ROMOLA, BY GEORGE ELIOT.

PART ONE.

PROEM.

More than three centuries and a half ago, in the mid spring-time of

1492, we are sure that the angel of the dawn, as he travelled with broad

slow wing from the Levant to the Pillars of Hercules, and from the

summits of the Caucasus across all the snowy Alpine ridges to the dark

nakedness of the Western isles, saw nearly the same outline of firm land

and unstable sea--saw the same great mountain shadows on the same

valleys as he has seen to-day--saw olive mounts, and pine forests, and

the broad plains green with young corn or rain-freshened grass--saw the

domes and spires of cities rising by the river-sides or mingled with the

sedge-like masts on the many-curved sea-coast, in the same spots where

they rise to-day. And as the faint light of his course pierced into the

dwellings of men, it fell, as now, on the rosy warmth of nestling

children; on the haggard waking of sorrow and sickness; on the hasty

uprising of the hard-handed labourer; and on the late sleep of the

night-student, who had been questioning the stars or the sages, or his

own soul, for that hidden knowledge which would break through the

barrier of man's brief life, and show its dark path, that seemed to bend

no whither, to be an arc in an immeasurable circle of light and glory.

The great river-courses which have shaped the lives of men have hardly

changed; and those other streams, the life-currents that ebb and flow in

human hearts, pulsate to the same great needs, the same great loves and

terrors. As our thought follows close in the slow wake of the dawn, we

are impressed with the broad sameness of the human lot, which never

alters in the main headings of its history--hunger and labour, seed-time

and harvest, love and death.

Even if, instead of following the dim daybreak, our imagination pauses

on a certain historical spot and awaits the fuller morning, we may see a

world-famous city, which has hardly changed its outline since the days

of Columbus, seeming to stand as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the

flux of human things, to remind us that we still resemble the men of the

past more than we differ from them, as the great mechanical principles

on which those domes and towers were raised must make a likeness in

human building that will be broader and deeper than all possible change.

And doubtless, if the spirit of a Florentine citizen, whose eyes were

closed for the last time while Columbus was still waiting and arguing

for the three poor vessels with which he was to set sail from the port

of Palos, could return from the shades and pause where our thought is

pausing, he would believe that there must still be fellowship and

understanding for him among the inheritors of his birthplace.

Let us suppose that such a Shade has been permitted to revisit the

glimpses of the golden morning, and is standing once more on the famous

hill of San Miniato, which overlooks Florence from the south.

The Spirit is clothed in his habit as he lived: the folds of his

well-lined black silk garment or \_lucco\_ hang in grave unbroken lines

from neck to ankle; his plain cloth cap, with its \_becchetto\_, or long

hanging strip of drapery, to serve as a scarf in case of need, surmounts

a penetrating face, not, perhaps, very handsome, but with a firm,

well-cut mouth, kept distinctly human by a close-shaven lip and chin.

It is a face charged with memories of a keen and various life passed

below there on the banks of the gleaming river; and as he looks at the

scene before him, the sense of familiarity is so much stronger than the

perception of change, that he thinks it might be possible to descend

once more amongst the streets, and take up that busy life where he left

it. For it is not only the mountains and the westward-bending river

that he recognises; not only the dark sides of Mount Morello opposite to

him, and the long valley of the Arno that seems to stretch its grey

low-tufted luxuriance to the far-off ridges of Carrara; and the steep

height of Fiesole, with its crown of monastic walls and cypresses; and

all the green and grey slopes sprinkled with villas which he can name as

he looks at them. He sees other familiar objects much closer to his

daily walks. For though he misses the seventy or more towers that once

surmounted the walls, and encircled the city as with a regal diadem, his

eyes will not dwell on that blank; they are drawn irresistibly to the

unique tower springing, like a tall flower-stem drawn towards the sun,

from the square turreted mass of the Old Palace in the very heart of the

city--the tower that looks none the worse for the four centuries that

have passed since he used to walk under it. The great dome, too,

greatest in the world, which, in his early boyhood, had been only a

daring thought in the mind of a small, quick-eyed man--there it raises

its large curves still, eclipsing the hills. And the well-known

bell-towers--Giotto's, with its distant hint of rich colour, and the

graceful-spired Badia, and the rest--he looked at them all from the

shoulder of his nurse.

"Surely," he thinks, "Florence can still ring her bells with the solemn

hammer-sound that used to beat on the hearts of her citizens and strike

out the fire there. And here, on the right, stands the long dark mass

of Santa Croce, where we buried our famous dead, laying the laurel on

their cold brows and fanning them with the breath of praise and of

banners. But Santa Croce had no spire then: we Florentines were too

full of great building projects to carry them all out in stone and

marble; we had our frescoes and our shrines to pay for, not to speak of

rapacious condottieri, bribed royalty, and purchased territories, and

our facades and spires must needs wait. But what architect can the

Frati Minori [the Franciscans] have employed to build that spire for

them? If it had been built in my day, Filippo Brunelleschi or

Michelozzo would have devised something of another fashion than that--

something worthy to crown the church of Arnolfo."

At this the Spirit, with a sigh, lets his eyes travel on to the city

walls, and now he dwells on the change there with wonder at these modern

times. Why have five out of the eleven convenient gates been closed?

And why, above all, should the towers have been levelled that were once

a glory and defence? Is the world become so peaceful, then, and do

Florentines dwell in such harmony, that there are no longer conspiracies

to bring ambitious exiles home again with armed bands at their back?

These are difficult questions: it is easier and pleasanter to recognise

the old than to account for the new. And there flows Arno, with its

bridges just where they used to be--the Ponte Vecchio, least like other

bridges in the world, laden with the same quaint shops where our Spirit

remembers lingering a little on his way perhaps to look at the progress

of that great palace which Messer Luca Pitti had set a-building with

huge stones got from the Hill of Bogoli [now Boboli] close behind, or

perhaps to transact a little business with the cloth-dressers in

Oltrarno. The exorbitant line of the Pitti roof is hidden from San

Miniato; but the yearning of the old Florentine is not to see Messer

Luca's too ambitious palace which he built unto himself; it is to be

down among those narrow streets and busy humming Piazze where he

inherited the eager life of his fathers. Is not the anxious voting with

black and white beans still going on down there? Who are the Priori in

these months, eating soberly--regulated official dinners in the Palazzo

Vecchio, with removes of tripe and boiled partridges, seasoned by

practical jokes against the ill-fated butt among those potent signors?

Are not the significant banners still hung from the windows--still

distributed with decent pomp under Orcagna's Loggia every two months?

Life had its zest for the old Florentine when he, too, trod the marble

steps and shared in those dignities. His politics had an area as wide

as his trade, which stretched from Syria to Britain, but they had also

the passionate intensity, and the detailed practical interest, which

could belong only to a narrow scene of corporate action; only to the

members of a community shut in close by the hills and by walls of six

miles' circuit, where men knew each other as they passed in the street,

set their eyes every day on the memorials of their commonwealth, and

were conscious of having not simply the right to vote, but the chance of

being voted for. He loved his honours and his gains, the business of

his counting-house, of his guild, of the public council-chamber; he

loved his enmities too, and fingered the white bean which was to keep a

hated name out of the \_borsa\_ with more complacency than if it had been

a golden florin. He loved to strengthen his family by a good alliance,

and went home with a triumphant light in his eyes after concluding a

satisfactory marriage for his son or daughter under his favourite loggia

in the evening cool; he loved his game at chess under that same loggia,

and his biting jest, and even his coarse joke, as not beneath the

dignity of a man eligible for the highest magistracy. He had gained an

insight into all sorts of affairs at home and abroad: he had been of the

"Ten" who managed the war department, of the "Eight" who attended to

home discipline, of the Priori or Signori who were the heads of the

executive government; he had even risen to the supreme office of

Gonfaloniere; he had made one in embassies to the Pope and to the

Venetians; and he had been commissary to the hired army of the Republic,

directing the inglorious bloodless battles in which no man died of brave

breast wounds--\_virtuosi colpi\_--but only of casual falls and

tramplings. And in this way he had learned to distrust men without

bitterness; looking on life mainly as a game of skill, but not dead to

traditions of heroism and clean-handed honour. For the human soul is

hospitable, and will entertain conflicting sentiments and contradictory

opinions with much impartiality. It was his pride besides, that he was

duly tinctured with the learning of his age, and judged not altogether

with the vulgar, but in harmony with the ancients: he, too, in his

prime, had been eager for the most correct manuscripts, and had paid

many florins for antique vases and for disinterred busts of the ancient

immortals--some, perhaps, \_truncis naribus\_, wanting as to the nose, but

not the less authentic; and in his old age he had made haste to look at

the first sheets of that fine Homer which was among the early glories of

the Florentine press. But he had not, for all that, neglected to hang

up a waxen image or double of himself under the protection of the

Madonna Annunziata, or to do penance for his sins in large gifts to the

shrines of saints whose lives had not been modelled on the study of the

classics; he had not even neglected making liberal bequests towards

buildings for the Frati, against whom he had levelled many a jest.

For the Unseen Powers were mighty. Who knew--who was sure--that there

was \_any\_ name given to them behind which there was no angry force to be

appeased, no intercessory pity to be won? Were not gems medicinal,

though they only pressed the finger? Were not all things charged with

occult virtues? Lucretius might be right--he was an ancient, and a

great poet; Luigi Pulci, too, who was suspected of not believing

anything from the roof upward (\_dal tetto in su\_), had very much the air

of being right over the supper-table, when the wine and jests were

circulating fast, though he was only a poet in the vulgar tongue. There

were even learned personages who maintained that Aristotle, wisest of

men (unless, indeed, Plato were wiser?) was a thoroughly irreligious

philosopher; and a liberal scholar must entertain all speculations. But

the negatives might, after all, prove false; nay, seemed manifestly

false, as the circling hours swept past him, and turned round with

graver faces. For had not the world become Christian? Had he not been

baptised in San Giovanni, where the dome is awful with me symbols of

coming judgment, and where the altar bears a crucified Image disturbing

to perfect complacency in one's self and the world? Our resuscitated

Spirit was not a pagan philosopher, nor a philosophising pagan poet, but

a man of the fifteenth century, inheriting its strange web of belief and

unbelief; of Epicurean levity and fetichistic dread; of pedantic

impossible ethics uttered by rote, and crude passions acted out with

childish impulsiveness; of inclination towards a self-indulgent

paganism, and inevitable subjection to that human conscience which, in

the unrest of a new growth, was rilling the air with strange prophecies

and presentiments.

He had smiled, perhaps, and shaken his head dubiously, as he heard

simple folk talk of a Pope Angelico, who was to come by-and-by and bring

in a new order of things, to purify the Church from simony, and the

lives of the clergy from scandal--a state of affairs too different from

what existed under Innocent the Eighth for a shrewd merchant and

politician to regard the prospect as worthy of entering into his

calculations. But he felt the evils of the time, nevertheless; for he

was a man of public spirit, and public spirit can never be wholly

immoral, since its essence is care for a common good. That very

Quaresima or Lent of 1492 in which he died, still in his erect old age,

he had listened in San Lorenzo, not without a mixture of satisfaction,

to the preaching of a Dominican Friar, named Girolamo Savonarola, who

denounced with a rare boldness the worldliness and vicious habits of the

clergy, and insisted on the duty of Christian men not to live for their

own ease when wrong was triumphing in high places, and not to spend

their wealth in outward pomp even in the churches, when their

fellow-citizens were suffering from want and sickness. The Frate

carried his doctrine rather too far for elderly ears; yet it was a

memorable thing to see a preacher move his audience to such a pitch that

the women even took off their ornaments, and delivered them up to be

sold for the benefit of the needy.

"He was a noteworthy man, that Prior of San Marco," thinks our Spirit;

"somewhat arrogant and extreme, perhaps, especially in his denunciations

of speedy vengeance. Ah, \_Iddio non paga il Sabatol\_ [`God does not pay

on a Saturday']--the wages of men's sins often linger in their payment,

and I myself saw much established wickedness of long-standing

prosperity. But a Frate Predicatore who wanted to move the people--how

could he be moderate? He might have been a little less defiant and

curt, though, to Lorenzo de' Medici, whose family had been the very

makers of San Marco: was that quarrel ever made up? And our Lorenzo

himself, with the dim outward eyes and the subtle inward vision, did he

get over that illness at Careggi? It was but a sad, uneasy-looking face

that he would carry out of the world which had given him so much, and

there were strong suspicions that his handsome son would play the part

of Rehoboam. How has it all turned out? Which party is likely to be

banished and have its houses sacked just now? Is there any successor of

the incomparable Lorenzo, to whom the great Turk is so gracious as to

send over presents of rare animals, rare relics, rare manuscripts, or

fugitive enemies, suited to the tastes of a Christian Magnifico who is

at once lettered and devout--and also slightly vindictive? And what

famous scholar is dictating the Latin letters of the Republic--what

fiery philosopher is lecturing on Dante in the Duomo, and going home to

write bitter invectives against the father and mother of the bad critic

who may have found fault with his classical spelling? Are our wiser

heads leaning towards alliance with the Pope and the Regno [The name

given to Naples by way of distinction among the Italian States], or are

they rather inclining their ears to the orators of France and of Milan?

"There is knowledge of these things to be had in the streets below, on

the beloved \_marmi\_ in front of the churches, and under the sheltering

Loggie, where surely our citizens have still their gossip and debates,

their bitter and merry jests as of old. For are not the well-remembered

buildings all there? The changes have not been so great in those

uncounted years. I will go down and hear--I will tread the familiar

pavement, and hear once again the speech of Florentines."

Go not down, good Spirit! for the changes are great and the speech of

Florentines would sound as a riddle in your ears. Or, if you go, mingle

with no politicians on the \_marmi\_, or elsewhere; ask no questions about

trade in the Calimara; confuse yourself with no inquiries into

scholarship, official or monastic. Only look at the sunlight and

shadows on the grand walls that were built solidly, and have endured in

their grandeur; look at the faces of the little children, making another

sunlight amid the shadows of age; look, if you will, into the churches,

and hear the same chants, see the same images as of old--the images of

willing anguish for a great end, of beneficent love and ascending glory;

see upturned living faces, and lips moving to the old prayers for help.

These things have not changed. The sunlight and shadows bring their old

beauty and waken the old heart-strains at morning, noon, and eventide;

the little children are still the symbol of the eternal marriage between

love and duty; and men still yearn for the reign of peace and

righteousness--still own \_that\_ life to be the highest which is a

conscious voluntary sacrifice. For the Pope Angelico is not come yet.

CHAPTER ONE.

THE SHIPWRECKED STRANGER.

The Loggia de' Cerchi stood in the heart of old Florence, within a

labyrinth of narrow streets behind the Badia, now rarely threaded by the

stranger, unless in a dubious search for a certain severely simple

doorplace, bearing this inscription:

Qui Nacque Il Divino Poeta.

To the ear of Dante, the same streets rang with the shout and clash of

fierce battle between rival families; but in the fifteenth century, they

were only noisy with the unhistorical quarrels and broad jests of

woolcarders in the cloth-producing quarters of San Martino and Garbo.

Under this loggia, in the early morning of the 9th of April 1492, two

men had their eyes fixed on each other: one was stooping slightly, and

looking downward with the scrutiny of curiosity; the other, lying on the

pavement, was looking upward with the startled gaze of a

suddenly-awakened dreamer.

The standing figure was the first to speak. He was a grey-haired,

broad-shouldered man, of the type which, in Tuscan phrase, is moulded

with the fist and polished with the pickaxe; but the self-important

gravity which had written itself out in the deep lines about his brow

and mouth seemed intended to correct any contemptuous inferences from

the hasty workmanship which Nature had bestowed on his exterior. He had

deposited a large well-filled bag, made of skins, on the pavement, and

before him hung a pedlar's basket, garnished partly with small

woman's-ware, such as thread and pins, and partly with fragments of

glass, which had probably been taken in exchange for those commodities.

"Young man," he said, pointing to a ring on the finger of the reclining

figure, "when your chin has got a stiffer crop on it, you'll know better

than to take your nap in street-corners with a ring like that on your

forefinger. By the holy 'vangels! if it had been anybody but me

standing over you two minutes ago--but Bratti Ferravecchi is not the man

to steal. The cat couldn't eat her mouse if she didn't catch it alive,

and Bratti couldn't relish gain if it had no taste of a bargain. Why,

young man, one San Giovanni, three years ago, the Saint sent a dead body

in my way--a blind beggar, with his cap well-lined with pieces--but, if

you'll believe me, my stomach turned against the money I'd never

bargained for, till it came into my head that San Giovanni owed me the

pieces for what I spend yearly at the Festa; besides, I buried the body

and paid for a mass--and so I saw it was a fair bargain. But how comes

a young man like you, with the face of Messer San Michele, to be

sleeping on a stone bed with the wind for a curtain?"

The deep guttural sounds of the speaker were scarcely intelligible to

the newly-waked, bewildered listener, but he understood the action of

pointing to his ring: he looked down at it, and, with a half-automatic

obedience to the warning, took it off and thrust it within his doublet,

rising at the same time and stretching himself.

"Your tunic and hose match ill with that jewel, young man," said Bratti,

deliberately. "Anybody might say the saints had sent \_you\_ a dead body;

but if you took the jewels, I hope you buried him--and you can afford a

mass or two for him into the bargain."

Something like a painful thrill appeared to dart through the frame of

the listener, and arrest the careless stretching of his arms and chest.

For an instant he turned on Bratti with a sharp frown; but he

immediately recovered an air of indifference, took off the red Levantine

cap which hung like a great purse over his left ear, pushed back his

long dark-brown curls, and glancing at his dress, said, smilingly--

"You speak truth, friend: my garments are as weather-stained as an old

sail, and they are not old either, only, like an old sail, they have had

a sprinkling of the sea as well as the rain. The fact is, I'm a

stranger in Florence, and when I came in footsore last night I preferred

flinging myself in a corner of this hospitable porch to hunting any

longer for a chance hostelry, which might turn out to be a nest of

blood-suckers of more sorts than one."

"A stranger, in good sooth," said Bratti, "for the words come all

melting out of your throat, so that a Christian and a Florentine can't

tell a hook from a hanger. But you're not from Genoa? More likely from

Venice, by the cut of your clothes?"

"At this present moment," said the stranger, smiling, "it is of less

importance where I come from than where I can go to for a mouthful of

breakfast. This city of yours turns a grim look on me just here: can

you show me the way to a more lively quarter, where I can get a meal and

a lodging?"

"That I can," said Bratti, "and it is your good fortune, young man, that

I have happened to be walking in from Rovezzano this morning, and turned

out of my way to Mercato Vecchio to say an Ave at the Badia. That, I

say, is your good fortune. But it remains to be seen what is my profit

in the matter. Nothing for nothing, young man. If I show you the way

to Mercato Vecchio, you'll swear by your patron saint to let me have the

bidding for that stained suit of yours, when you set up a better--as

doubtless you will."

"Agreed, by San Niccolo," said the other, laughing. "But now let us set

off to this said Mercato, for I feel the want of a better lining to this

doublet of mine which you are coveting."

"Coveting? Nay," said Bratti, heaving his bag on his back and setting

out. But he broke off in his reply, and burst out in loud, harsh tones,

not unlike the creaking and grating of a cart-wheel: "\_Chi

abbaratta\_--\_baratta\_--\_b'ratta\_--\_chi abbaratta cenci e

vetri\_--\_b'ratta ferri vecchi\_?" ["Who wants to exchange rags, broken

glass, or old iron?"]

"It's worth but little," he said presently, relapsing into his

conversational tone. "Hose and altogether, your clothes are worth but

little. Still, if you've a mind to set yourself up with a lute worth

more than any new one, or with a sword that's been worn by a Ridolfi, or

with a paternoster of the best mode, I could let you have a great

bargain, by making an allowance for the clothes; for, simple as I stand

here, I've got the best-furnished shop in the Ferravecchi, and it's

close by the Mercato. The Virgin be praised! it's not a pumpkin I carry

on my shoulders. But I don't stay caged in my shop all day: I've got a

wife and a raven to stay at home and mind the stock. \_Chi

abbaratta\_--\_baratta\_--\_b'ratta\_? ... And now, young man, where do you

come from, and what's your business in Florence?"

"I thought you liked nothing that came to you without a bargain," said

the stranger. "You've offered me nothing yet in exchange for that

information."

"Well, well; a Florentine doesn't mind bidding a fair price for news: it

stays the stomach a little though he may win no hose by it. If I take

you to the prettiest damsel in the Mercato to get a cup of milk--that

will be a fair bargain."

"Nay; I can find her myself, if she be really in the Mercato; for pretty

heads are apt to look forth of doors and windows. No, no. Besides, a

sharp trader, like you, ought to know that he who bids for nuts and

news, may chance to find them hollow."

"Ah! young man," said Bratti, with a sideway glance of some admiration,

"you were not born of a Sunday--the salt-shops were open when you came

into the world. You're not a Hebrew, eh?--come from Spain or Naples,

eh? Let me tell you the Frati Minori are trying to make Florence as hot

as Spain for those dogs of hell that want to get all the profit of usury

to themselves and leave none for Christians; and when you walk the

Calimara with a piece of yellow cloth in your cap, it will spoil your

beauty more than a sword-cut across that smooth olive cheek of

yours.--\_Abbaratta, baratta\_--\_chi abbaratta\_?--I tell you, young man,

grey cloth is against yellow cloth; and there's as much grey cloth in

Florence as would make a gown and cowl for the Duomo, and there's not so

much yellow cloth as would make hose for Saint Christopher--blessed be

his name, and send me a sight of him this day!--\_Abbaratta, baratta,

b'ratta\_--\_chi abbaratta\_?"

"All that is very amusing information you are parting with for nothing,"

said the stranger, rather scornfully; "but it happens not to concern me.

I am no Hebrew."

"See, now!" said Bratti, triumphantly; "I've made a good bargain with

mere words. I've made you tell me something, young man, though you're

as hard to hold as a lamprey. San Giovanni be praised! a blind

Florentine is a match for two one-eyed men. But here we are in the

Mercato."

They had now emerged from the narrow streets into a broad piazza, known

to the elder Florentine writers as the Mercato Vecchio, or the Old

Market. This piazza, though it had been the scene of a provision-market

from time immemorial, and may, perhaps, says fond imagination, be the

very spot to which the Fesulean ancestors of the Florentines descended

from their high fastness to traffic with the rustic population of the

valley, had not been shunned as a place of residence by Florentine

wealth. In the early decades of the fifteenth century, which was now

near its end, the Medici and other powerful families of the \_popolani

grassi\_, or commercial nobility, had their houses there, not perhaps

finding their ears much offended by the loud roar of mingled dialects,

or their eyes much shocked by the butchers' stalls, which the old poet

Antonio Pucci accounts a chief glory, or \_dignita\_, of a market that, in

his esteem, eclipsed the markets of all the earth beside. But the glory

of mutton and veal (well attested to be the flesh of the right animals;

for were not the skins, with the heads attached, duly displayed,

according to the decree of the Signoria?) was just now wanting to the

Mercato, the time of Lent not being yet over. The proud corporation, or

"Art," of butchers was in abeyance, and it was the great harvest-time of

the market-gardeners, the cheesemongers, the vendors of macaroni, corn,

eggs, milk, and dried fruits: a change which was apt to make the women's

voices predominant in the chorus. But in all seasons there was the

experimental ringing of pots and pans, the chinking of the

money-changers, the tempting offers of cheapness at the old-clothes

stalls, the challenges of the dicers, the vaunting of new linens and

woollens, of excellent wooden-ware, kettles, and frying-pans; there was

the choking of the narrow inlets with mules and carts, together with

much uncomplimentary remonstrance in terms remarkably identical with the

insults in use by the gentler sex of the present day, under the same

imbrowning and heating circumstances. Ladies and gentlemen, who came to

market, looked on at a larger amount of amateur fighting than could

easily be seen in these later times, and beheld more revolting rags,

beggary, and rascaldom, than modern householders could well picture to

themselves. As the day wore on, the hideous drama of the gaming-house

might be seen here by any chance open-air spectator--the quivering

eagerness, the blank despair, the sobs, the blasphemy, and the blows:--

"E vedesi chi perde con gran soffi,

E bestemmiar colla mano alia mascella,

E ricever e dar di molti ingoffi."

But still there was the relief of prettier sights: there were

brood-rabbits, not less innocent and astonished than those of our own

period; there were doves and singing-birds to be bought as presents for

the children; there were even kittens for sale, and here and there a

handsome \_gattuccio\_, or "Tom," with the highest character for mousing;

and, better than all, there were young, softly-rounded cheeks and bright

eyes, freshened by the start from the far-off castello [walled village]

at daybreak, not to speak of older faces with the unfading charm of

honest goodwill in them, such as are never quite wanting in scenes of

human industry. And high on a pillar in the centre of the place--a

venerable pillar, fetched from the church of San Giovanni--stood

Donatello's stone statue of Plenty, with a fountain near it, where, says

old Pucci, the good wives of the market freshened their utensils, and

their throats also; not because they were unable to buy wine, but

because they wished to save the money for their husbands.

But on this particular morning a sudden change seemed to have come over

the face of the market. The \_deschi\_, or stalls, were indeed partly

dressed with their various commodities, and already there were

purchasers assembled, on the alert to secure the finest, freshest

vegetables and the most unexceptionable butter. But when Bratti and his

companion entered the piazza, it appeared that some common preoccupation

had for the moment distracted the attention both of buyers and sellers

from their proper business. Most of the traders had turned their backs

on their goods, and had joined the knots of talkers who were

concentrating themselves at different points in the piazza. A vendor of

old-clothes, in the act of hanging out a pair of long hose, had

distractedly hung them round his neck in his eagerness to join the

nearest group; an oratorical cheesemonger, with a piece of cheese in one

hand and a knife in the other, was incautiously making notes of his

emphatic pauses on that excellent specimen of \_marzolino\_; and elderly

market-women, with their egg-baskets in a dangerously oblique position,

contributed a wailing fugue of invocation.

In this general distraction, the Florentine boys, who were never wanting

in any street scene, and were of an especially mischievous sort--as who

should say, very sour crabs indeed--saw a great opportunity. Some made

a rush at the nuts and dried figs, others preferred the farinaceous

delicacies at the cooked provision stalls--delicacies to which certain

four-footed dogs also, who had learned to take kindly to Lenten fare,

applied a discriminating nostril, and then disappeared with much

rapidity under the nearest shelter; while the mules, not without some

kicking and plunging among impeding baskets, were stretching their

muzzles towards the aromatic green-meat.

"Diavolo!" said Bratti, as he and his companion came, quite unnoticed,

upon the noisy scene; "the Mercato is gone as mad as if the most Holy

Father had excommunicated us again. I must know what this is. But

never fear: it seems a thousand years to you till you see the pretty

Tessa, and get your cup of milk; but keep hold of me, and I'll hold to

my bargain. Remember, I'm to have the first bid for your suit,

specially for the hose, which, with all their stains, are the best

\_panno di garbo\_--as good as ruined, though, with mud and weather

stains."

"Ola, Monna Trecca," Bratti proceeded, turning towards an old woman on

the outside of the nearest group, who for the moment had suspended her

wail to listen, and shouting close in her ear: "Here are the mules

upsetting all your bunches of parsley: is the world coming to an end,

then?"

"Monna Trecca" (equivalent to "Dame Greengrocer") turned round at this

unexpected trumpeting in her right ear, with a half-fierce,

half-bewildered look, first at the speaker, then at her disarranged

commodities, and then at the speaker again.

"A bad Easter and a bad year to you, and may you die by the sword!" she

burst out, rushing towards her stall, but directing this first volley of

her wrath against Bratti, who, without heeding the malediction, quietly

slipped into her place, within hearing of the narrative which had been

absorbing her attention; making a sign at the same time to the younger

stranger to keep near him.

"I tell you I saw it myself," said a fat man, with a bunch of

newly-purchased leeks in his hand. "I was in Santa Maria Novella, and

saw it myself. The woman started up and threw out her arms, and cried

out and said she saw a big bull with fiery horns coming down on the

church to crush it. I saw it myself."

"Saw what, Goro?" said a man of slim figure, whose eye twinkled rather

roguishly. He wore a close jerkin, a skull-cap lodged carelessly over

his left ear as if it had fallen there by chance, a delicate linen apron

tucked up on one side, and a razor stuck in his belt. "Saw the bull, or

only the woman?"

"Why, the woman, to be sure; but it's all one, \_mi pare\_: it doesn't

alter the meaning--\_va\_!" answered the fat man, with some contempt.

"Meaning? no, no; that's clear enough," said several voices at once, and

then followed a confusion of tongues, in which "Lights shooting over San

Lorenzo for three nights together"--"Thunder in the clear

starlight"--"Lantern of the Duomo struck with the sword of Saint

Michael"--"\_Palle\_" [Arms of the Medici]--"All smashed"--"Lions tearing

each other to pieces"--"Ah! and they might well"--"\_Boto [Note 1] caduto

in Santissima Nunziata\_!"--"Died like the best of Christians"--"God will

have pardoned him"--were often-repeated phrases, which shot across each

other like storm-driven hailstones, each speaker feeling rather the

necessity of utterance than of finding a listener. Perhaps the only

silent members of the group were Bratti, who, as a new-comer, was busy

in mentally piecing together the flying fragments of information; the

man of the razor; and a thin-lipped, eager-looking personage in

spectacles, wearing a pen-and-ink case at his belt.

"\_Ebbene\_, Nello," said Bratti, skirting the group till he was within

hearing of the barber. "It appears the Magnifico is dead--rest his

soul!--and the price of wax will rise?"

"Even as you say," answered Nello; and then added, with an air of extra

gravity, but with marvellous rapidity, "and his waxen image in the

Nunziata fell at the same moment, they say; or at some other time,

whenever it pleases the Frati Serviti, who know best. And several cows

and women have had still-born calves this Quaresima; and for the bad

eggs that have been broken since the Carnival, nobody has counted them.

Ah! a great man--a great politician--a greater poet than Dante. And yet

the cupola didn't fall, only the lantern. \_Che miracolo\_!"

A sharp and lengthened "Pst!" was suddenly heard darting across the

pelting storm of gutturals. It came from the pale man in spectacles,

and had the effect he intended; for the noise ceased, and all eyes in

the group were fixed on him with a look of expectation.

"'Tis well said you Florentines are blind," he began, in an incisive

high voice. "It appears to me, you need nothing but a diet of hay to

make cattle of you. What! do you think the death of Lorenzo is the

scourge God has prepared for Florence? Go! you are sparrows chattering

praise over the dead hawk. What! a man who was trying to slip a noose

over every neck in the Republic that he might tighten it at his

pleasure! You like that; you like to have the election of your

magistrates turned into closet-work, and no man to use the rights of a

citizen unless he is a Medicean. That is what is meant by qualification

now: \_netto di specchio\_ [Note 2] no longer means that a man pays his

dues to the Republic: it means that he'll wink at robbery of the

people's money--at robbery of their daughters' dowries; that he'll play

the chamberer and the philosopher by turns--listen to bawdy songs at the

Carnival and cry `Bellissimi!'--and listen to sacred lauds and cry again

`Bellissimi!' But this is what you love: you grumble and raise a riot

over your \_quattrini bianchi\_" (white farthings); "but you take no

notice when the public treasury has got a hole in the bottom for the

gold to run into Lorenzo's drains. You like to pay for footmen to walk

before and behind one of your citizens, that he may be affable and

condescending to you. `See, what a tall Pisan we keep,' say you, `to

march before him with the drawn sword flashing in our eyes!--and yet

Lorenzo smiles at us. What goodness!' And you think the death of a

man, who would soon have saddled and bridled you as the Sforza has

saddled and bridled Milan--you think his death is the scourge God is

warning you of by portents. I tell you there is another sort of scourge

in the air."

"Nay, nay, Ser Cioni, keep astride your politics, and never mount your

prophecy; politics is the better horse," said Nello. "But if you talk

of portents, what portent can be greater than a pious notary? Balaam's

ass was nothing to it."

"Ay, but a notary out of work, with his inkbottle dry," said another

bystander, very much out at elbows. "Better don a cowl at once, Ser

Cioni: everybody will believe in your fasting."

The notary turned and left the group with a look of indignant contempt,

disclosing, as he did so, the sallow but mild face of a short man who

had been standing behind him, and whose bent shoulders told of some

sedentary occupation.

"By San Giovanni, though," said the fat purchaser of leeks, with the air

of a person rather shaken in his theories, "I am not sure there isn't

some truth in what Ser Cioni says. For I know I have good reason to

find fault with the \_quattrini bianchi\_ myself. Grumble, did he say?

Suffocation! I should think we do grumble; and, let anybody say the

word, I'll turn out into the piazza with the readiest, sooner than have

our money altered in our hands as if the magistracy were so many

necromancers. And it's true Lorenzo might have hindered such work if he

would--and for the bull with the flaming horns, why, as Ser Cioni says,

there may be many meanings to it, for the matter of that; it may have

more to do with the taxes than we think. For when God above sends a

sign, it's not to be supposed he'd have only one meaning."

"Spoken like an oracle, Goro!" said the barber. "Why, when we poor

mortals can pack two or three meanings into one sentence, it were mere

blasphemy not to believe that your miraculous bull means everything that

any man in Florence likes it to mean."

"Thou art pleased to scoff, Nello," said the sallow, round-shouldered

man, no longer eclipsed by the notary, "but it is not the less true that

every revelation, whether by visions, dreams, portents, or the written

word, has many meanings, which it is given to the illuminated only to

unfold."

"Assuredly," answered Nello. "Haven't I been to hear the Frate in San

Lorenzo? But then, I've been to hear Fra Menico in the Duomo too; and

according to him, your Fra Girolamo, with his visions and

interpretations, is running after the wind of Mongibello, and those who

follow him are like to have the fate of certain swine that ran headlong

into the sea--or some hotter place. With San Domenico roaring \_e vero\_

in one ear, and San Francisco screaming \_e falso\_ in the other, what is

a poor barber to do--unless he were illuminated? But it's plain our

Goro here is beginning to be illuminated for he already sees that the

bull with the flaming horns means first himself, and secondly all the

other aggrieved taxpayers of Florence, who are determined to gore the

magistracy on the first opportunity."

"Goro is a fool!" said a bass voice, with a note that dropped like the

sound of a great bell in the midst of much tinkling. "Let him carry

home his leeks and shake his flanks over his wool-beating. He'll mend

matters more that way than by showing his tun-shaped body in the piazza,

as if everybody might measure his grievances by the size of his paunch.

The burdens that harm him most are his heavy carcass and his idleness."

The speaker had joined the group only in time to hear the conclusion of

Nello's speech, but he was one of those figures for whom all the world

instinctively makes way, as it would for a battering-ram. He was not

much above the middle height, but the impression of enormous force which

was conveyed by his capacious chest and brawny arms bared to the

shoulder, was deepened by the keen sense and quiet resolution expressed

in his glance and in every furrow of his cheek and brow. He had often

been an unconscious model to Domenico Ghirlandajo, when that great

painter was making the walls of the churches reflect the life of

Florence, and translating pale aerial traditions into the deep colour

and strong lines of the faces he knew. The naturally dark tint of his

skin was additionally bronzed by the same powdery deposit that gave a

polished black surface to his leathern apron: a deposit which habit had

probably made a necessary condition of perfect ease, for it was not

washed off with punctilious regularity.

Goro turned his fat cheek and glassy eye on the frank speaker with a

look of deprecation rather than of resentment.

"Why, Niccolo," he said, in an injured tone, "I've heard you sing to

another tune than that, often enough, when you've been laying down the

law at San Gallo on a festa. I've heard you say yourself, that a man

wasn't a mill-wheel, to be on the grind, grind, as long as he was

driven, and then stick in his place without stirring when the water was

low. And you're as fond of your vote as any man in Florence--ay, and

I've heard you say, if Lorenzo--"

"Yes, yes," said Niccolo. "Don't you be bringing up my speeches again

after you've swallowed them, and handing them about as if they were none

the worse. I vote and I speak when there's any use in it: if there's

hot metal on the anvil, I lose no time before I strike; but I don't

spend good hours in tinkling on cold iron, or in standing on the

pavement as thou dost, Goro, with snout upward, like a pig under an

oak-tree. And as for Lorenzo--dead and gone before his time--he was a

man who had an eye for curious iron-work; and if anybody says he wanted

to make himself a tyrant, I say, `\_Sia\_; I'll not deny which way the

wind blows when every man can see the weathercock.' But that only means

that Lorenzo was a crested hawk, and there are plenty of hawks without

crests whose claws and beaks are as good for tearing. Though if there

was any chance of a real reform, so that Marzocco [the stone Lion,

emblem of the Republic] might shake his mane and roar again, instead of

dipping his head to lick the feet of anybody that will mount and ride

him, I'd strike a good blow for it."

"And that reform is not far off, Niccolo," said the sallow, mild-faced

man, seizing his opportunity like a missionary among the too

light-minded heathens; "for a time of tribulation is coming, and the

scourge is at hand. And when the Church is purged of cardinals and

prelates who traffic in her inheritance that their hands may be full to

pay the price of blood and to satisfy their own lusts, the State will be

purged too--and Florence will be purged of men who love to see avarice

and lechery under the red hat and the mitre because it gives them the

screen of a more hellish vice than their own."

"Ay, as Goro's broad body would be a screen for my narrow person in case

of missiles," said Nello; "but if that excellent screen happened to

fall, I were stifled under it, surely enough. That is no bad image of

thine, Nanni--or, rather, of the Frate's; for I fancy there is no room

in the small cup of thy understanding for any other liquor than what he

pours into it."

"And it were well for thee, Nello," replied Nanni, "if thou couldst

empty thyself of thy scoffs and thy jests, and take in that liquor too.

The warning is ringing in the ears of all men: and it's no new story;

for the Abbot Joachim prophesied of the coming time three hundred years

ago, and now Fra Girolamo has got the message afresh. He has seen it in

a vision, even as the prophets of old: he has seen the sword hanging

from the sky."

"Ay, and thou wilt see it thyself, Nanni, if thou wilt stare upward long

enough," said Niccolo; "for that pitiable tailor's work of thine makes

thy noddle so overhang thy legs, that thy eyeballs can see nought above

the stitching-board but the roof of thy own skull."

The honest tailor bore the jest without bitterness, bent on convincing

his hearers of his doctrine rather than of his dignity. But Niccolo

gave him no opportunity for replying; for he turned away to the pursuit

of his market business, probably considering further dialogue as a

tinkling on cold iron.

"\_Ebbene\_" said the man with the hose round his neck, who had lately

migrated from another knot of talkers, "they are safest who cross

themselves and jest at nobody. Do you know that the Magnifico sent for

the Frate at the last, and couldn't die without his blessing?"

"Was it so--in truth?" said several voices. "Yes, yes--God will have

pardoned him."

"He died like the best of Christians."

"Never took his eyes from the holy crucifix."

"And the Frate will have given him his blessing?"

"Well, I know no more," said he of the hosen, "only Guccio there met a

footman going back to Careggi, and he told him the Frate had been sent

for yesternight, after the Magnifico had confessed and had the holy

sacraments."

"It's likely enough the Frate will tell the people something about it in

his sermon this morning; is it not true, Nanni?" said Goro. "What do

you think?"

But Nanni had already turned his back on Goro, and the group was rapidly

thinning; some being stirred by the impulse to go and hear "new things"

from the Frate ("new things" were the nectar of Florentines); others by

the sense that it was time to attend to their private business. In this

general movement, Bratti got close to the barber, and said--

"Nello, you've a ready tongue of your own, and are used to worming

secrets out of people when you've once got them well lathered. I picked

up a stranger this morning as I was coming in from Rovezzano, and I can

spell him out no better than I can the letters on that scarf I bought

from the French cavalier. It isn't my wits are at fault,--I want no man

to help me tell peas from paternosters,--but when you come to foreign

fashions, a fool may happen to know more than a wise man."

"Ay, thou hast the wisdom of Midas, who could turn rags and rusty nails

into gold, even as thou dost," said Nello, "and he had also something of

the ass about him. But where is thy bird of strange plumage?"

Bratti was looking round, with an air of disappointment.

"Diavolo!" he said, with some vexation. "The bird's flown. It's true

he was hungry, and I forgot him. But we shall find him in the Mercato,

within scent of bread and savours, I'll answer for him."

"Let us make the round of the Mercato, then," said Nello.

"It isn't his feathers that puzzle me," continued Bratti, as they pushed

their way together. "There isn't much in the way of cut and cloth on

this side the Holy Sepulchre that can puzzle a Florentine."

"Or frighten him either," said Nello, "after he has seen an Englander or

a German."

"No, no," said Bratti, cordially; "one may never lose sight of the

Cupola and yet know the world, I hope. Besides, this stranger's clothes

are good Italian merchandise, and the hose he wears were dyed in

Ognissanti before ever they were dyed with salt water, as he says. But

the riddle about him is--"

Here Bratti's explanation was interrupted by some jostling as they

reached one of the entrances of the piazza, and before he could resume

it they had caught sight of the enigmatical object they were in search

of.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. A votive image of Lorenzo, in wax, hung up in the Church of the

Annunziata, supposed to have fallen at the time of his death. \_Boto\_ is

popular Tuscan for \_Voto\_.

Note 2. The phrase used to express the absence of disqualification--

i.e., the not being entered as a debtor in the public book--\_specchio\_.

CHAPTER TWO.

BREAKFAST FOR LOVE.

After Bratti had joined the knot of talkers, the young stranger,

hopeless of learning what was the cause of the general agitation, and

not much caring to know what was probably of little interest to any but

born Florentines, soon became tired of waiting for Bratti's escort; and

chose to stroll round the piazza, looking out for some vendor of

eatables who might happen to have less than the average curiosity about

public news. But as if at the suggestion of a sudden thought, he thrust

his hand into a purse or wallet that hung at his waist, and explored it

again and again with a look of frustration.

"Not an obolus, by Jupiter!" he murmured, in a language which was not

Tuscan or even Italian. "I thought I had one poor piece left. I must

get my breakfast for love, then!"

He had not gone many steps farther before it seemed likely that he had

found a quarter of the market where that medium of exchange might not be

rejected.

In a corner, away from any group of talkers, two mules were standing,

well adorned with red tassels and collars. One of them carried wooden

milk-vessels, the other a pair of panniers filled with herbs and salads.

Resting her elbow on the neck of the mule that carried the milk, there

leaned a young girl, apparently not more than sixteen, with a red hood

surrounding her face, which was all the more baby-like in its prettiness

from the entire concealment of her hair. The poor child, perhaps, was

weary after her labour in the morning twilight in preparation for her

walk to market from some castello three or four miles off, for she

seemed to have gone to sleep in that half-standing, half-leaning

posture. Nevertheless, our stranger had no compunction in awaking her;

but the means he chose were so gentle, that it seemed to the damsel in

her dream as if a little sprig of thyme had touched her lips while she

was stooping to gather the herbs. The dream was broken, however, for

she opened her blue baby-eyes, and started up with astonishment and

confusion to see the young stranger standing close before her. She

heard him speaking to her in a voice which seemed so strange and soft,

that even if she had been more collected she would have taken it for

granted that he said something hopelessly unintelligible to her, and her

first movement was to turn her head a little away, and lift up a corner

of her green serge mantle as a screen. He repeated his words--

"Forgive me, pretty one, for awaking you. I'm dying with hunger, and

the scent of milk makes breakfast seem more desirable than ever."

He had chosen the words "\_muoio di fame\_" because he knew they would be

familiar to her ears; and he had uttered them playfully, with the

intonation of a mendicant. This time he was understood; the corner of

the mantle was dropped, and in a few moments a large cup of fragrant

milk was held out to him. He paid no further compliments before raising

it to his lips, and while he was drinking, the little maiden found

courage to look up at the long dark curls of this singular-voiced

stranger, who had asked for food in the tones of a beggar, but who,

though his clothes were much damaged, was unlike any beggar she had ever

seen.

While this process of survey was going on, there was another current of

feeling that carried her hand into a bag which hung by the side of the

mule, and when the stranger set down his cup, he saw a large piece of

bread held out towards him, and caught a glance of the blue eyes that

seemed intended as an encouragement to him to take this additional gift.

"But perhaps that is your own breakfast," he said. "No, I have had

enough without payment. A thousand thanks, my gentle one."

There was no rejoinder in words; but the piece of bread was pushed a

little nearer to him, as if in impatience at his refusal; and as the

long dark eyes of the stranger rested on the baby-face, it seemed to be

gathering more and more courage to look up and meet them.

"Ah, then, if I must take the bread," he said, laying his hand on it, "I

shall get bolder still, and beg for another kiss to make the bread

sweeter."

His speech was getting wonderfully intelligible in spite of the strange

voice, which had at first almost seemed a thing to make her cross

herself. She blushed deeply, and lifted up a corner of her mantle to

her mouth again. But just as the too presumptuous stranger was leaning

forward, and had his fingers on the arm that held up the screening

mantle, he was startled by a harsh voice close upon his ear.

"Who are \_you\_--with a murrain to you? No honest buyer, I'll warrant,

but a hanger-on of the dicers--or something worse. Go! dance off, and

find fitter company, or I'll give you a tune to a little quicker time

than you'll like."

The young stranger drew back and looked at the speaker with a glance

provokingly free from alarm and deprecation, and his slight expression

of saucy amusement broke into a broad beaming smile as he surveyed the

figure of his threatenor. She was a stout but brawny woman, with a

man's jerkin slipped over her green serge gamurra or gown, and the

peaked hood of some departed mantle fastened round her sunburnt face,

which, under all its coarseness and premature wrinkles, showed a

half-sad, half-ludicrous maternal resemblance to the tender baby-face of

the little maiden--the sort of resemblance which often seems a more

croaking, shudder-creating prophecy than that of the death's-head.

There was something irresistibly propitiating in that bright young

smile, but Monna Ghita was not a woman to betray any weakness, and she

went on speaking, apparently with heightened exasperation.

"Yes, yes, you can grin as well as other monkeys in cap and jerkin.

You're a minstrel or a mountebank, I'll be sworn; you look for all the

world as silly as a tumbler when he's been upside down and has got on

his heels again. And what fool's tricks hast thou been after, Tessa?"

she added, turning to her daughter, whose frightened face was more

inviting to abuse. "Giving away the milk and victuals, it seems; ay,

ay, thou'dst carry water in thy ears for any idle vagabond that didn't

like to stoop for it, thou silly staring rabbit! Turn thy back, and

lift the herbs out of the panniers, else I'll make thee say a few Aves

without counting."

"Nay, Madonna," said the stranger, with a pleading smile, "don't be

angry with your pretty Tessa for taking pity on a hungry traveller, who

found himself unexpectedly without a quattrino. Your handsome face

looks so well when it frowns, that I long to see it illuminated by a

smile."

"\_Va via\_! I know what paste you are made of. You may tickle me with

that straw a good long while before I shall laugh, I can tell you. Get

along, with a bad Easter! else I'll make a beauty-spot or two on that

face of yours that shall spoil your kissing on this side Advent."

As Monna Ghita lifted her formidable talons by way of complying with the

first and last requisite of eloquence, Bratti, who had come up a minute

or two before, had been saying to his companion, "What think you of this

pretty parrot, Nello? Doesn't his tongue smack of Venice?"

"Nay, Bratti," said the barber in an undertone, "thy wisdom has much of

the ass in it, as I told thee just now; especially about the ears. This

stranger is a Greek, else I'm not the barber who has had the sole and

exclusive shaving of the excellent Demetrio, and drawn more than one

sorry tooth from his learned jaw. And this youth might be taken to have

come straight from Olympus--at least when he has had a touch of my

razor."

"\_Orsu\_! Monna Ghita!" continued Nello, not sorry to see some sport;

"what has happened to cause such a thunderstorm? Has this young

stranger been misbehaving himself?"

"By San Giovanni!" said the cautious Bratti, who had not shaken off his

original suspicions concerning the shabbily-clad possessor of jewels,

"he did right to run away from \_me\_, if he meant to get into mischief.

I can swear that I found him under the Loggia de' Cerchi, with a ring on

his finger such as I've seen worn by Bernardo Rucellai himself. Not

another rusty nail's worth do I know about him."

"The fact is," said Nello, eyeing the stranger good-humouredly, "this

\_bello giovane\_ has been a little too presumptuous in admiring the

charms of Monna Ghita, and has attempted to kiss her while her

daughter's back is turned; for I observe that the pretty Tessa is too

busy to look this way at present. Was it not so, Messer?" Nello

concluded, in a tone of courtesy.

"You have divined the offence like a soothsayer," said the stranger,

laughingly. "Only that I had not the good fortune to find Monna Ghita

here at first. I begged a cup of milk from her daughter, and had

accepted this gift of bread, for which I was making a humble offering of

gratitude, before I had the higher pleasure of being face to face with

these riper charms which I was perhaps too bold in admiring."

"\_Va, va\_! be off, every one of you, and stay in purgatory till I pay to

get you out, will you?" said Monna Ghita, fiercely, elbowing Nello, and

leading forward her mule so as to compel the stranger to jump aside.

"Tessa, thou simpleton, bring forward thy mule a bit: the cart will be

upon us."

As Tessa turned to take the mule's bridle, she cast one timid glance at

the stranger, who was now moving with Nello out of the way of an

approaching market-cart; and the glance was just long enough to seize

the beckoning movement of his hand, which indicated that he had been

watching for this opportunity of an adieu.

"\_Ebbene\_," said Bratti, raising his voice to speak across the cart; "I

leave you with Nello, young man, for there's no pushing my bag and

basket any farther, and I have business at home. But you'll remember

our bargain, because if you found Tessa without me, it was not my fault.

Nello will show you my shop in the Ferravecchi, and I'll not turn my

back on you."

"A thousand thanks, friend!" said the stranger, laughing, and then

turned away with Nello up the narrow street which led most directly to

the Piazza del Duomo.

CHAPTER THREE.

THE BARBER'S SHOP.

"To tell you the truth," said the young stranger to Nello, as they got a

little clearer of the entangled vehicles and mules, "I am not sorry to

be handed over by that patron of mine to one who has a less barbarous

accent, and a less enigmatical business. Is it a common thing among you

Florentines for an itinerant trafficker in broken glass and rags to talk

of a shop where he sells lutes and swords?"

"Common? No: our Bratti is not a common man. He has a theory, and

lives up to it, which is more than I can say for any philosopher I have

the honour of shaving," answered Nello, whose loquacity, like an

over-full bottle, could never pour forth a small dose. "Bratti means to

extract the utmost possible amount of pleasure, that is to say, of hard

bargaining, out of this life; winding it up with a bargain for the

easiest possible passage through purgatory, by giving Holy Church his

winnings when the game is over. He has had his will made to that effect

on the cheapest terms a notary could be got for. But I have often said

to him, `Bratti, thy bargain is a limping one, and thou art on the lame

side of it. Does it not make thee a little sad to look at the pictures

of the Paradiso? Thou wilt never be able there to chaffer for rags and

rusty nails: the saints and angels want neither pins nor tinder; and

except with San Bartolommeo, who carries his skin about in an

inconvenient manner, I see no chance of thy making a bargain for

second-hand clothing.' But God pardon me," added Nello, changing his

tone, and crossing himself, "this light talk ill beseems a morning when

Lorenzo lies dead, and the Muses are tearing their hair--always a

painful thought to a barber; and you yourself, Messere, are probably

under a cloud, for when a man of your speech and presence takes up with

so sorry a night's lodging, it argues some misfortune to have befallen

him."

"What Lorenzo is that whose death you speak of?" said the stranger,

appearing to have dwelt with too anxious an interest on this point to

have noticed the indirect inquiry that followed it.

"What Lorenzo? There is but one Lorenzo, I imagine, whose death could

throw the Mercato into an uproar, set the lantern of the Duomo leaping

in desperation, and cause the lions of the Republic to feel under an

immediate necessity to devour one another. I mean Lorenzo de' Medici,

the Pericles of our Athens--if I may make such a comparison in the ear

of a Greek."

"Why not?" said the other, laughingly; "for I doubt whether Athens, even

in the days of Pericles, could have produced so learned a barber."

"Yes, yes; I thought I could not be mistaken," said the rapid Nello,

"else I have shaved the venerable Demetrio Calcondila to little purpose;

but pardon me, I am lost in wonder: your Italian is better than his,

though he has been in Italy forty years--better even than that of the

accomplished Marullo, who may be said to have married the Italic Muse in

more senses than one, since he has married our learned and lovely

Alessandra Scala."

"It will lighten your wonder to know that I come of a Greek stock

planted in Italian soil much longer than the mulberry-trees which have

taken so kindly to it. I was born at Bari, and my--I mean, I was

brought up by an Italian--and, in fact, I am a Greek, very much as your

peaches are Persian. The Greek dye was subdued in me, I suppose, till I

had been dipped over again by long abode and much travel in the land of

gods and heroes. And, to confess something of my private affairs to

you, this same Greek dye, with a few ancient gems I have about me, is

the only fortune shipwreck has left me. But--when the towers fall, you

know it is an ill business for the small nest-builders--the death of

your Pericles makes me wish I had rather turned my steps towards Rome,

as I should have done but for a fallacious Minerva in the shape of an

Augustinian monk. `At Rome,' he said, `you will be lost in a crowd of

hungry scholars; but at Florence, every corner is penetrated by the

sunshine of Lorenzo's patronage: Florence is the best market in Italy

for such commodities as yours.'"

"\_Gnaffe\_, and so it will remain, I hope," said Nello, "Lorenzo was not

the only patron and judge of learning in our city--heaven forbid!

Because he was a large melon, every other Florentine is not a pumpkin, I

suppose. Have we not Bernardo Rucellai, and Alamanno Rinuccini, and

plenty more? And if you want to be informed on such matters, I, Nello,

am your man. It seems to me a thousand years till I can be of service

to a \_bel erudito\_ like yourself. And, first of all, in the matter of

your hair. That beard, my fine young man, must be parted with, were it

as dear to you as the nymph of your dreams. Here at Florence, we love

not to see a man with his nose projecting over a cascade of hair. But,

remember, you will have passed the Rubicon, when once you have been

shaven: if you repent, and let your beard grow after it has acquired

stoutness by a struggle with the razor, your mouth will by-and-by show

no longer what Messer Angelo calls the divine prerogative of lips, but

will appear like a dark cavern fringed with horrent brambles."

"That is a terrible prophecy," said the Greek, "especially if your

Florentine maidens are many of them as pretty as the little Tessa I

stole a kiss from this morning."

"Tessa? she is a rough-handed contadina: you will rise into the favour

of dames who bring no scent of the mule-stables with them. But to that

end, you must not have the air of a \_sgherro\_, or a man of evil repute:

you must look like a courtier, and a scholar of the more polished sort,

such as our Pietro Crinito--like one who sins among well-bred, well-fed

people, and not one who sucks down vile \_vino di sotto\_ in a chance

tavern."

"With all my heart," said the stranger. "If the Florentine Graces

demand it, I am willing to give up this small matter of my beard, but--"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Nello. "I know what you would say. It is the

\_bella zazzera\_--the hyacinthine locks, you do not choose to part with;

and there is no need. Just a little pruning--ecco!--and you will look

not unlike the illustrious prince Pico di Mirandola in his prime. And

here we are in good time in the Piazza San Giovanni, and at the door of

my shop. But you are pausing, I see: naturally, you want to look at our

wonder of the world, our Duomo, our Santa Maria del Fiore. Well, well,

a mere glance; but I beseech you to leave a closer survey till you have

been shaved: I am quivering with the inspiration of my art even to the

very edge of my razor. Ah, then, come round this way."

The mercurial barber seized the arm of the stranger, and led him to a

point, on the south side of the piazza, from which he could see at once

the huge dark shell of the cupola, the slender soaring grace of Giotto's

campanile, and the quaint octagon of San Giovanni in front of them,

showing its unique gates of storied bronze, which still bore the

somewhat dimmed glory of their original gilding. The inlaid marbles

were then fresher in their pink, and white, and purple, than they are

now, when the winters of four centuries have turned their white to the

rich ochre of well-mellowed meerschaum; the facade of the cathedral did

not stand ignominious in faded stucco, but had upon it the magnificent

promise of the half-completed marble inlaying and statued niches, which

Giotto had devised a hundred and fifty years before; and as the

campanile in all its harmonious variety of colour and form led the eyes

upward, high into the clear air of this April morning, it seemed a

prophetic symbol, telling that human life must somehow and some time

shape itself into accord with that pure aspiring beauty.

But this was not the impression it appeared to produce on the Greek.

His eyes were irresistibly led upward, but as he stood with his arms

folded and his curls falling backward, there was a slight touch of scorn

on his lip, and when his eyes fell again they glanced round with a

scanning coolness which was rather piquing to Nello's Florentine spirit.

"Well, my fine young man," he said, with some impatience, "you seem to

make as little of our Cathedral as if you were the Angel Gabriel come

straight from Paradise. I should like to know if you have ever seen

finer work than our Giotto's tower, or any cupola that would not look a

mere mushroom by the side of Brunelleschi's there, or any marbles finer

or more cunningly wrought than these that our Signoria got from far-off

quarries, at a price that would buy a dukedom. Come, now, have you ever

seen anything to equal them?"

"If you asked me that question with a scimitar at my throat, after the

Turkish fashion, or even your own razor," said the young Greek, smiling

gaily, and moving on towards the gates of the Baptistery, "I daresay you

might get a confession of the true faith from me. But with my throat

free from peril, I venture to tell you that your buildings smack too

much of Christian barbarism for my taste. I have a shuddering sense of

what there is inside--hideous smoked Madonnas; fleshless saints in

mosaic, staring down idiotic astonishment and rebuke from the apse;

skin-clad skeletons hanging on crosses, or stuck all over with arrows,

or stretched on gridirons; women and monks with heads aside in perpetual

lamentation. I have seen enough of those wry-necked favourites of

heaven at Constantinople. But what is this bronze door rough with

imagery? These women's figures seem moulded in a different spirit from

those starved and staring saints I spoke of: these heads in high relief

speak of a human mind within them, instead of looking like an index to

perpetual spasms and colic."

"Yes, yes," said Nello, with some triumph. "I think we shall show you

by-and-by that our Florentine art is not in a state of barbarism. These

gates, my fine young man, were moulded half a century ago, by our

Lorenzo Ghiberti, when he counted hardly so many years as you do."

"Ah, I remember," said the stranger, turning away, like one whose

appetite for contemplation was soon satisfied. "I have heard that your

Tuscan sculptors and painters have been studying the antique a little.

But with monks for models, and the legends of mad hermits and martyrs

for subjects, the vision of Olympus itself would be of small use to

them."

"I understand," said Nello, with a significant shrug, as they walked

along. "You are of the same mind as Michele Marullo, ay, and as Angelo

Poliziano himself, in spite of his canonicate, when he relaxes himself a

little in my shop after his lectures, and talks of the gods awaking from

their long sleep and making the woods and streams vital once more. But

he rails against the Roman scholars who want to make us all talk Latin

again: `My ears,' he says, `are sufficiently flayed by the barbarisms of

the learned, and if the vulgar are to talk Latin I would as soon have

been in Florence the day they took to beating all the kettles in the

city because the bells were not enough to stay the wrath of the saints.'

Ah, Messer Greco, if you want to know the flavour of our scholarship,

you must frequent my shop: it is the focus of Florentine intellect, and

in that sense the navel of the earth--as my great predecessor,

Burchiello, said of \_his\_ shop, on the more frivolous pretension that

his street of the Calimara was the centre of our city. And here we are

at the sign of `Apollo and the Razor.' Apollo, you see, is bestowing

the razor on the Triptolemus of our craft, the first reaper of beards,

the sublime \_Anonimo\_, whose mysterious identity is indicated by a

shadowy hand."

"I see thou hast had custom already, Sandro," continued Nello,

addressing a solemn-looking dark-eyed youth, who made way for them on

the threshold. "And now make all clear for this signor to sit down.

And prepare the finest-scented lather, for he has a learned and a

handsome chin."

"You have a pleasant little adytum there, I see," said the stranger,

looking through a latticed screen which divided the shop from a room of

about equal size, opening into a still smaller walled enclosure, where a

few bays and laurels surrounded a stone Hermes. "I suppose your

conclave of \_eruditi\_ meets there?"

"There, and not less in my shop," said Nello, leading the way into the

inner room, in which were some benches, a table, with one book in

manuscript and one printed in capitals lying open upon it, a lute, a few

oil-sketches, and a model or two of hands and ancient masks. "For my

shop is a no less fitting haunt of the Muses, as you will acknowledge

when you feel the sudden illumination of understanding and the serene

vigour of inspiration that will come to you with a clear chin. Ah! you

can make that lute discourse, I perceive. I, too, have some skill that

way, though the serenata is useless when daylight discloses a visage

like mine, looking no fresher than an apple that has stood the winter.

But look at that sketch: it is a fancy of Piero di Cosimo's, a strange

freakish painter, who says he saw it by long looking at a mouldy wall."

The sketch Nello pointed to represented three masks--one a drunken

laughing Satyr, another a sorrowing Magdalen, and the third, which lay

between them, the rigid, cold face of a Stoic: the masks rested

obliquely on the lap of a little child, whose cherub features rose above

them with something of the supernal promise in the gaze which painters

had by that time learned to give to the Divine Infant.

"A symbolical picture, I see," said the young Greek, touching the lute

while he spoke, so as to bring out a slight musical murmur. "The child,

perhaps, is the Golden Age, wanting neither worship nor philosophy. And

the Golden Age can always come back as long as men are born in the form

of babies, and don't come into the world in cassock or furred mantle.

Or, the child may mean the wise philosophy of Epicurus, removed alike

from the gross, the sad, and the severe."

"Ah! everybody has his own interpretation for that picture," said Nello;

"and if you ask Piero himself what he meant by it, he says his pictures

are an appendix which Messer Domeneddio has been pleased to make to the

universe, and if any man is in doubt what they mean, he had better

inquire of Holy Church. He has been asked to paint a picture after the

sketch, but he puts his fingers to his ears and shakes his head at that;

the fancy is past, he says--a strange animal, our Piero. But now all is

ready for your initiation into the mysteries of the razor."

"Mysteries they may well be called," continued the barber, with rising

spirits at the prospect of a long monologue, as he imprisoned the young

Greek in the shroud-like shaving-cloth; "mysteries of Minerva and the

Graces. I get the flower of men's thoughts, because I seize them in the

first moment after shaving. (Ah! you wince a little at the lather: it

tickles the outlying limits of the nose, I admit.) And that is what

makes the peculiar fitness of a barber's shop to become a resort of wit

and learning. For, look now at a druggist's shop: there is a dull

conclave at the sign of `The Moor,' that pretends to rival mine; but

what sort of inspiration, I beseech you, can be got from the scent of

nauseous vegetable decoctions?--to say nothing of the fact that you no

sooner pass the threshold than you see a doctor of physic, like a

gigantic spider disguised in fur and scarlet, waiting for his prey; or

even see him blocking up the doorway seated on a bony hack, inspecting

saliva. (Your chin a little elevated, if it please you: contemplate

that angel who is blowing the trumpet at you from the ceiling. I had it

painted expressly for the regulation of my clients' chins.) Besides,

your druggist, who herborises and decocts, is a man of prejudices: he

has poisoned people according to a system, and is obliged to stand up

for his system to justify the consequences. Now a barber can be

dispassionate; the only thing he necessarily stands by is the razor,

always providing he is not an author. That was the flaw in my great

predecessor Burchiello: he was a poet, and had consequently a prejudice

about his own poetry. I have escaped that; I saw very early that

authorship is a narrowing business, in conflict with the liberal art of

the razor, which demands an impartial affection for all men's chins.

Ecco, Messer! the outline of your chin and lip is as clear as a

maiden's; and now fix your mind on a knotty question--ask yourself

whether you are bound to spell Virgil with an \_i\_ or an \_e\_, and say if

you do not feel an unwonted clearness on the point. Only, if you decide

for the \_i\_, keep it to yourself till your fortune is made, for the \_e\_

hath the stronger following in Florence. Ah! I think I see a gleam of

still quicker wit in your eye. I have it on the authority of our young

Niccolo Macchiavelli, himself keen enough to discern \_il pelo nell'

uovo\_, as we say, and a great lover of delicate shaving, though his

beard is hardly of two years' date, that no sooner do the hairs begin to

push themselves, than he perceives a certain grossness of apprehension

creeping over him."

"Suppose you let me look at myself," said the stranger, laughing. "The

happy effect on my intellect is perhaps obstructed by a little doubt as

to the effect on my appearance."

"Behold yourself in this mirror, then; it is a Venetian mirror from

Murano, the true \_nosce teipsum\_, as I have named it, compared with

which the finest mirror of steel or silver is mere darkness. See now,

how by diligent shaving, the nether region of your face may preserve its

human outline, instead of presenting no distinction from the physiognomy

of a bearded owl or a Barbary ape. I have seen men whose beards have so

invaded their cheeks, that one might have pitied them as the victims of

a sad, brutalising chastisement befitting our Dante's Inferno, if they

had not seemed to strut with a strange triumph in their extravagant

hairiness."

"It seems to me," said the Greek, still looking into the mirror, "that

you have taken away some of my capital with your razor--I mean a year or

two of age, which might have won me more ready credit for my learning.

Under the inspection of a patron whose vision has grown somewhat dim, I

shall have a perilous resemblance to a maiden of eighteen in the

disguise of hose and jerkin."

"Not at all," said Nello, proceeding to clip the too extravagant curls;

"your proportions are not those of a maiden. And for your age, I myself

remember seeing Angelo Poliziano begin his lectures on the Latin

language when he had a younger beard than yours; and between ourselves,

his juvenile ugliness was not less signal than his precocious

scholarship. Whereas you--no, no, your age is not against you; but

between ourselves, let me hint to you that your being a Greek, though it

be only an Apulian Greek, is not in your favour. Certain of our

scholars hold that your Greek learning is but a wayside degenerate plant

until it has been transplanted into Italian brains, and that now there

is such a plentiful crop of the superior quality, your native teachers

are mere propagators of degeneracy. Ecco! your curls are now of the

right proportion to neck and shoulders; rise, Messer, and I will free

you from the encumbrance of this cloth. \_Gnaffe\_! I almost advise you

to retain the faded jerkin and hose a little longer; they give you the

air of a fallen prince."

"But the question is," said the young Greek, leaning against the high

back of a chair, and returning Nello's contemplative admiration with a

look of inquiring anxiety; "the question is, in what quarter I am to

carry my princely air, so as to rise from the said fallen condition. If

your Florentine patrons of learning share this scholarly hostility to

the Greeks, I see not how your city can be a hospitable refuge for me,

as you seemed to say just now."

"\_Pian piano\_--not so fast," said Nello, sticking his thumbs into his

belt and nodding to Sandro to restore order. "I will not conceal from

you that there is a prejudice against Greeks among us; and though, as a

barber unsnared by authorship, I share no prejudices, I must admit that

the Greeks are not always such pretty youngsters as yourself: their

erudition is often of an uncombed, unmannerly aspect, and encrusted with

a barbarous utterance of Italian, that makes their converse hardly more

euphonious than that of a Tedesco in a state of vinous loquacity. And

then, again, excuse me--we Florentines have liberal ideas about speech,

and consider that an instrument which can flatter and promise so

cleverly as the tongue, must have been partly made for those purposes;

and that truth is a riddle for eyes and wit to discover, which it were a

mere spoiling of sport for the tongue to betray. Still we have our

limits beyond which we call dissimulation treachery. But it is said of

the Greeks that their honesty begins at what is the hanging point with

us, and that since the old Furies went to sleep, your Christian Greek is

of so easy a conscience that he would make a stepping-stone of his

father's corpse."

The flush on the stranger's face indicated what seemed so natural a

movement of resentment, that the good-natured Nello hastened to atone

for his want of reticence.

"Be not offended, \_bel giovane\_; I am but repeating what I hear in my

shop; as you may perceive, my eloquence is simply the cream which I skim

off my clients' talk. Heaven forbid I should fetter my impartiality by

entertaining an opinion. And for that same scholarly objection to the

Greeks," added Nello, in a more mocking tone, and with a significant

grimace, "the fact is, you are heretics, Messer; jealousy has nothing to

do with it: if you would just change your opinion about leaven, and

alter your Doxology a little, our Italian scholars would think it a

thousand years till they could give up their chairs to you. Yes, yes;

it is chiefly religious scruple, and partly also the authority of a

great classic,--Juvenal, is it not? He, I gather, had his bile as much

stirred by the swarm of Greeks as our Messer Angelo, who is fond of

quoting some passage about their incorrigible impudence--\_audacia

perdita\_."

"Pooh! the passage is a compliment," said the Greek, who had recovered

himself, and seemed wise enough to take the matter gaily--

"`Ingenium velox, audacia perdita, sermo

Promptus, et Isaeo torrentior.'

"A rapid intellect and ready eloquence may carry off a little

impudence."

"Assuredly," said Nello. "And since, as I see, you know Latin

literature as well as Greek, you will not fall into the mistake of

Giovanni Argiropulo, who ran full tilt against Cicero, and pronounced

him all but a pumpkin-head. For, let me give you one bit of advice,

young man--trust a barber who has shaved the best chins, and kept his

eyes and ears open for twenty years--oil your tongue well when you talk

of the ancient Latin writers, and give it an extra dip when you talk of

the modern. A wise Greek may win favour among us; witness our excellent

Demetrio, who is loved by many, and not hated immoderately even by the

most renowned scholars."

"I discern the wisdom of your advice so clearly," said the Greek, with

the bright smile which was continually lighting up the fine form and

colour of his young face, "that I will ask you for a little more. Who

now, for example, would be the most likely patron for me? Is there a

son of Lorenzo who inherits his tastes? Or is there any other wealthy

Florentine specially addicted to purchasing antique gems? I have a fine

Cleopatra cut in sardonyx, and one or two other intaglios and cameos,

both curious and beautiful, worthy of being added to the cabinet of a

prince. Happily, I had taken the precaution of fastening them within

the lining of my doublet before I set out on my voyage. Moreover, I

should like to raise a small sum for my present need on this ring of

mine," (here he took out the ring and replaced it on his finger), "if

you could recommend me to any honest trafficker."

"Let us see, let us see," said Nello, perusing the floor, and walking up

and down the length of his shop. "This is no time to apply to Piero de'

Medici, though he has the will to make such purchases if he could always

spare the money; but I think it is another sort of Cleopatra that he

covets most... Yes, yes, I have it. What you want is a man of wealth,

and influence, and scholarly tastes--not one of your learned porcupines,

bristling all over with critical tests, but one whose Greek and Latin

are of a comfortable laxity. And that man is Bartolommeo Scala, the

secretary of our Republic. He came to Florence as a poor adventurer

himself--a miller's son--a `branny monster,' as he has been nicknamed by

our honey-lipped Poliziano, who agrees with him as well as my teeth

agree with lemon-juice. And, by the by, that may be a reason why the

secretary may be the more ready to do a good turn to a strange scholar.

For, between you and me, \_bel giovane\_--trust a barber who has shaved

the best scholars--friendliness is much such a steed as Ser Benghi's: it

will hardly show much alacrity unless it has got the thistle of hatred

under its tail. However, the secretary is a man who'll keep his word to

you, even to the halving of a fennel-seed; and he is not unlikely to buy

some of your gems."

"But how am I to get at this great man?" said the Greek, rather

impatiently.

"I was coming to that," said Nello. "Just now everybody of any public

importance will be full of Lorenzo's death, and a stranger may find it

difficult to get any notice. But in the meantime, I could take you to a

man who, if he has a mind, can help you to a chance of a favourable

interview with Scala sooner than anybody else in Florence--worth seeing

for his own sake too, to say nothing of his collections, or of his

daughter Romola, who is as fair as the Florentine lily before it got

quarrelsome and turned red."

"But if this father of the beautiful Romola makes collections, why

should he not like to buy some of my gems himself?"

Nello shrugged his shoulders. "For two good reasons--want of sight to

look at the gems, and want of money to pay for them. Our old Bardo de'

Bardi is so blind that he can see no more of his daughter than, as he

says, a glimmering of something bright when she comes very near him:

doubtless her golden hair, which, as Messer Luigi Pulci says of his

Meridiana's, `\_raggia come stella per sereno\_.' Ah! here come some

clients of mine, and I shouldn't wonder if one of them could serve your

turn about that ring."

CHAPTER FOUR.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

"Good-day, Messer Domenico," said Nello to the foremost of the two

visitors who entered the shop, while he nodded silently to the other.

"You come as opportunely as cheese on macaroni. Ah! you are in haste--

wish to be shaved without delay--ecco! And this is a morning when every

one has grave matter on his mind. Florence orphaned--the very pivot of

Italy snatched away--heaven itself at a loss what to do next. \_Oime\_!

Well, well; the sun is nevertheless travelling on towards dinner-time

again; and, as I was saying, you come like cheese ready grated. For

this young stranger was wishing for an honourable trader who would

advance, him a sum on a certain ring of value, and if I had counted

every goldsmith and money-lender in Florence on my fingers, I couldn't

have found a better name than Menico Cennini. Besides, he hath other

ware in which you deal--Greek learning, and young eyes--a double

implement which you printers are always in need of."

The grave elderly man, son of that Bernardo Cennini, who, twenty years

before, having heard of the new process of printing carried on by

Germans, had cast his own types in Florence, remained necessarily in

lathered silence and passivity while Nello showered this talk in his

ears, but turned a slow sideway gaze on the stranger.

"This fine young man has unlimited Greek, Latin, or Italian at your

service," continued Nello, fond of interpreting by very ample

paraphrase. "He is as great a wonder of juvenile learning as Francesco

Filelfo or our own incomparable Poliziano. A second Guarino, too, for

he has had the misfortune to be shipwrecked, and has doubtless lost a

store of precious manuscripts that might have contributed some

correctness even to your correct editions, Domenico. Fortunately, he

has rescued a few gems of rare value. His name is--you said your name,

Messer, was--?"

"Tito Melema," said the stranger, slipping the ring from his finger, and

presenting it to Cennini, whom Nello, not less rapid with his razor than

with his tongue, had now released from the shaving-cloth.

Meanwhile the man who had entered the shop in company with the

goldsmith--a tall figure, about fifty, with a short trimmed beard,

wearing an old felt hat and a threadbare mantle--had kept his eye fixed

on the Greek, and now said abruptly--

"Young man, I am painting a picture of Sinon deceiving old Priam, and I

should be glad of your face for my Sinon, if you'd give me a sitting."

Tito Melema started and looked round with a pale astonishment in his

face as if at a sudden accusation; but Nello left him no time to feel at

a loss for an answer: "Piero," said the barber, "thou art the most

extraordinary compound of humours and fancies ever packed into a human

skin. What trick wilt thou play with the fine visage of this young

scholar to make it suit thy traitor? Ask him rather to turn his eyes

upward, and thou mayst make a Saint Sebastian of him that will draw

troops of devout women; or, if thou art in a classical vein, put myrtle

about his curls and make him a young Bacchus, or say rather a Phoebus

Apollo, for his face is as warm and bright as a summer morning; it made

me his friend in the space of a `credo.'"

"Ay, Nello," said the painter, speaking with abrupt pauses; "and if thy

tongue can leave off its everlasting chirping long enough for thy

understanding to consider the matter, thou mayst see that thou hast just

shown the reason why the face of Messere will suit my traitor. A

perfect traitor should have a face which vice can write no marks on--

lips that will lie with a dimpled smile--eyes of such agate-like

brightness and depth that no infamy can dull them--cheeks that will rise

from a murder and not look haggard. I say not this young man is a

traitor: I mean, he has a face that would make him the more perfect

traitor if he had the heart of one, which is saying neither more nor

less than that he has a beautiful face, informed with rich young blood,

that will be nourished enough by food, and keep its colour without much

help of virtue. He may have the heart of a hero along with it; I aver

nothing to the contrary. Ask Domenico there if the lapidaries can

always tell a gem by the sight alone. And now I'm going to put the tow

in my ears, for thy chatter and the bells together are more than I can

endure: so say no more to me, but trim my beard."

With these last words Piero (called "di Cosimo," from his master, Cosimo

Rosselli) drew out two bits of tow, stuffed them in his ears, and placed

himself in the chair before Nello, who shrugged his shoulders and cast a

grimacing look of intelligence at the Greek, as much as to say, "A

whimsical fellow, you perceive! Everybody holds his speeches as mere

jokes."

Tito, who had stood transfixed, with his long dark eyes resting on the

unknown man who had addressed him so equivocally, seemed recalled to his

self-command by Piero's change of position, and apparently satisfied

with his explanation, was again giving his attention to Cennini, who

presently said--

"This is a curious and valuable ring, young man. This intaglio of the

fish with the crested serpent above it, in the black stratum of the

onyx, or rather nicolo, is well shown by the surrounding blue of the

upper stratum. The ring has, doubtless, a history?" added Cennini,

looking up keenly at the young stranger.

"Yes, indeed," said Tito, meeting the scrutiny very frankly. "The ring

was found in Sicily, and I have understood from those who busy

themselves with gems and sigils, that both the stone and intaglio are of

virtue to make the wearer fortunate, especially at sea, and also to

restore to him whatever he may have lost. But," he continued, smiling,

"though I have worn it constantly since I quitted Greece, it has not

made me altogether fortunate at sea, you perceive, unless I am to count

escape from drowning as a sufficient proof of its virtue. It remains to

be seen whether my lost chests will come to light; but to lose no chance

of such a result, Messer, I will pray you only to hold the ring for a

short space as pledge for a small sum far beneath its value, and I will

redeem it as soon as I can dispose of certain other gems which are

secured within my doublet, or indeed as soon as I can earn something by

any scholarly employment, if I may be so fortunate as to meet with

such."

"That may be seen, young man, if you will come with me," said Cennini.

"My brother Pietro, who is a better judge of scholarship than I, will

perhaps be able to supply you with a task that may test your

capabilities. Meanwhile, take back your ring until I can hand you the

necessary florins, and, if it please you, come along with me."

"Yes, yes," said Nello, "go with Messer Domenico, you cannot go in

better company; he was born under the constellation that gives a man

skill, riches, and integrity, whatever that constellation may be, which

is of the less consequence because babies can't choose their own

horoscopes, and, indeed, if they could, there might be an inconvenient

rush of babies at particular epochs. Besides, our Phoenix, the

incomparable Pico, has shown that your horoscopes are all a nonsensical

dream--which is the less troublesome opinion. \_Addio! bel giovane\_!

don't forget to come back to me."

"No fear of that," said Tito, beckoning a farewell, as he turned round

his bright face at the door. "You are to do me a great service:--that

is the most positive security for your seeing me again."

"Say what thou wilt, Piero," said Nello, as the young stranger

disappeared, "I shall never look at such an outside as that without

taking it as a sign of a lovable nature. Why, thou wilt say next that

Leonardo, whom thou art always raving about, ought to have made his

Judas as beautiful as Saint John! But thou art as deaf as the top of

Mount Morello with that accursed tow in thy ears. Well, well: I'll get

a little more of this young man's history from him before I take him to

Bardo Bardi."

CHAPTER FIVE.

THE BLIND SCHOLAR AND HIS DAUGHTER.

The Via de' Bardi, a street noted in the history of Florence, lies in

Oltrarno, or that portion of the city which clothes the southern bank of

the river. It extends from the Ponte Vecchio to the Piazza de' Mozzi at

the head of the Ponte alle Grazie; its right-hand line of houses and

walls being backed by the rather steep ascent which in the fifteenth

century was known as the hill of Bogoli, the famous stone-quarry whence

the city got its pavement--of dangerously unstable consistence when

penetrated by rains; its left-hand buildings flanking the river and

making on their northern side a length of quaint, irregularly-pierced

facade, of which the waters give a softened loving reflection as the sun

begins to decline towards the western heights. But quaint as these

buildings are, some of them seem to the historical memory a too modern

substitute for the famous houses of the Bardi family, destroyed by

popular rage in the middle of the fourteenth century.

They were a proud and energetic stock, these Bardi; conspicuous among

those who clutched the sword in the earliest world-famous quarrels of

Florentines with Florentines, when the narrow streets were darkened with

the high towers of the nobles, and when the old tutelar god Mars, as he

saw the gutters reddened with neighbours' blood, might well have smiled

at the centuries of lip-service paid to his rival, the Baptist. But the

Bardi hands were of the sort that not only clutch the sword-hilt with

vigour, but love the more delicate pleasure of fingering minted metal:

they were matched, too, with true Florentine eyes, capable of discerning

that power was to be won by other means than by rending and riving, and

by the middle of the fourteenth century we find them risen from their

original condition of \_popolani\_ to be possessors, by purchase, of lands

and strongholds, and the feudal dignity of Counts of Vernio, disturbing

to the jealousy of their republican fellow-citizens. These lordly

purchases are explained by our seeing the Bardi disastrously signalised

only a few years later as standing in the very front of European

commerce--the Christian Rothschilds of that time--undertaking to furnish

specie for the wars of our Edward the Third, and having revenues "in

kind" made over to them; especially in wool, most precious of freights

for Florentine galleys. Their august debtor left them with an august

deficit, and alarmed Sicilian creditors made a too sudden demand for the

payment of deposits, causing a ruinous shock to the credit of the Bardi

and of associated houses, which was felt as a commercial calamity along

all the coasts of the Mediterranean. But, like more modern bankrupts,

they did not, for all that, hide their heads in humiliation; on the

contrary, they seemed to have held them higher than ever, and to have

been among the most arrogant of those grandees, who under certain

noteworthy circumstances, open to all who will read the honest pages of

Giovanni Villani, drew upon themselves the exasperation of the armed

people in 1343. The Bardi, who had made themselves fast in their street

between the two bridges, kept these narrow inlets, like panthers at bay,

against the oncoming gonfalons of the people, and were only made to give

way by an assault from the hill behind them. Their houses by the river,

to the number of twenty-two (\_palagi e case grandi\_), were sacked and

burnt, and many among the chief of those who bore the Bardi name were

driven from the city. But an old Florentine family was many-rooted, and

we find the Bardi maintaining importance and rising again and again to

the surface of Florentine affairs in a more or less creditable manner,

implying an untold family history that would have included even more

vicissitudes and contrasts of dignity and disgrace, of wealth and

poverty, than are usually seen on the background of wide kinship. [Note

1.] But the Bardi never resumed their proprietorship in the old street

on the banks of the river, which in 1492 had long been associated with

other names of mark, and especially with the Neri, who possessed a

considerable range of houses on the side towards the hill.

In one of these Neri houses there lived, however, a descendant of the

Bardi, and of that very branch which a century and a half before had

become Counts of Vernio: a descendant who had inherited the old family

pride and energy, the old love of pre-eminence, the old desire to leave

a lasting track of his footsteps on the fast-whirling earth. But the

family passions lived on in him under altered conditions: this

descendant of the Bardi was not a man swift in street warfare, or one

who loved to play the signor, fortifying strongholds and asserting the

right to hang vassals, or a merchant and usurer of keen daring, who

delighted in the generalship of wide commercial schemes: he was a man

with a deep-veined hand cramped by much copying of manuscripts, who ate

sparing dinners, and wore threadbare clothes, at first from choice and

at last from necessity; who sat among his books and his marble fragments

of the past, and saw them only by the light of those far-off younger

days which still shone in his memory: he was a moneyless, blind old

scholar--the Bardo de' Bardi to whom Nello, the barber, had promised to

introduce the young Greek, Tito Melema.

The house in which Bardo lived was situated on the side of the street

nearest the hill, and was one of those large sombre masses of stone

building pierced by comparatively small windows, and surmounted by what

may be called a roofed terrace or loggia, of which there are many

examples still to be seen in the venerable city. Grim doors, with

conspicuous scrolled hinges, having high up on each side of them a small

window defended by iron bars, opened on a groined entrance-court, empty

of everything but a massive lamp-iron suspended from the centre of the

groin. A smaller grim door on the left-hand admitted to the stone

staircase, and the rooms on the ground-floor. These last were used as a

warehouse by the proprietor; so was the first floor; and both were

filled with precious stores, destined to be carried, some perhaps to the

banks of the Scheldt, some to the shores of Africa, some to the isles of

the Aegean, or to the banks of the Euxine. Maso, the old serving-man,

when he returned from the Mercato with the stock of cheap vegetables,

had to make his slow way up to the second storey before he reached the

door of his master, Bardo, through which we are about to enter only a

few mornings after Nello's conversation with the Greek.

We follow Maso across the ante-chamber to the door on the left-hand,

through which we pass as he opens it. He merely looks in and nods,

while a clear young voice says, "Ah, you are come back, Maso. It is

well. We have wanted nothing."

The voice came from the farther end of a long, spacious room, surrounded

with shelves, on which books and antiquities were arranged in scrupulous

order. Here and there, on separate stands in front of the shelves, were

placed a beautiful feminine torso; a headless statue, with an uplifted

muscular arm wielding a bladeless sword; rounded, dimpled, infantine

limbs severed from the trunk, inviting the lips to kiss the cold marble;

some well-preserved Roman busts; and two or three vases from Magna

Grecia. A large table in the centre was covered with antique bronze

lamps and small vessels in dark pottery. The colour of these objects

was chiefly pale or sombre: the vellum bindings, with their deep-ridged

backs, gave little relief to the marble, livid with long burial; the

once splendid patch of carpet at the farther end of the room had long

been worn to dimness; the dark bronzes wanted sunlight upon them to

bring out their tinge of green, and the sun was not yet high enough to

send gleams of brightness through the narrow windows that looked on the

Via de' Bardi.

The only spot of bright colour in the room was made by the hair of a

tall maiden of seventeen or eighteen, who was standing before a carved

\_leggio\_, or reading-desk, such as is often seen in the choirs of

Italian churches. The hair was of a reddish gold colour, enriched by an

unbroken small ripple, such as may be seen in the sunset clouds on

grandest autumnal evenings. It was confined by a black fillet above her

small ears, from which it rippled forward again, and made a natural veil

for her neck above her square-cut gown of black \_rascia\_, or serge. Her

eyes were bent on a large volume placed before her: one long white hand

rested on the reading, desk, and the other clasped the back of her

father's chair.

The blind father sat with head uplifted and turned a little aside

towards his daughter, as if he were looking at her. His delicate

paleness, set off by the black velvet cap which surmounted his drooping

white hair, made all the more perceptible the likeness between his aged

features and those of the young maiden, whose cheeks were also without

any tinge of the rose. There was the same refinement of brow and

nostril in both, counterbalanced by a full though firm mouth and

powerful chin, which gave an expression of proud tenacity and latent

impetuousness: an expression carried out in the backward poise of the

girl's head, and the grand line of her neck and shoulders. It was a

type of face of which one could not venture to say whether it would

inspire love or only that unwilling admiration which is mixed with

dread: the question must be decided by the eyes, which often seem

charged with a more direct message from the soul. But the eyes of the

father had long been silent, and the eyes of the daughter were bent on

the Latin pages of Politian's `Miscellanea,' from which she was reading

aloud at the eightieth chapter, to the following effect:--

"There was a certain nymph of Thebes named Chariclo, especially dear to

Pallas; and this nymph was the mother of Teiresias. But once when in

the heat of summer, Pallas, in company with Chariclo, was bathing her

disrobed limbs in the Heliconian Hippocrene, it happened that Teiresias

coming as a hunter to quench his thirst at the same fountain,

inadvertently beheld Minerva unveiled, and immediately became blind.

For it is declared in the Saturnian laws, that he who beholds the gods

against their will, shall atone for it by a heavy penalty... When

Teiresias had fallen into this calamity, Pallas, moved by the tears of

Chariclo, endowed him with prophecy and length of days, and even caused

his prudence and wisdom to continue after he had entered among the

shades, so that an oracle spake from his tomb: and she gave him a staff,

wherewith, as by a guide, he might walk without stumbling... And hence,

Nonnus, in the fifth book of the `Dionysiaca,' introduces Actreon

exclaiming that he calls Teiresias happy, since, without dying, and with

the loss of his eyesight merely, he had beheld Minerva unveiled, and

thus, though blind, could for evermore carry her image in his soul."

At this point in the reading, the daughter's hand slipped from the back

of the chair and met her father's, which he had that moment uplifted;

but she had not looked round, and was going on, though with a voice a

little altered by some suppressed feeling, to read the Greek quotation

from Nonnus, when the old man said--

"Stay, Romola; reach me my own copy of Nonnus. It is a more correct

copy than any in Poliziano's hands, for I made emendations in it which

have not yet been communicated to any man. I finished it in 1477, when

my sight was fast failing me."

Romola walked to the farther end of the room, with the queenly step

which was the simple action of her tall, finely-wrought frame, without

the slightest conscious adjustment of herself.

"Is it in the right place, Romola?" asked Bardo, who was perpetually

seeking the assurance that the outward fact continued to correspond with

the image which lived to the minutest detail in his mind.

"Yes, father; at the west end of the room, on the third shelf from the

bottom, behind the bust of Hadrian, above Apollonius Rhodius and

Callimachus, and below Lucan and Silius Italious."

As Romola said this, a fine ear would have detected in her clear voice

and distinct utterance, a faint suggestion of weariness struggling with

habitual patience. But as she approached her father and saw his arms

stretched out a little with nervous excitement to seize the volume, her

hazel eyes filled with pity; she hastened to lay the book on his lap,

and kneeled down by him, looking up at him as if she believed that the

love in her face must surely make its way through the dark obstruction

that shut out everything else. At that moment the doubtful

attractiveness of Romola's face, in which pride and passion seemed to be

quivering in the balance with native refinement and intelligence, was

transfigured to the most lovable womanliness by mingled pity and

affection: it was evident that the deepest fount of feeling within her

had not yet wrought its way to the less changeful features, and only

found its outlet through her eyes.

But the father, unconscious of that soft radiance, looked flushed and

agitated as his hand explored the edges and back of the large book.

"The vellum is yellowed in these thirteen years, Romola."

"Yes, father," said Romola, gently; "but your letters at the back are

dark and plain still--fine Roman letters; and the Greek character," she

continued, laying the book open on her father's knee, "is more beautiful

than that of any of your bought manuscripts."

"Assuredly, child," said Bardo, passing his finger across the page, as

if he hoped to discriminate line and margin. "What hired amanuensis can

be equal to the scribe who loves the words that grow under his hand, and

to whom an error or indistinctness in the text is more painful than a

sudden darkness or obstacle across his path? And even these mechanical

printers who threaten to make learning a base and vulgar thing--even

they must depend on the manuscript over which we scholars have bent with

that insight into the poet's meaning which is closely akin to the \_mens

divinior\_ of the poet himself; unless they would flood the world with

grammatical falsities and inexplicable anomalies that would turn the

very fountain of Parnassus into a deluge of poisonous mud. But find the

passage in the fifth book, to which Poliziano refers--I know it very

well."

Seating herself on a low stool, close to her father's knee, Romola took

the book on her lap and read the four verses containing the exclamation

of Actreon.

"It is true, Romola," said Bardo, when she had finished; "it is a true

conception of the poet; for what is that grosser, narrower light by

which men behold merely the petty scene around them, compared with that

far-stretching, lasting light which spreads over centuries of thought,

and over the life of nations, and makes clear to us the minds of the

immortals who have reaped the great harvest and left us to glean in

their furrows? For me, Romola, even when I could see, it was with the

great dead that I lived; while the living often seemed to me mere

spectres--shadows dispossessed of true feeling and intelligence; and

unlike those Lamiae, to whom Poliziano, with that superficial ingenuity

which I do not deny to him, compares our inquisitive Florentines,

because they put on their eyes when they went abroad, and took them off

when they got home again, I have returned from the converse of the

streets as from a forgotten dream, and have sat down among my books,

saying with Petrarca, the modern who is least unworthy to be named after

the ancients, `Libri medullitus delectant, colloquuntur, consulunt, et

viva quadam nobis atque arguta familiaritate junguntur.'"

"And in one thing you are happier than your favourite Petrarca, father,"

said Romola, affectionately humouring the old man's disposition to

dilate in this way; "for he used to look at his copy of Homer and think

sadly that the Greek was a dead letter to him: so far, he had the inward

blindness that you feel is worse than your outward blindness."

"True, child; for I carry within me the fruits of that fervid study

which I gave to the Greek tongue under the teaching of the younger

Crisolora, and Filelfo, and Argiropulo; though that great work in which

I had desired to gather, as into a firm web, all the threads that my

research had laboriously disentangled, and which would have been the

vintage of my life, was cut off by the failure of my sight and my want

of a fitting coadjutor. For the sustained zeal and unconquerable

patience demanded from those who would tread the unbeaten paths of

knowledge are still less reconcilable with the wandering, vagrant

propensity of the feminine mind than with the feeble powers of the

feminine body."

"Father," said Romola, with a sudden flush and in an injured tone, "I

read anything you wish me to read; and I will look out any passages for

you, and make whatever notes you want."

Bardo shook his head, and smiled with a bitter sort of pity. "As well

try to be a pentathlos and perform all the five feats of the palaestra

with the limbs of a nymph. Have I forgotten thy fainting in the mere

search for the references I needed to explain a single passage of

Callimachus?"

"But, father, it was the weight of the books, and Maso can help me; it

was not want of attention and patience."

Bardo shook his head again. "It is not mere bodily organs that I want:

it is the sharp edge of a young mind to pierce the way for my somewhat

blunted faculties. For blindness acts like a dam, sending the streams

of thought backward along the already-travelled channels and hindering

the course onward. If my son had not forsaken me, deluded by debasing

fanatical dreams, worthy only of an energumen whose dwelling is among

tombs, I might have gone on and seen my path broadening to the end of my

life; for he was a youth of great promise. But it has closed in now,"

the old man continued, after a short pause; "it has closed in now;--all

but the narrow track he has left me to tread--alone in my blindness."

Romola started from her seat, and carried away the large volume to its

place again, stung too acutely by her father's last words to remain

motionless as well as silent; and when she turned away from the shelf

again, she remained standing at some distance from him, stretching her

arms downwards and clasping her fingers tightly as she looked with a sad

dreariness in her young face at the lifeless objects around her--the

parchment backs, the unchanging mutilated marble, the bits of obsolete

bronze and clay.

Bardo, though usually susceptible to Romola's movements and eager to

trace them, was now too entirely preoccupied by the pain of rankling

memories to notice her departure from his side.

"Yes," he went on, "with my son to aid me, I might have had my due share

in the triumphs of this century: the names of the Bardi, father and son,

might have been held reverently on the lips of scholars in the ages to

come; not on account of frivolous verses or philosophical treatises,

which are superfluous and presumptuous attempts to imitate the

inimitable, such as allure vain men like Panhormita, and from which even

the admirable Poggio did not keep himself sufficiently free; but because

we should have given a lamp whereby men might have studied the supreme

productions of the past. For why is a young man like Poliziano (who was

not yet born when I was already held worthy to maintain a discussion

with Thomas of Sarzana) to have a glorious memory as a commentator on

the Pandects--why is Ficino, whose Latin is an offence to me, and who

wanders purblind among the superstitious fancies that marked the decline

at once of art, literature, and philosophy, to descend to posterity as

the very high priest of Platonism, while I, who am more than their

equal, have not effected anything but scattered work, which will be

appropriated by other men? Why? but because my son, whom I had brought

up to replenish my ripe learning with young enterprise, left me and all

liberal pursuits that he might lash himself and howl at midnight with

besotted friars--that he might go wandering on pilgrimages befitting men

who know of no past older than the missal and the crucifix?--left me

when the night was already beginning to fall on me."

In these last words the old man's voice, which had risen high in

indignant protest, fell into a tone of reproach so tremulous and

plaintive that Romola, turning her eyes again towards the blind aged

face, felt her heart swell with forgiving pity. She seated herself by

her father again, and placed her hand on his knee--too proud to obtrude

consolation in words that might seem like a vindication of her own

value, yet wishing to comfort him by some sign of her presence.

"Yes, Romola," said Bardo, automatically letting his left-hand, with its

massive prophylactic rings, fall a little too heavily on the delicate

blue-veined back of the girl's right, so that she bit her lip to prevent

herself from starting. "If even Florence only is to remember me, it can

but be on the same ground that it will remember Niccolo Niccoli--because

I forsook the vulgar pursuit of wealth in commerce that I might devote

myself to collecting the precious remains of ancient art and wisdom, and

leave them, after the example of the munificent Romans, for an

everlasting possession to my fellow-citizens. But why do I say Florence

only? If Florence remembers me, will not the world remember me? ...

Yet," added Bardo, after a short pause, his voice falling again into a

saddened key, "Lorenzo's untimely death has raised a new difficulty. I

had his promise--I should have had his bond--that my collection should

always bear my name and should never be sold, though the harpies might

clutch everything else; but there is enough for them--there is more than

enough--and for thee, too, Romola, there will be enough. Besides, thou

wilt marry; Bernardo reproaches me that I do not seek a fitting

\_parentado\_ for thee, and we will delay no longer, we will think about

it."

"No, no, father; what could you do? besides, it is useless: wait till

some one seeks me," said Romola, hastily.

"Nay, my child, that is not the paternal duty. It was not so held by

the ancients, and in this respect Florentines have not degenerated from

their ancestral customs."

"But I will study diligently," said Romola, her eyes dilating with

anxiety. "I will become as learned as Cassandra Fedele: I will try and

be as useful to you as if I had been a boy, and then perhaps some great

scholar will want to marry me, and will not mind about a dowry; and he

will like to come and live with you, and he will be to you in place of

my brother... and you will not be sorry that I was a daughter."

There was a rising sob in Romola's voice as she said the last words,

which touched the fatherly fibre in Bardo. He stretched his hand upward

a little in search of her golden hair, and as she placed her head under

his hand, he gently stroked it, leaning towards her as if his eyes

discerned some glimmer there.

"Nay, Romola mia, I said not so; if I have pronounced an anathema on a

degenerate and ungrateful son, I said not that I could wish thee other

than the sweet daughter thou hast been to me. For what son could have

tended me so gently in the frequent sickness I have had of late? And

even in learning thou art not, according to thy measure, contemptible.

Something perhaps were to be wished in thy capacity of attention and

memory, not incompatible even with the feminine mind. But as Calcondila

bore testimony, when he aided me to teach thee, thou hast a ready

apprehension, and even a wide-glancing intelligence. And thou hast a

man's nobility of soul: thou hast never fretted me with thy petty

desires as thy mother did. It is true, I have been careful to keep thee

aloof from the debasing influence of thy own sex, with their

sparrow-like frivolity and their enslaving superstition, except, indeed,

from that of our cousin Brigida, who may well serve as a scarecrow and a

warning. And though--since I agree with the divine Petrarca, when he

declares, quoting the `Aulularia' of Plautus, who again was indebted for

the truth to the supreme Greek intellect, `Optimam foeminam nullam esse,

alia licet alia pejor sit'--I cannot boast that thou art entirely lifted

out of that lower category to which Nature assigned thee, nor even that

in erudition thou art on a par with the more learned women of this age;

thou art, nevertheless--yes, Romola mia," said the old man, his pedantry

again melting into tenderness, "thou art my sweet daughter, and thy

voice is as the lower notes of the flute, `dulcis, durabilis, clara,

pura, secans aera et auribus sedens,' according to the choice words of

Quintilian; and Bernardo tells me thou art fair, and thy hair is like

the brightness of the morning, and indeed it seems to me that I discern

some radiance from thee. Ah! I know how all else looks in this room,

but thy form I only guess at. Thou art no longer the little woman six

years old, that faded for me into darkness; thou art tall, and thy arm

is but little below mine. Let us walk together."

The old man rose, and Romola, soothed by these beams of tenderness,

looked happy again as she drew his arm within hers, and placed in his

right-hand the stick which rested at the side of his chair. While Bardo

had been sitting, he had seemed hardly more than sixty: his face, though

pale, had that refined texture in which wrinkles and lines are never

deep; but now that he began to walk he looked as old as he really was--

rather more than seventy; for his tall spare frame had the student's

stoop of the shoulders, and he stepped with the undecided gait of the

blind.

"No, Romola," he said, pausing against the bust of Hadrian, and passing

his stick from the right to the left that he might explore the familiar

outline with a "seeing hand."

"There will be nothing else to preserve my memory and carry down my name

as a member of the great republic of letters--nothing but my library and

my collection of antiquities. And they are choice," continued Bardo,

pressing the bust and speaking in a tone of insistance. "The

collections of Niccolo I know were larger; but take any collection which

is the work of a single man--that of the great Boccaccio even--mine will

surpass it. That of Poggio was contemptible compared with mine. It

will be a great gift to unborn scholars. And there is nothing else.

For even if I were to yield to the wish of Aldo Manuzio when he sets up

his press at Venice, and give him the aid of my annotated manuscripts, I

know well what would be the result: some other scholar's name would

stand on the title-page of the edition--some scholar who would have fed

on my honey, and then declared in his preface that he had gathered it

all himself fresh from Hymettus. Else, why have I refused the loan of

many an annotated codex? why have I refused to make public any of my

translations? why? but because scholarship is a system of licenced

robbery, and your man in scarlet and furred robe who sits in judgment on

thieves, is himself a thief of the thoughts and the fame that belong to

his fellows. But against that robbery Bardo de' Bardi shall struggle--

though blind and forsaken, he shall struggle. I too have a right to be

remembered--as great a right as Pontanus or Merula, whose names will be

foremost on the lips of posterity, because they sought patronage and

found it; because they had tongues that could flatter, and blood that

was used to be nourished from the client's basket. I have a right to be

remembered."

The old man's voice had become at once loud and tremulous, and a pink

flush overspread his proud, delicately-cut features, while the

habitually raised attitude of his head gave the idea that behind the

curtain of his blindness he saw some imaginary high tribunal to which he

was appealing against the injustice of Fame.

Romola was moved with sympathetic indignation, for in her nature too

there lay the same large claims, and the same spirit of struggle against

their denial. She tried to calm her father by a still prouder word than

his.

"Nevertheless, father, it is a great gift of the gods to be born with a

hatred and contempt of all injustice and meanness. Yours is a higher

lot, never to have lied and truckled, than to have shared honours won by

dishonour. There is strength in scorn, as there was in the martial fury

by which men became insensible to wounds."

"It is well said, Romola. It is a Promethean word thou hast uttered,"

answered Bardo, after a little interval in which he had begun to lean on

his stick again, and to walk on. "And I indeed am not to be pierced by

the shafts of Fortune. My armour is the \_aes triplex\_ of a clear

conscience, and a mind nourished by the precepts of philosophy. `For

men,' says Epictetus, `are disturbed not by things themselves, but by

their opinions or thoughts concerning those things.' And again,

`whosoever will be free, let him not desire or dread that which it is in

the power of others either to deny or inflict: otherwise, he is a

slave.' And of all such gifts as are dependent on the caprice of

fortune or of men, I have long ago learned to say, with Horace--who,

however, is too wavering in his philosophy, vacillating between the

precepts of Zeno and the less worthy maxims of Epicurus, and attempting,

as we say, `duabus sellis sedere'--concerning such accidents, I say,

with the pregnant brevity of the poet--

"`Sunt qui non habeant, est qui non curat habere.'

"He is referring to gems, and purple, and other insignia of wealth; but

I may apply his words not less justly to the tributes men pay us with

their lips and their pens, which are also matters of purchase, and often

with base coin. Yes, `\_inanis\_'--hollow, empty--is the epithet justly

bestowed on Fame."

They made the tour of the room in silence after this; but Bardo's

lip-born maxims were as powerless over the passion which had been moving

him, as if they had been written on parchment and hung round his neck in

a sealed bag; and he presently broke forth again in a new tone of

insistance.

"\_Inanis\_? yes, if it is a lying fame; but not if it is the just meed of

labour and a great purpose. I claim my right: it is not fair that the

work of my brain and my hands should not be a monument to me--it is not

just that my labour should bear the name of another man. It is but

little to ask," the old man went on, bitterly, "that my name should be

over the door--that men should own themselves debtors to the Bardi

Library in Florence. They will speak coldly of me, perhaps: `a diligent

collector and transcriber,' they will say, `and also of some critical

ingenuity, but one who could hardly be conspicuous in an age so fruitful

in illustrious scholars. Yet he merits our pity, for in the latter

years of his life he was blind, and his only son, to whose education he

had devoted his best years--' Nevertheless, my name will be remembered,

and men will honour me: not with the breath of flattery, purchased by

mean bribes, but because I have laboured, and because my labours will

remain. Debts! I know there are debts; and there is thy dowry, Romola,

to be paid. But there must be enough--or, at least, there can lack but

a small sum, such as the Signoria might well provide. And if Lorenzo

had not died, all would have been secured and settled. But now..."

At this moment Maso opened the door, and advancing to his master,

announced that Nello, the barber, had desired him to say, that he was

come with the Greek scholar whom he had asked leave to introduce.

"It is well," said the old man. "Bring them in."

Bardo, conscious that he looked more dependent when he was walking,

liked always to be seated in the presence of strangers, and Romola,

without needing to be told, conducted him to his chair. She was

standing by him at her full height, in quiet majestic self-possession,

when the visitors entered; and the most penetrating observer would

hardly have divined that this proud pale face, at the slightest touch on

the fibres of affection or pity, could become passionate with

tenderness, or that this woman, who imposed a certain awe on those who

approached her, was in a state of girlish simplicity and ignorance

concerning the world outside her father's books.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. A sign that such contrasts were peculiarly frequent in

Florence, is the fact that Saint Antonine, Prior of San Marco, and

afterwards archbishop, in the first half of this fifteenth century,

founded the society of Buonuomini di San Martino (Good Men of Saint

Martin) with the main object of succouring the \_poveri vergognosi\_--in

other words, paupers of good family. In the records of the famous

Panciatichi family we find a certain Girolamo in this century who was

reduced to such a state of poverty that he was obliged to seek charity

for the mere means of sustaining life, though other members of his

family were enormously wealthy.

CHAPTER SIX.

DAWNING HOPES.

When Maso opened the door again, and ushered in the two visitors, Nello,

first making a deep reverence to Romola, gently pushed Tito before him,

and advanced with him towards her father.

"Messer Bardo," he said, in a more measured and respectful tone than was

usual with him, "I have the honour of presenting to you the Greek

scholar, who has been eager to have speech of you, not less from the

report I have made to him of your learning and your priceless

collections, than because of the furtherance your patronage may give him

under the transient need to which he has been reduced by shipwreck. His

name is Tito Melema, at your service."

Romola's astonishment could hardly have been greater if the stranger had

worn a panther-skin and carried a thyrsus; for the cunning barber had

said nothing of the Greek's age or appearance; and among her father's

scholarly visitors, she had hardly ever seen any but middle-aged or

grey-headed men. There was only one masculine face, at once youthful

and beautiful, the image of which remained deeply impressed on her mind:

it was that of her brother, who long years ago had taken her on his

knee, kissed her, and never come back again: a fair face, with sunny

hair, like her own. But the habitual attitude of her mind towards

strangers--a proud self-dependence and determination to ask for nothing

even by a smile--confirmed in her by her father's complaints against the

world's injustice, was like a snowy embankment hemming in the rush of

admiring surprise. Tito's bright face showed its rich-tinted beauty

without any rivalry of colour above his black \_sajo\_ or tunic reaching

to the knees. It seemed like a wreath of spring, dropped suddenly in

Romola's young but wintry life, which had inherited nothing but

memories--memories of a dead mother, of a lost brother, of a blind

father's happier time--memories of far-off light, love, and beauty, that

lay embedded in dark mines of books, and could hardly give out their

brightness again until they were kindled for her by the torch of some

known joy. Nevertheless, she returned Tito's bow, made to her on

entering, with the same pale proud face as ever; but, as he approached,

the snow melted, and when he ventured to look towards her again, while

Nello was speaking, a pink flush overspread her face, to vanish again

almost immediately, as if her imperious will had recalled it. Tito's

glance, on the contrary, had that gentle, beseeching admiration in it

which is the most propitiating of appeals to a proud, shy woman, and is

perhaps the only atonement a man can make for being too handsome. The

finished fascination of his air came chiefly from the absence of demand

and assumption. It was that of a fleet, soft-coated, dark-eyed animal

that delights you by not bounding away in indifference from you, and

unexpectedly pillows its chin on your palm, and looks up at you desiring

to be stroked--as if it loved you.

"Messere, I give you welcome," said Bardo, with some condescension;

"misfortune wedded to learning, and especially to Greek learning, is a

letter of credit that should win the ear of every instructed Florentine;

for, as you are doubtless aware, since the period when your countryman,

Manuelo Crisolora, diffused the light of his teaching in the chief

cities of Italy, now nearly a century ago, no man is held worthy of the

name of scholar who has acquired merely the transplanted and derivative

literature of the Latins; rather, such inert students are stigmatised as

\_opici\_ or barbarians according to the phrase of the Romans themselves,

who frankly replenished their urns at the fountain-head. I am, as you

perceive, and as Nello has doubtless forewarned you, totally blind: a

calamity to which we Florentines are held especially liable, whether

owing to the cold winds which rush upon us in spring from the passes of

the Apennines, or to that sudden transition from the cool gloom of our

houses to the dazzling brightness of our summer sun, by which the

\_lippi\_ are said to have been made so numerous among the ancient Romans;

or, in fine, to some occult cause which eludes our superficial surmises.

But I pray you be seated: Nello, my friend, be seated."

Bardo paused until his fine ear had assured him that the visitors were

seating themselves, and that Romola was taking her usual chair at his

right-hand. Then he said--

"From what part of Greece do you come, Messere? I had thought that your

unhappy country had been almost exhausted of those sons who could

cherish in their minds any image of her original glory, though indeed

the barbarous Sultans have of late shown themselves not indisposed to

engraft on their wild stock the precious vine which their own fierce

bands have hewn down and trampled under foot. From what part of Greece

do you come?"

"I sailed last from Nauplia," said Tito; "but I have resided both at

Constantinople and Thessalonica, and have travelled in various parts

little visited by Western Christians since the triumph of the Turkish

arms. I should tell you, however, Messere, that I was not born in

Greece, but at Bari. I spent the first sixteen years of my life in

Southern Italy and Sicily."

While Tito was speaking, some emotion passed, like a breath on the

waters, across Bardo's delicate features; he leaned forward, put out his

right-hand towards Romola, and turned his head as if about to speak to

her; but then, correcting himself, turned away again, and said, in a

subdued voice--

"Excuse me; is it not true--you are young?"

"I am three-and-twenty," said Tito.

"Ah," said Bardo, still in a tone of subdued excitement, "and you had,

doubtless, a father who cared for your early instruction--who, perhaps,

was himself a scholar?"

There was a slight pause before Tito's answer came to the ear of Bardo;

but for Romola and Nello it began with a slight shock that seemed to

pass through him, and cause a momentary quivering of the lip; doubtless

at the revival of a supremely painful remembrance.

"Yes," he replied, "at least a father by adoption. He was a Neapolitan,

and of accomplished scholarship, both Latin and Greek. But," added

Tito, after another slight pause, "he is lost to me--was lost on a

voyage he too rashly undertook to Delos."

Bardo sank backward again, too delicate to ask another question that

might probe a sorrow which he divined to be recent. Romola, who knew

well what were the fibres that Tito's voice had stirred in her father,

felt that this new acquaintance had with wonderful suddenness got within

the barrier that lay between them and the alien world. Nello, thinking

that the evident check given to the conversation offered a graceful

opportunity for relieving himself from silence, said--

"In truth, it is as clear as Venetian glass that this fine young man has

had the best training; for the two Cennini have set him to work at their

Greek sheets already, and it seems to me they are not men to begin

cutting before they have felt the edge of their tools; they tested him

well beforehand, we may be sure, and if there are two things not to be

hidden--love and a cough--I say there is a third, and that is ignorance,

when once a man is obliged to do something besides wagging his head.

The \_tonsor inequalis\_ is inevitably betrayed when he takes the shears

in his hand; is it not true, Messer Bardo? I speak after the fashion of

a barber, but, as Luigi Pulci says--

"`Perdonimi s'io fallo: chi m'ascolta

Intenda il mio volgar col suo latino.'"

"Nay, my good Nello," said Bardo, with an air of friendly severity, "you

are not altogether illiterate, and might doubtless have made a more

respectable progress in learning if you had abstained somewhat from the

\_cicalata\_ and gossip of the street-corner, to which our Florentines are

excessively addicted; but still more if you had not clogged your memory

with those frivolous productions of which Luigi Pulci has furnished the

most peccant exemplar--a compendium of extravagances and incongruities

the farthest removed from the models of a pure age, and resembling

rather the \_grylli\_ or conceits of a period when mystic meaning was held

a warrant for monstrosity of form; with this difference, that while the

monstrosity is retained, the mystic meaning is absent; in contemptible

contrast with the great poem of Virgil, who, as I long held with

Filelfo, before Landino had taken upon him to expound the same opinion,

embodied the deepest lessons of philosophy in a graceful and well-knit

fable. And I cannot but regard the multiplication of these babbling,

lawless productions, albeit countenanced by the patronage, and in some

degree the example of Lorenzo himself, otherwise a friend to true

learning, as a sign that the glorious hopes of this century are to be

quenched in gloom; nay, that they have been the delusive prologue to an

age worse than that of iron--the age of tinsel and gossamer, in which no

thought has substance enough to be moulded into consistent and lasting

form."

"Once more, pardon," said Nello, opening his palms outwards, and

shrugging his shoulders, "I find myself knowing so many things in good

Tuscan before I have time to think of the Latin for them; and Messer

Luigi's rhymes are always slipping off the lips of my customers:--that

is what corrupts me. And, indeed, talking of customers, I have left my

shop and my reputation too long in the custody of my slow Sandro, who

does not deserve even to be called a \_tonsor inequalis\_, but rather to

be pronounced simply a bungler in the vulgar tongue. So with your

permission, Messer Bardo, I will take my leave--well understood that I

am at your service whenever Maso calls upon me. It seems a thousand

years till I dress and perfume the damigella's hair, which deserves to

shine in the heavens as a constellation, though indeed it were a pity

for it ever to go so far out of reach."

Three voices made a fugue of friendly farewells to Nello, as he

retreated with a bow to Romola and a beck to Tito. The acute barber saw

that the pretty youngster, who had crept into his liking by some strong

magic, was well launched in Bardo's favourable regard; and satisfied

that his introduction had not miscarried so far, he felt the propriety

of retiring.

The little burst of wrath, called forth by Nello's unlucky quotation,

had diverted Bardo's mind from the feelings which had just before been

hemming in further speech, and he now addressed Tito again with his

ordinary calmness.

"Ah! young man, you are happy in having been able to unite the

advantages of travel with those of study, and you will be welcome among

us as a bringer of fresh tidings from a land which has become sadly

strange to us, except through the agents of a now restricted commerce

and the reports of hasty pilgrims. For those days are in the far

distance which I myself witnessed, when men like Aurispa and Guarino

went out to Greece as to a storehouse, and came back laden with

manuscripts which every scholar was eager to borrow--and, be it owned

with shame, not always willing to restore; nay, even the days when

erudite Greeks flocked to our shores for a refuge, seem far-off now--

farther off than the on-coming of my blindness. But doubtless, young

man, research after the treasures of antiquity was not alien to the

purpose of your travels?"

"Assuredly not," said Tito. "On the contrary, my companion--my father--

was willing to risk his life in his zeal for the discovery of

inscriptions and other traces of ancient civilisation."

"And I trust there is a record of his researches and their results,"

said Bardo, eagerly, "since they must be even more precious than those

of Ciriaco, which I have diligently availed myself of, though they are

not always illuminated by adequate learning."

"There \_was\_ such a record," said Tito, "but it was lost, like

everything else, in the shipwreck I suffered below Ancona. The only

record left is such as remains in our--in my memory."

"You must lose no time in committing it to paper, young man," said

Bardo, with growing interest. "Doubtless you remember much, if you

aided in transcription; for when I was your age, words wrought

themselves into my mind as if they had been fixed by the tool of the

graver; wherefore I constantly marvel at the capriciousness of my

daughter's memory, which grasps certain objects with tenacity, and lets

fall all those minutiae whereon depends accuracy, the very soul of

scholarship. But I apprehend no such danger with you, young man, if

your will has seconded the advantages of your training."

When Bardo made this reference to his daughter, Tito ventured to turn

his eyes towards her, and at the accusation against her memory his face

broke into its brightest smile, which was reflected as inevitably as

sudden sunbeams in Romola's. Conceive the soothing delight of that

smile to her! Romola had never dreamed that there was a scholar in the

world who would smile at a deficiency for which she was constantly made

to feel herself a culprit. It was like the dawn of a new sense to her--

the sense of comradeship. They did not look away from each other

immediately, as if the smile had been a stolen one; they looked and

smiled with frank enjoyment.

"She is not really so cold and proud," thought Tito.

"Does \_he\_ forget too, I wonder?" thought Romola, "Yet I hope not, else

he will vex my father."

But Tito was obliged to turn away, and answer Bardo's question.

"I have had much practice in transcription," he said; "but in the case

of inscriptions copied in memorable scenes, rendered doubly impressive

by the sense of risk and adventure, it may have happened that my

retention of written characters has been weakened. On the plain of the

Eurotas, or among the gigantic stones of Mycenae and Tyrins--especially

when the fear of the Turk hovers over one like a vulture--the mind

wanders, even though the hand writes faithfully what the eye dictates.

But something doubtless I have retained," added Tito, with a modesty

which was not false, though he was conscious that it was politic,

"something that might be of service if illustrated and corrected by a

wider learning than my own."

"That is well spoken, young man," said Bardo, delighted. "And I will

not withhold from you such aid as I can give, if you like to communicate

with me concerning your recollections. I foresee a work which will be a

useful supplement to the `Isolario' of Christoforo Buondelmonte, and

which may take rank with the `Itineraria' of Ciriaco and the admirable

Ambrogio Traversari. But we must prepare ourselves for calumny, young

man," Bardo went on with energy, as if the work were already growing so

fast that the time of trial was near; "if your book contains novelties

you will be charged with forgery; if my elucidations should clash with

any principles of interpretation adopted by another scholar, our

personal characters will be attacked, we shall be impeached with foul

actions; you must prepare yourself to be told that your mother was a

fish-woman, and that your father was a renegade priest or a hanged

malefactor. I myself, for having shown error in a single preposition,

had an invective written against me wherein I was taxed with treachery,

fraud, indecency, and even hideous crimes. Such, my young friend--such

are the flowers with which the glorious path of scholarship is strewed!

But tell me, then: I have learned much concerning Byzantium and

Thessalonica long ago from Demetrio Calcondila, who has but lately

departed from Florence; but you, it seems, have visited less familiar

scenes?"

"Yes; we made what I may call a pilgrimage full of danger, for the sake

of visiting places which have almost died out of the memory of the West,

for they lie away from the track of pilgrims; and my father used to say

that scholars themselves hardly imagine them to have any existence out

of books. He was of opinion that a new and more glorious era would open

for learning when men should begin to look for their commentaries on the

ancient writers in the remains of cities and temples, nay, in the paths

of the rivers, and on the face of the valleys and the mountains."

"Ah!" said Bardo, fervidly, "your father, then, was not a common man.

Was he fortunate, may I ask? Had he many friends?" These last words

were uttered in a tone charged with meaning.

"No; he made enemies--chiefly, I believe, by a certain impetuous

candour; and they hindered his advancement, so that he lived in

obscurity. And he would never stoop to conciliate: he could never

forget an injury."

"Ah!" said Bardo again, with a long, deep intonation.

"Among our hazardous expeditions," continued Tito, willing to prevent

further questions on a point so personal, "I remember with particular

vividness a hastily snatched visit to Athens. Our hurry, and the double

danger of being seized as prisoners by the Turks, and of our galley

raising anchor before we could return, made it seem like a fevered

vision of the night--the wide plain, the girdling mountains, the ruined

porticos and columns, either standing far aloof, as if receding from our

hurried footsteps, or else jammed in confusedly among the dwellings of

Christians degraded into servitude, or among the forts and turrets of

their Moslem conquerors, who have their stronghold on the Acropolis."

"You fill me with surprise," said Bardo. "Athens, then, is not utterly

destroyed and swept away, as I had imagined?"

"No wonder you should be under that mistake, for few even of the Greeks

themselves, who live beyond the mountain boundary of Attica, know

anything about the present condition of Athens, or \_Setine\_, as the

sailors call it. I remember, as we were rounding the promontory of

Sunium, the Greek pilot we had on board our Venetian galley pointed to

the mighty columns that stand on the summit of the rock--the remains, as

you know well, of the great temple erected to the goddess Athena, who

looked down from that high shrine with triumph at her conquered rival

Poseidon;--well, our Greek pilot, pointing to those columns, said, `That

was the school of the great philosopher Aristotle.' And at Athens

itself, the monk who acted as our guide in the hasty view we snatched,

insisted most on showing us the spot where Saint Philip baptised the

Ethiopian eunuch, or some such legend."

"Talk not of monks and their legends, young man!" said Bardo,

interrupting Tito impetuously. "It is enough to overlay human hope and

enterprise with an eternal frost to think that the ground which was

trodden by philosophers and poets is crawled over by those insect-swarms

of besotted fanatics or howling hypocrites."

"\_Perdio\_, I have no affection for them," said Tito, with a shrug;

"servitude agrees well with a religion like theirs, which lies in the

renunciation of all that makes life precious to other men. And they

carry the yoke that befits them: their matin chant is drowned by the

voice of the muezzin, who, from the gallery of the high tower on the

Acropolis, calls every Mussulman to his prayers. That tower springs

from the Parthenon itself; and every time we paused and directed our

eyes towards it, our guide set up a wail, that a temple which had once

been won from the diabolical uses of the pagans to become the temple of

another virgin than Pallas--the Virgin Mother of God--was now again

perverted to the accursed ends of the Moslem. It was the sight of those

walls of the Acropolis, which disclosed themselves in the distance as we

leaned over the side of our galley when it was forced by contrary winds

to anchor in the Piraeus, that fired my father's mind with the

determination to see Athens at all risks, and in spite of the sailors'

warnings that if we lingered till a change of wind, they would depart

without us: but, after all, it was impossible for us to venture near the

Acropolis, for the sight of men eager in examining `old stones' raised

the suspicion that we were Venetian spies, and we had to hurry back to

the harbour."

"We will talk more of these things," said Bardo, eagerly. "You must

recall everything, to the minutest trace left in your memory. You will

win the gratitude of after-times by leaving a record of the aspect

Greece bore while yet the barbarians had not swept away every trace of

the structures that Pausanias and Pliny described: you will take those

great writers as your models; and such contribution of criticism and

suggestion as my riper mind can supply shall not be wanting to you.

There will be much to tell; for you have travelled, you said, in the

Peloponnesus?"

"Yes; and in Boeotia also: I have rested in the groves of Helicon, and

tasted of the fountain Hippocrene. But on every memorable spot in

Greece conquest after conquest has set its seal, till there is a

confusion of ownership even in ruins, that only close study and

comparison could unravel. High over every fastness, from the plains of

Lacedaemon to the straits of Thermopylae, there towers some huge

Frankish fortress, once inhabited by a French or Italian marquis, now

either abandoned or held by Turkish bands."

"Stay!" cried Bardo, whose mind was now too thoroughly preoccupied by

the idea of the future book to attend to Tito's further narration. "Do

you think of writing in Latin or Greek? Doubtless Greek is the more

ready clothing for your thoughts, and it is the nobler language. But,

on the other hand, Latin is the tongue in which we shall measure

ourselves with the larger and more famous number of modern rivals. And

if you are less at ease in it, I will aid you--yes, I will spend on you

that long-accumulated study which was to have been thrown into the

channel of another work--a work in which I myself was to have had a

helpmate."

Bardo paused a moment, and then added--

"But who knows whether that work may not be executed yet? For you, too,

young man, have been brought up by a father who poured into your mind

all the long-gathered stream of his knowledge and experience. Our aid

might be mutual."

Romola, who had watched her father's growing excitement, and divined

well the invisible currents of feeling that determined every question

and remark, felt herself in a glow of strange anxiety: she turned her

eyes on Tito continually, to watch the impression her father's words

made on him, afraid lest he should be inclined to dispel these visions

of co-operation which were lighting up her father's face with a new

hope. But no! He looked so bright and gentle: he must feel, as she

did, that in this eagerness of blind age there was piteousness enough to

call forth inexhaustible patience. How much more strongly he would feel

this if he knew about her brother! A girl of eighteen imagines the

feelings behind the face that has moved her with its sympathetic youth,

as easily as primitive people imagined the humours of the gods in fair

weather: what is she to believe in, if not in this vision woven from

within?

And Tito was really very far from feeling impatient. He delighted in

sitting there with the sense that Romola's attention was fixed on him,

and that he could occasionally look at her. He was pleased that Bardo

should take an interest in him; and he did not dwell with enough

seriousness on the prospect of the work in which he was to be aided, to

feel moved by it to anything else than that easy, good-humoured

acquiescence which was natural to him.

"I shall be proud and happy," he said, in answer to Bardo's last words,

"if my services can be held a meet offering to the matured scholarship

of Messere. But doubtless,"--here he looked towards Romola--"the lovely

damigella, your daughter, makes all other aid superfluous; for I have

learned from Nello that she has been nourished on the highest studies

from her earliest years."

"You are mistaken," said Romola; "I am by no means sufficient to my

father: I have not the gifts that are necessary for scholarship."

Romola did not make this self-depreciatory statement in a tone of

anxious humility, but with a proud gravity.

"Nay, my Romola," said her father, not willing that the stranger should

have too low a conception of his daughter's powers; "thou art not

destitute of gifts; rather, thou art endowed beyond the measure of

women; but thou hast withal the woman's delicate frame, which ever

craves repose and variety, and so begets a wandering imagination. My

daughter,"--turning to Tito--"has been very precious to me, filling up

to the best of her power the place of a son. For I had once a son..."

Bardo checked himself: he did not wish to assume an attitude of

complaint in the presence of a stranger, and he remembered that this

young man, in whom he had unexpectedly become so much interested, was

still a stranger, towards whom it became him rather to keep the position

of a patron. His pride was roused to double activity by the fear that

he had forgotten his dignity.

"But," he resumed, in his original tone of condescension, "we are

departing from what I believe is to you the most important business.

Nello informed me that you had certain gems which you would fain dispose

of, and that you desired a passport to some man of wealth and taste who

would be likely to become a purchaser."

"It is true; for, though I have obtained employment, as a corrector with

the Cennini, my payment leaves little margin beyond the provision of

necessaries, and would leave less but that my good friend Nello insists

on my hiring a lodging from him, and saying nothing about the rent till

better days."

"Nello is a good-hearted prodigal," said Bardo; "and though, with that

ready ear and ready tongue of his, he is too much like the ill-famed

Margites--knowing many things and knowing them all badly, as I hinted to

him but now--he is nevertheless `abnormis sapiens,' after the manner of

our born Florentines. But have you the gems with you? I would

willingly know what they are--yet it is useless: no, it might only

deepen regret. I cannot add to my store."

"I have one or two intaglios of much beauty," said Tito, proceeding to

draw from his wallet a small case.

But Romola no sooner saw the movement than she looked at him with

significant gravity, and placed her finger on her lips--

"Con viso che tacendo dicea, Taci."

If Bardo were made aware that the gems were within reach, she knew well

he would want a minute description of them, and it would become pain to

him that they should go away from him, even if he did not insist on some

device for purchasing them in spite of poverty. But she had no sooner

made this sign than she felt rather guilty and ashamed at having

virtually confessed a weakness of her father's to a stranger. It seemed

that she was destined to a sudden confidence and familiarity with this

young Greek, strangely at variance with her deep-seated pride and

reserve; and this consciousness again brought the unwonted colour to her

cheeks.

Tito understood her look and sign, and immediately withdrew his hand

from the case, saying, in a careless tone, so as to make it appear that

he was merely following up his last words, "But they are usually in the

keeping of Messer Domenico Cennini, who has strong and safe places for

these things. He estimates them as worth at least five hundred ducats."

"Ah, then, they are fine intagli," said Bardo. "Five hundred ducats!

Ah, more than a man's ransom!"

Tito gave a slight, almost imperceptible start, and opened his long dark

eyes with questioning surprise at Bardo's blind face, as if his words--a

mere phrase of common parlance, at a time when men were often being

ransomed from slavery or imprisonment--had had some special meaning for

him. But the next moment he looked towards Romola, as if her eyes must

be her father's interpreters. She, intensely preoccupied with what

related to her father, imagined that Tito was looking to her again for

some guidance, and immediately spoke.

"Alessandra Scala delights in gems, you know, father; she calls them her

winter flowers; and the Segretario would be almost sure to buy any gems

that she wished for. Besides, he himself sets great store by rings and

sigils, which he wears as a defence against pains in the joints."

"It is true," said Bardo. "Bartolommeo has overmuch confidence in the

efficacy of gems--a confidence wider than what is sanctioned by Pliny,

who clearly shows that he regards many beliefs of that sort as idle

superstitions; though not to the utter denial of medicinal virtues in

gems. Wherefore, I myself, as you observe, young man, wear certain

rings, which the discreet Camillo Leonardi prescribed to me by letter

when two years ago I had a certain infirmity of sudden numbness. But

thou hast spoken well, Romola. I will dictate a letter to Bartolommeo,

which Maso shall carry. But it were well that Messere should notify to

thee what the gems are, together with the intagli they bear, as a

warrant to Bartolommeo that they will be worthy of his attention."

"Nay, father," said Romola, whose dread lest a paroxysm of the

collector's mania should seize her father, gave her the courage to

resist his proposal. "Your word will be sufficient that Messere is a

scholar and has travelled much. The Segretario will need no further

inducement to receive him."

"True, child," said Bardo, touched on a chord that was sure to respond.

"I have no need to add proofs and arguments in confirmation of my word

to Bartolommeo. And I doubt not that this young man's presence is in

accord with the tones of his voice, so that, the door being once opened,

he will be his own best advocate."

Bardo paused a few moments, but his silence was evidently charged with

some idea that he was hesitating to express, for he once leaned forward

a little as if he were going to speak, then turned his head aside

towards Romola and sank backward again. At last, as if he had made up

his mind, he said in a tone which might have become a prince giving the

courteous signal of dismissal--

"I am somewhat fatigued this morning, and shall prefer seeing you again

to-morrow, when I shall be able to give you the secretary's answer,

authorising you to present yourself to him at some given time. But

before you go,"--here the old man, in spite of himself, fell into a more

faltering tone--"you will perhaps permit me to touch your hand? It is

long since I touched the hand of a young man."

Bardo had stretched out his aged white hand, and Tito immediately placed

his dark but delicate and supple fingers within it. Bardo's cramped

fingers closed over them, and he held them for a few minutes in silence.

Then he said--

"Romola, has this young man the same complexion as thy brother--fair and

pale?"

"No, father," Romola answered, with determined composure, though her

heart began to beat violently with mingled emotions. "The hair of

Messere is dark--his complexion is dark." Inwardly she said, "Will he

mind it? will it be disagreeable? No, he looks so gentle and

good-natured." Then aloud again--

"Would Messere permit my father to touch his hair and face?"

Her eyes inevitably made a timid entreating appeal while she asked this,

and Tito's met them with soft brightness as he said, "Assuredly," and,

leaning forward, raised Bardo's hand to his curls, with a readiness of

assent, which was the greater relief to her, because it was

unaccompanied by any sign of embarrassment.

Bardo passed his hand again and again over the long curls and grasped

them a little, as if their spiral resistance made his inward vision

clearer; then he passed his hand over the brow and cheek, tracing the

profile with the edge of his palm and fourth finger, and letting the

breadth of his hand repose on the rich oval of the cheek.

"Ah," he said, as his hand glided from the face and rested on the young

man's shoulder. "He must be very unlike thy brother, Romola: and it is

the better. You see no visions, I trust, my young friend?"

At this moment the door opened, and there entered, unannounced, a tall

elderly man in a handsome black silk lucco, who, unwinding his becchetto

from his neck and taking off his cap, disclosed a head as white as

Bardo's. He cast a keen glance of surprise at the group before him--the

young stranger leaning in that filial attitude, while Bardo's hand

rested on his shoulder, and Romola sitting near with eyes dilated by

anxiety and agitation. But there was an instantaneous change: Bardo let

fall his hand, Tito raised himself from his stooping posture, and Romola

rose to meet the visitor with an alacrity which implied all the greater

intimacy, because it was unaccompanied by any smile.

"Well, god-daughter," said the stately man, as he touched Romola's

shoulder; "Maso said you had a visitor, but I came in nevertheless."

"It is thou, Bernardo," said Bardo. "Thou art come at a fortunate

moment. This, young man," he continued, while Tito rose and bowed, "is

one of the chief citizens of Florence, Messer Bernardo del Nero, my

oldest, I had almost said my only friend--whose good opinion, if you can

win it, may carry you far. He is but three-and-twenty, Bernardo, yet he

can doubtless tell thee much which thou wilt care to hear; for though a

scholar, he has already travelled far, and looked on other things

besides the manuscripts for which thou hast too light an esteem."

"Ah, a Greek, as I augur," said Bernardo, returning Tito's reverence but

slightly, and surveying him with that sort of glance which seems almost

to cut like fine steel. "Newly arrived in Florence, it appears. The

name of Messere--or part of it, for it is doubtless a long one?"

"On the contrary," said Tito, with perfect good-humour, "it is most

modestly free from polysyllabic pomp. My name is Tito Melema."

"Truly?" said Bernardo, rather scornfully, as he took a seat; "I had

expected it to be at least as long as the names of a city, a river, a

province, and an empire all put together. We Florentines mostly use

names as we do prawns, and strip them of all flourishes before we trust

them to our throats."

"Well, Bardo," he continued, as if the stranger were not worth further

notice, and changing his tone of sarcastic suspicion for one of sadness,

"we have buried him."

"Ah!" replied Bardo, with corresponding sadness, "and a new epoch has

come for Florence--a dark one, I fear. Lorenzo has left behind him an

inheritance that is but like the alchemist's laboratory when the wisdom

of the alchemist is gone."

"Not altogether so," said Bernardo. "Piero de' Medici has abundant

intelligence; his faults are only the faults of hot blood. I love the

lad--lad he will always be to me, as I have always been `little father'

to him."

"Yet all who want a new order of things are likely to conceive new

hopes," said Bardo. "We shall have the old strife of parties, I fear."

"If we could have a new order of things that was something else than

knocking down one coat of arms to put up another," said Bernardo, "I

should be ready to say, `I belong to no party: I am a Florentine.' But

as long as parties are in question, I am a Medicean, and will be a

Medicean till I die. I am of the same mind as Farinata degli Uberti: if

any man asks me what is meant by siding with a party, I say, as he did,

`To wish ill or well, for the sake of past wrongs or kindnesses.'"

During this short dialogue, Tito had been standing, and now took his

leave.

"But come again at the same hour to-morrow," said Bardo, graciously,

before Tito left the room, "that I may give you Bartolommeo's answer."

"From what quarter of the sky has this pretty Greek youngster alighted

so close to thy chair, Bardo?" said Bernardo del Nero, as the door

closed. He spoke with dry emphasis, evidently intended to convey

something more to Bardo than was implied by the mere words.

"He is a scholar who has been shipwrecked and has saved a few gems, for

which he wants to find a purchaser. I am going to send him to

Bartolommeo Scala, for thou knowest it were more prudent in me to

abstain from further purchases."

Bernardo shrugged his shoulders and said, "Romola, wilt thou see if my

servant is without? I ordered him to wait for me here." Then, when

Romola was at a sufficient distance, he leaned forward and said to Bardo

in a low, emphatic tone--

"Remember, Bardo, thou hast a rare gem of thy own; take care no one gets

it who is not likely to pay a worthy price. That pretty Greek has a

lithe sleekness about him, that seems marvellously fitted for slipping

easily into any nest he fixes his mind on."

Bardo was startled: the association of Tito with the image of his lost

son had excluded instead of suggesting the thought of Romola. But

almost immediately there seemed to be a reaction which made him grasp

the warning as if it had been a hope.

"But why not, Bernardo? If the young man approved himself worthy--he is

a scholar--and--and there would be no difficulty about the dowry, which

always makes thee gloomy."

CHAPTER SEVEN.

A LEARNED SQUABBLE.

Bartolommeo Scala, secretary of the Florentine Republic, on whom Tito

Melema had been thus led to anchor his hopes, lived in a handsome palace

close to the Porta Pinti, now known as the Casa Gherardesca. His arms--

an azure ladder transverse on a golden field, with the motto \_Gradatim\_

placed over the entrance--told all comers that the miller's son held his

ascent to honours by his own efforts a fact to be proclaimed without

wincing. The secretary was a vain and pompous man, but he was also an

honest one: he was sincerely convinced of his own merit, and could see

no reason for feigning. The topmost round of his azure ladder had been

reached by this time: he had held his secretaryship these twenty years--

had long since made his orations on the \_ringhiera\_, or platform of the

Old Palace, as the custom was, in the presence of princely visitors,

while Marzocco, the republican lion, wore his gold crown on the

occasion, and all the people cried, "Viva Messer Bartolommeo!"--had been

on an embassy to Rome, and had there been made titular Senator,

Apostolical Secretary, Knight of the Golden Spur; and had, eight years

ago, been Gonfaloniere--last goal of the Florentine citizen's ambition.

Meantime he had got richer and richer, and more and more gouty, after

the manner of successful mortality; and the Knight of the Golden Spur

had often to sit with helpless cushioned heel under the handsome loggia

he had built for himself, overlooking the spacious gardens and lawn at

the back of his palace.

He was in this position on the day when he had granted the desired

interview to Tito Melema. The May afternoon sun was on the flowers and

the grass beyond the pleasant shade of the loggia; the too stately silk

lucco was cast aside, and the light loose mantle was thrown over his

tunic; his beautiful daughter Alessandra and her husband, the Greek

soldier-poet Marullo, were seated on one side of him: on the other, two

friends not oppressively illustrious, and therefore the better

listeners. Yet, to say nothing of the gout, Messer Bartolommeo's

felicity was far from perfect: it was embittered by the contents of

certain papers that lay before him, consisting chiefly of a

correspondence between himself and Politian. It was a human foible at

that period (incredible as it may seem) to recite quarrels, and favour

scholarly visitors with the communication of an entire and lengthy

correspondence; and this was neither the first nor the second, time that

Scala had asked the candid opinion of his friends as to the balance of

right and wrong in some half-score Latin letters between himself and

Politian, all springing out of certain epigrams written in the most

playful tone in the world. It was the story of a very typical and

pretty quarrel, in which we are interested, because it supplied

precisely that thistle of hatred necessary, according to Nello, as a

stimulus to the sluggish paces of the cautious steed, Friendship.

Politian, having been a rejected pretender to the love and the hand of

Scala's daughter, kept a very sharp and learned tooth in readiness

against the too prosperous and presumptuous secretary, who had declined

the greatest scholar of the age for a son-in-law. Scala was a

meritorious public servant, and, moreover, a lucky man--naturally

exasperating to an offended scholar; but then--O beautiful balance of

things!--he had an itch for authorship, and was a bad writer--one of

those excellent people who, sitting in gouty slippers, "penned poetical

trifles" entirely for their own amusement, without any view to an

audience, and, consequently, sent them to their friends in letters,

which were the literary periodicals of the fifteenth century. Now Scala

had abundance of friends who were ready to praise his writings: friends

like Ficino and Landino--amiable browsers in the Medicean park along

with himself--who found his Latin prose style elegant and masculine; and

the terrible Joseph Scaliger, who was to pronounce him totally ignorant

of Latinity, was at a comfortable distance in the next century. But

when was the fatal coquetry inherent in superfluous authorship ever

quite contented with the ready praise of friends? That critical

supercilious Politian--a fellow-browser, who was far from amiable--must

be made aware that the solid secretary showed, in his leisure hours, a

pleasant fertility in verses, which indicated pretty clearly how much he

might do in that way if he were not a man of affairs.

Ineffable moment! when the man you secretly hate sends you a Latin

epigram with a false gender--hendecasyllables with a questionable

elision, at least a toe too much--attempts at poetic figures which are

manifest solecisms. That moment had come to Politian: the secretary had

put forth his soft head from the official shell, and the terrible

lurking crab was down upon him. Politian had used the freedom of a

friend, and pleasantly, in the form of a Latin epigram, corrected the

mistake of Scala in making the \_culex\_ (an insect too well-known on the

banks of the Arno) of the inferior or feminine gender. Scala replied by

a bad joke, in suitable Latin verses, referring to Politian's

unsuccessful suit. Better and better. Politian found the verses very

pretty and highly facetious: the more was the pity that they were

seriously incorrect, and inasmuch as Scala had alleged that he had

written them in imitation of a Greek epigram, Politian, being on such

friendly terms, would enclose a Greek epigram of his own, on the same

interesting insect--not, we may presume, out of any wish to humble

Scala, but rather to instruct him; said epigram containing a lively

conceit about Venus, Cupid, and the \_culex\_, of a kind much tasted at

that period, founded partly on the zoological fact that the gnat, like

Venus, was born from the waters. Scala, in reply, begged to say that

his verses were never intended for a scholar with such delicate

olfactories as Politian, nearest of all living men to the perfection of

the ancients, and of a taste so fastidious that sturgeon itself must

seem insipid to him; defended his own verses, nevertheless, though

indeed they were written hastily, without correction, and intended as an

agreeable distraction during the summer heat to himself and such friends

as were satisfied with mediocrity, he, Scala, not being like some other

people, who courted publicity through the booksellers. For the rest, he

had barely enough Greek to make out the sense of the epigram so

graciously sent him, to say nothing of tasting its elegances; but--the

epigram was Politian's: what more need be said? Still, by way of

postscript, he feared that his incomparable friend's comparison of the

gnat to Venus, on account of its origin from the waters, was in many

ways ticklish. On the one hand, Venus might be offended; and on the

other, unless the poet intended an allusion to the doctrine of Thales,

that cold and damp origin seemed doubtful to Scala in the case of a

creature so fond of warmth; a fish were perhaps the better comparison,

or, when the power of flying was in question, an eagle, or indeed, when

the darkness was taken into consideration, a bat or an owl were a less

obscure and more apposite parallel, etcetera, etcetera. Here was a

great opportunity for Politian. He was not aware, he wrote, that when

he had Scala's verses placed before him, there was any question of

sturgeon, but rather of frogs and gudgeons: made short work with Scala's

defence of his own Latin, and mangled him terribly on the score of the

stupid criticisms he had ventured on the Greek epigram kindly forwarded

to him as a model. Wretched cavils, indeed! for as to the damp origin

of the gnat, there was the authority of Virgil himself, who had called

it the "\_alumnus\_ of the waters;" and as to what his dear dull friend

had to say about the fish, the eagle, and the rest, it was "nihil ad

rem;" for because the eagle could fly higher, it by no means followed

that the gnat could not fly at all, etcetera, etcetera. He was ashamed,

however, to dwell on such trivialities, and thus to swell a gnat into an

elephant; but, for his own part, would only add that he had nothing

deceitful or double about him, neither was he to be caught when present

by the false blandishments of those who slandered him in his absence,

agreeing rather with a Homeric sentiment on that head--which furnished a

Greek quotation to serve as powder to his bullet.

The quarrel could not end there. The logic could hardly get worse, but

the secretary got more pompously self-asserting, and the scholarly

poet's temper more and more venomous. Politian had been generously

willing to hold up a mirror, by which the too-inflated secretary,

beholding his own likeness, might be induced to cease setting up his

ignorant defences of bad Latin against ancient authorities whom the

consent of centuries had placed beyond question,--unless, indeed, he had

designed to sink in literature in proportion as he rose in honours, that

by a sort of compensation men of letters might feel themselves his

equals. In return, Politian was begged to examine Scala's writings:

nowhere would he find a more devout admiration of antiquity. The

secretary was ashamed of the age in which he lived, and blushed for it.

\_Some\_, indeed, there were who wanted to have their own works praised

and exalted to a level with the divine monuments of antiquity; but he,

Scala, could not oblige them. And as to the honours which were

offensive to the envious, they had been well earned: witness his whole

life since he came in penury to Florence. The elegant scholar, in

reply, was not surprised that Scala found the Age distasteful to him,

since he himself was so distasteful to the Age; nay, it was with perfect

accuracy that he, the elegant scholar, had called Scala a branny

monster, inasmuch as he was formed from the off-scourings of monsters,

born amidst the refuse of a mill, and eminently worthy the long-eared

office of turning the paternal millstones (\_in pistrini sordibus natus

et quidem pistrino dignissimus\_)!

It was not without reference to Tito's appointed visit that the papers

containing this correspondence were brought out to-day. Here was a new

Greek scholar whose accomplishments were to be tested, and on nothing

did Scala more desire a dispassionate opinion from persons of superior

knowledge than on that Greek epigram of Politian's. After sufficient

introductory talk concerning Tito's travels, after a survey and

discussion of the gems, and an easy passage from the mention of the

lamented Lorenzo's eagerness in collecting such specimens of ancient art

to the subject of classical tastes and studies in general and their

present condition in Florence, it was inevitable to mention Politian, a

man of eminent ability indeed, but a little too arrogant--assuming to be

a Hercules, whose office it was to destroy all the literary

monstrosities of the age, and writing letters to his elders without

signing them, as if they were miraculous revelations that could only

have one source. And after all, were not his own criticisms often

questionable and his tastes perverse? He was fond of saying pungent

things about the men who thought they wrote like Cicero because they

ended every sentence with "esse videtur:" but while he was boasting of

his freedom from servile imitation, did he not fall into the other

extreme, running after strange words and affected phrases? Even in his

much-belauded `Miscellanea' was every point tenable? And Tito, who had

just been looking into the `Miscellanea,' found so much to say that was

agreeable to the secretary--he would have done so from the mere

disposition to please, without further motive--that he showed himself

quite worthy to be made a judge in the notable correspondence concerning

the \_culex\_. Here was the Greek epigram which Politian had doubtless

thought the finest in the world, though he had pretended to believe that

the "transmarini," the Greeks themselves, would make light of it: had he

not been unintentionally speaking the truth in his false modesty?

Tito was ready, and scarified the epigram to Scala's content. O wise

young judge! He could doubtless appreciate satire even in the vulgar

tongue, and Scala--who, excellent man, not seeking publicity through the

booksellers, was never unprovided with "hasty uncorrected trifles," as a

sort of sherbet for a visitor on a hot day, or, if the weather were

cold, why then as a cordial--had a few little matters in the shape of

Sonnets, turning on well-known foibles of Politian's, which he would not

like to go any farther, but which would, perhaps, amuse the company.

Enough: Tito took his leave under an urgent invitation to come again.

His gems were interesting; especially the agate, with the \_lusus

naturae\_ in it--a most wonderful semblance of Cupid riding on the lion;

and the "Jew's stone," with the lion-headed serpent enchased in it; both

of which the secretary agreed to buy--the latter as a reinforcement of

his preventives against the gout, which gave him such severe twinges

that it was plain enough how intolerable it would be if he were not well

supplied with rings of rare virtue, and with an amulet worn close under

the right breast. But Tito was assured that he himself was more

interesting than his gems. He had won his way to the Scala Palace by

the recommendation of Bardo de' Bardi, who, to be sure, was Scala's old

acquaintance and a worthy scholar, in spite of his overvaluing himself a

little (a frequent foible in the secretary's friends); but he must come

again on the ground of his own manifest accomplishments.

The interview could hardly have ended more auspiciously for Tito, and as

he walked out at the Porta Pinti that he might laugh a little at his

ease over the affair of the \_culex\_, he felt that fortune could hardly

mean to turn her back on him again at present, since she had taken him

by the hand in this decided way.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

A FACE IN THE CROWD.

It is easy to northern people to rise early on Midsummer morning, to see

the dew on the grassy edge of the dusty pathway, to notice the fresh

shoots among the darker green of the oak and fir in the coppice, and to

look over the gate at the shorn meadow, without recollecting that it is

the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist.

Not so to the Florentine--still less to the Florentine of the fifteenth

century: to him on that particular morning the brightness of the eastern

sun on the Arno had something special in it; the ringing of the bells

was articulate, and declared it to be the great summer festival of

Florence, the day of San Giovanni.

San Giovanni had been the patron saint of Florence for at least eight

hundred years--ever since the time when the Lombard Queen Theodolinda

had commanded her subjects to do him peculiar honour; nay, says old

Villani, to the best of his knowledge, ever since the days of

Constantino the Great and Pope Sylvester, when the Florentines deposed

their idol Mars, whom they were nevertheless careful not to treat with

contumely; for while they consecrated their beautiful and noble temple

to the honour of God and of the "Beato Messere Santo Giovanni," they

placed old Mars respectfully on a high tower near the River Arno,

finding in certain ancient memorials that he had been elected as their

tutelar deity under such astral influences that if he were broken, or

otherwise treated with indignity, the city would suffer great damage and

mutation. But in the fifteenth century that discreet regard to the

feelings of the Man-destroyer had long vanished: the god of the spear

and shield had ceased to frown by the side of the Arno, and the defences

of the Republic were held to lie in its craft and its coffers. For

spear and shield could be hired by gold florins, and on the gold florins

there had always been the image of San Giovanni.

Much good had come to Florence since the dim time of struggle between

the old patron and the new: some quarrelling and bloodshed, doubtless,

between Guelf and Ghibelline, between Black and White, between orthodox

sons of the Church and heretic Paterini; some floods, famine, and

pestilence; but still much wealth and glory. Florence had achieved

conquests over walled cities once mightier than itself, and especially

over hated Pisa, whose marble buildings were too high and beautiful,

whose masts were too much honoured on Greek and Italian coasts. The

name of Florence had been growing prouder and prouder in all the courts

of Europe, nay, in Africa itself, on the strength of purest gold

coinage, finest dyes and textures, pre-eminent scholarship and poetic

genius, and wits of the most serviceable sort for statesmanship and

banking: it was a name so omnipresent that a Pope with a turn for

epigram had called Florentines "the fifth element." And for this high

destiny, though it might partly depend on the stars and Madonna dell'

Impruneta, and certainly depended on other higher Powers less often

named, the praise was greatly due to San Giovanni, whose image was on

the fair gold florins.

Therefore it was fitting that the day of San Giovanni--that ancient

Church festival already venerable in the days of Saint Augustine--should

be a day of peculiar rejoicing to Florence, and should be ushered in by

a vigil duly kept in strict old Florentine fashion, with much dancing,

with much street jesting, and perhaps with not a little stone-throwing

and window-breaking, but emphatically with certain street sights such as

could only be provided by a city which held in its service a clever

Cecca, engineer and architect, valuable alike in sieges and in shows.

By the help of Cecca, the very saints, surrounded with their

almond-shaped glory, and floating on clouds with their joyous

companionship of winged cherubs, even as they may be seen to this day in

the pictures of Perugino, seemed, on the eve of San Giovanni, to have

brought their piece of the heavens down into the narrow streets, and to

pass slowly through them; and, more wonderful still, saints of gigantic

size, with attendant angels, might be seen, not seated, but moving in a

slow mysterious manner along the streets, like a procession of colossal

figures come down from the high domes and tribunes of the churches. The

clouds were made of good woven stuff, the saints and cherubs were

unglorified mortals supported by firm bars, and those mysterious giants

were really men of very steady brain, balancing themselves on stilts,

and enlarged, like Greek tragedians, by huge masks and stuffed

shoulders; but he was a miserably unimaginative Florentine who thought

only of that--nay, somewhat impious, for in the images of sacred things

was there not some of the virtue of sacred things themselves? And if,

after that, there came a company of merry black demons well armed with

claws and thongs, and other implements of sport, ready to perform

impromptu farces of bastinadoing and clothes-tearing, why, that was the

demons' way of keeping a vigil, and they, too, might have descended from

the domes and the tribunes. The Tuscan mind slipped from the devout to

the burlesque, as readily as water round an angle; and the saints had

already had their turn, had gone their way, and made their due pause

before the gates of San Giovanni, to do him honour on the eve of his

\_festa\_. And on the morrow, the great day thus ushered in, it was

fitting that the tributary symbols paid to Florence by all its dependent

cities, districts, and villages, whether conquered, protected, or of

immemorial possession, should be offered at the shrine of San Giovanni

in the old octagonal church, once the cathedral and now the baptistery,

where every Florentine had had the sign of the Cross made with the

anointing chrism on his brow; that all the city, from the white-haired

man to the stripling, and from the matron to the lisping child, should

be clothed in its best to do honour to the great day, and see the great

sight; and that again, when the sun was sloping and the streets were

cool, there should be the glorious race or Corso, when the unsaddled

horses, clothed in rich trappings, should ran right across the city,

from the Porta al Prato on the north-west, through the Mercato Vecchio,

to the Porta Santa Croce on the south-east, where the richest of

\_Palii\_, or velvet and brocade banners with silk linings and fringe of

gold, such as became a city that half-clothed the well-dressed world,

were mounted on a triumphal car awaiting the winner or winner's owner.

And thereafter followed more dancing; nay, through the whole day, says

an old chronicler at the beginning of that century, there were weddings

and the grandest gatherings, with so much piping, music and song, with

balls and feasts and gladness and ornament, that this earth might have

been mistaken for Paradise!

In this year of 1492, it was, perhaps, a little less easy to make that

mistake. Lorenzo the magnificent and subtle was dead, and an arrogant,

incautious Piero was come in his room, an evil change for Florence,

unless, indeed, the wise horse prefers the bad rider, as more easily

thrown from the saddle, and already the regrets for Lorenzo were getting

less predominant over the murmured desire for government on a broader

basis, in which corruption might be arrested, and there might be that

free play for everybody's jealousy and ambition, which made the ideal

liberty of the good old quarrelsome, struggling times, when Florence

raised her great buildings, reared her own soldiers, drove out would-be

tyrants at the sword's point, and was proud to keep faith at her own

loss. Lorenzo was dead, Pope Innocent was dying, and a troublesome

Neapolitan succession, with an intriguing, ambitious Milan, might set

Italy by the ears before long: the times were likely to be difficult.

Still, there was all the more reason that the Republic should keep its

religious festivals.

And Midsummer morning, in this year 1492, was not less bright than

usual. It was betimes in the morning that the symbolic offerings to be

carried in grand procession were all assembled at their starting-point

in the Piazza della Signoria--that famous piazza, where stood then, and

stand now, the massive turreted Palace of the People, called the Palazzo

Vecchio, and the spacious Loggia, built by Orcagna--the scene of all

grand State ceremonial. The sky made the fairest blue tent, and under

it the bells swung so vigorously that every evil spirit with sense

enough to be formidable, must long since have taken his flight; windows

and terraced roofs were alive with human faces; sombre stone houses were

bright with hanging draperies; the boldly soaring palace tower, the yet

older square tower of the Bargello, and the spire of the neighbouring

Badia, seemed to keep watch above; and below, on the broad polygonal

flags of the piazza, was the glorious show of banners, and horses with

rich trappings, and gigantic \_ceri\_, or tapers, that were fitly called

towers--strangely aggrandised descendants of those torches by whose

faint light the Church worshipped in the Catacombs. Betimes in the

morning all processions had need to move under the Midsummer sky of

Florence, where the shelter of the narrow streets must every now and

then be exchanged for the glare of wide spaces; and the sun would be

high up in the heavens before the long pomp had ended its pilgrimage in

the Piazza di San Giovanni.

But here, where the procession was to pause, the magnificent city, with

its ingenious Cecca, had provided another tent than the sky; for the

whole of the Piazza del Duomo, from the octagonal baptistery in the

centre to the facade of the cathedral and the walls of the houses on the

other sides of the quadrangle, was covered, at the height of forty feet

or more, with blue drapery, adorned with well-stitched yellow lilies and

the familiar coats of arms, while sheaves of many-coloured banners

drooped at fit angles under this superincumbent blue--a gorgeous

rainbow-lit shelter to the waiting spectators who leaned from the

windows, and made a narrow border on the pavement, and wished for the

coming of the show.

One of these spectators was Tito Melema. Bright, in the midst of

brightness, he sat at the window of the room above Nello's shop, his

right elbow resting on the red drapery hanging from the window-sill, and

his head supported in a backward position by the right-hand, which

pressed the curls against his ear. His face wore that bland liveliness,

as far removed from excitability as from heaviness or gloom, which marks

the companion popular alike amongst men and women--the companion who is

never obtrusive or noisy from uneasy vanity or excessive animal spirits,

and whose brow is never contracted by resentment or indignation. He

showed no other change from the two months and more that had passed

since his first appearance in the weather-stained tunic and hose, than

that added radiance of good fortune, which is like the just perceptible

perfecting of a flower after it has drunk a morning's sunbeams. Close

behind him, ensconced in the narrow angle between his chair and the

window-frame, stood the slim figure of Nello in holiday suit, and at his

left the younger Cennini--Pietro, the erudite corrector of proof-sheets,

not Domenico the practical. Tito was looking alternately down on the

scene below, and upward at the varied knot of gazers and talkers

immediately around him, some of whom had come in after witnessing the

commencement of the procession in the Piazza della Signoria. Piero di

Cosimo was raising a laugh among them by his grimaces and anathemas at

the noise of the bells, against which no kind of ear-stuffing was a

sufficient barricade, since the more he stuffed his ears the more he

felt the vibration of his skull; and declaring that he would bury

himself in the most solitary spot of the Valdarno on a \_festa\_, if he

were not condemned, as a painter, to lie in wait for the secrets of

colour that were sometimes to be caught from the floating of banners and

the chance grouping of the multitude.

Tito had just turned his laughing face away from the whimsical painter

to look down at the small drama going on among the checkered border of

spectators, when at the angle of the marble steps in front of the Duomo,

nearly opposite Nello's shop, he saw a man's face upturned towards him,

and fixing on him a gaze that seemed to have more meaning in it than the

ordinary passing observation of a stranger. It was a face with tonsured

head, that rose above the black mantle and white tunic of a Dominican

friar--a very common sight in Florence; but the glance had something

peculiar in it for Tito. There was a faint suggestion in it, certainly

not of an unpleasant kind. Yet what pleasant association had he ever

had with monks? None. The glance and the suggestion hardly took longer

than a flash of lightning.

"Nello!" said Tito, hastily, but immediately added, in a tone of

disappointment, "Ah, he has turned round. It was that tall, thin friar

who is going up the steps. I wanted you to tell me if you knew aught of

him?"

"One of the Frati Predicatori," said Nello, carelessly; "you don't

expect me to know the private history of the crows."

"I seem to remember something about his face," said Tito. "It is an

uncommon face."

"What? you thought it might be our Fra Girolamo? Too tall; and he never

shows himself in that chance way."

"Besides, that loud-barking `hound of the Lord' [Note 1] is not in

Florence just now," said Francesco Cei, the popular poet; "he has taken

Piero de' Medici's hint, to carry his railing prophecies on a journey

for a while."

"The Frate neither rails nor prophesies against any man," said a

middle-aged personage seated at the other corner of the window; "he only

prophesies against vice. If you think that an attack on your poems,

Francesco, it is not the Frate's fault."

"Ah, he's gone into the Duomo now," said Tito, who had watched the

figure eagerly. "No, I was not under that mistake, Nello. Your Fra

Girolamo has a high nose and a large under-lip. I saw him once--he is

not handsome; but this man..."

"Truce to your descriptions!" said Cennini. "Hark! see! Here come the

horsemen and the banners. That standard," he continued, laying his hand

familiarly on Tito's shoulder,--"that carried on the horse with white

trappings--that with the red eagle holding the green dragon between his

talons, and the red lily over the eagle--is the Gonfalon of the Guelf

party, and those cavaliers close round it are the chief officers of the

Guelf party. That is one of our proudest banners, grumble as we may; it

means the triumph of the Guelfs, which means the triumph of Florentine

will, which means triumph of the popolani."

"Nay, go on, Cennini," said the middle-aged man, seated at the window,

"which means triumph of the fat popolani over the lean, which again

means triumph of the fattest popolano over those who are less fat."

"Cronaca, you are becoming sententious," said the printer; "Fra

Girolamo's preaching will spoil you, and make you take life by the wrong

handle. Trust me, your cornices will lose half their beauty if you

begin to mingle bitterness with them; that is the \_maniera Tedesca\_

which you used to declaim against when you came from Rome. The next

palace you build we shall see you trying to put the Frate's doctrine

into stone."

"That is a goodly show of cavaliers," said Tito, who had learned by this

time the best way to please Florentines; "but are there not strangers

among them? I see foreign costumes."

"Assuredly," said Cennini; "you see there the Orators from France,

Milan, and Venice, and behind them are English and German nobles; for it

is customary that all foreign visitors of distinction pay their tribute

to San Giovanni in the train of that gonfalon. For my part, I think our

Florentine cavaliers sit their horses as well as any of those

cut-and-thrust northerners, whose wits lie in their heels and saddles;

and for yon Venetian, I fancy he would feel himself more at ease on the

back of a dolphin. We ought to know something of horsemanship, for we

excel all Italy in the sports of the Giostra, and the money we spend on

them. But you will see a finer show of our chief men by-and-by, Melema;

my brother himself will be among the officers of the Zecca."

"The banners are the better sight," said Piero di Cosimo, forgetting the

noise in his delight at the winding stream of colour as the tributary

standards advanced round the piazza. "The Florentine men are so-so;

they make but a sorry show at this distance with their patch of sallow

flesh-tint above the black garments; but those banners with their

velvet, and satin, and minever, and brocade, and their endless play of

delicate light and shadow!--\_Va\_! your human talk and doings are a tame

jest; the only passionate life is in form and colour."

"Ay, Piero, if Satanasso could paint, thou wouldst sell thy soul to

learn his secrets," said Nello. "But there is little likelihood of it,

seeing the blessed angels themselves are such poor hands at chiaroscuro,

if one may judge from their \_capo-d'opera\_, the Madonna Nunziata."

"There go the banners of Pisa and Arezzo," said Cennini. "Ay, Messer

Pisano, it is no use for you to look sullen; you may as well carry your

banner to our San Giovanni with a good grace. `Pisans false,

Florentines blind'--the second half of that proverb will hold no longer.

There come the ensigns of our subject towns and signories, Melema; they

will all be suspended in San Giovanni until this day next year, when

they will give place to new ones."

"They are a fair sight," said Tito; "and San Giovanni will surely be as

well satisfied with that produce of Italian looms as Minerva with her

peplos, especially as he contents himself with so little drapery. But

my eyes are less delighted with those whirling towers, which would soon

make me fall from the window in sympathetic vertigo."

The "towers" of which Tito spoke were a part of the procession esteemed

very glorious by the Florentine populace; and being perhaps chiefly a

kind of hyperbole for the all-efficacious wax taper, were also called

\_ceri\_. But inasmuch as hyperbole is impracticable in a real and

literal fashion, these gigantic \_ceri\_, some of them so large as to be

of necessity carried on wheels, were not solid but hollow, and had their

surface made not solely of wax, but of wood and pasteboard, gilded,

carved, and painted, as real sacred tapers often are, with successive

circles of figures--warriors on horseback, foot-soldiers with lance and

shield, dancing maidens, animals, trees and fruits, and in fine, says

the old chronicler, "all things that could delight the eye and the

heart;" the hollowness having the further advantage that men could stand

inside these hyperbolic tapers and whirl them continually, so as to

produce a phantasmagoric effect, which, considering the towers were

numerous, must have been calculated to produce dizziness on a truly

magnificent scale.

"\_Pestilenza\_!" said Piero di Cosimo, moving from the window, "those

whirling circles one above the other are worse than the jangling of all

the bells. Let me know when the last taper has passed."

"Nay, you will surely like to be called when the contadini come carrying

their torches," said Nello; "you would not miss the country-folk of the

Mugello and the Casentino, of whom your favourite Leonardo would make a

hundred grotesque sketches."

"No," said Piero, resolutely, "I will see nothing till the car of the

Zecca comes. I have seen clowns enough holding tapers aslant, both with

and without cowls, to last me for my life."

"Here it comes, then, Piero--the car of the Zecca," called out Nello,

after an interval during which towers and tapers in a descending scale

of size had been making their slow transit.

"\_Fediddio\_!" exclaimed Francesco Cei, "that is a well-tanned San

Giovanni! some sturdy Romagnole beggar-man, I'll warrant. Our Signoria

plays the host to all the Jewish and Christian scum that every other

city shuts its gates against, and lets them fatten on us like Saint

Anthony's swine."

The car of the Zecca or Mint, which had just rolled into sight, was

originally an immense wooden tower or \_cero\_ adorned after the same

fashion as the other tributary \_ceri\_, mounted on a splendid car, and

drawn by two mouse-coloured oxen, whose mild heads looked out from rich

trappings bearing the arms of the Zecca. But the latter half of the

century was getting rather ashamed of the towers with their circular or

spiral paintings, which had delighted the eyes and the hearts of the

other half, so that they had become a contemptuous proverb, and any

ill-painted figure looking, as will sometimes happen to figures in the

best ages of art, as if it had been boned for a pie, was called a

\_fantoccio da cero\_, a tower-puppet; consequently improved taste, with

Cecca to help it, had devised for the magnificent Zecca a triumphal car

like a pyramidal catafalque, with ingenious wheels warranted to turn all

corners easily. Round the base were living figures of saints and angels

arrayed in sculpturesque fashion; and on the summit, at the height of

thirty feet, well bound to an iron rod and holding an iron cross also

firmly infixed, stood a living representative of Saint John the Baptist,

with arms and legs bare, a garment of tiger-skins about his body, and a

golden nimbus fastened on his head--as the Precursor was wont to appear

in the cloisters and churches, not having yet revealed himself to

painters as the brown and sturdy boy who made one of the Holy Family.

For where could the image of the patron saint be more fitly placed than

on the symbol of the Zecca? Was not the royal prerogative of coining

money the surest token that a city had won its independence? and by the

blessing of San Giovanni this "beautiful sheepfold" of his had shown

that token earliest among the Italian cities. Nevertheless, the annual

function of representing the patron saint was not among the high prizes

of public life; it was paid for with something like ten shillings, a

cake weighing fourteen pounds, two bottles of wine, and a handsome

supply of light eatables; the money being furnished by the magnificent

Zecca, and the payment in kind being by peculiar "privilege" presented

in a basket suspended on a pole from an upper window of a private house,

whereupon the eidolon of the austere saint at once invigorated himself

with a reasonable share of the sweets and wine, threw the remnants to

the crowd, and embraced the mighty cake securely with his right arm

through the remainder of his passage. This was the attitude in which

the mimic San Giovanni presented himself as the tall car jerked and

vibrated on its slow way round the piazza to the northern gate of the

Baptistery.

"There go the Masters of the Zecca, and there is my brother--you see

him, Melema?" cried Cennini, with an agreeable stirring of pride at

showing a stranger what was too familiar to be remarkable to

fellow-citizens. "Behind come the members of the Corporation of

Calimara, [Note 2] the dealers in foreign cloth, to which we have given

our Florentine finish; men of ripe years, you see, who were matriculated

before you were born; and then comes the famous Art of Money-changers."

"Many of them matriculated also to the noble art of usury before you

were born," interrupted Francesco Cei, "as you may discern by a certain

fitful glare of the eye and sharp curve of the nose which manifest their

descent from the ancient Harpies, whose portraits you saw supporting the

arms of the Zecca. Shaking off old prejudices now, such a procession as

that of some four hundred passably ugly men carrying their tapers in

open daylight, Diogenes-fashion, as if they were looking for a lost

quattrino, would make a merry spectacle for the Feast of Fools."

"Blaspheme not against the usages of our city," said Pietro Cennini,

much offended. "There are new wits who think they see things more truly

because they stand on their heads to look at them, like tumblers and

mountebanks, instead of keeping the attitude of rational men. Doubtless

it makes little difference to Maestro Vaiano's monkeys whether they see

our Donatello's statue of Judith with their heads or their tails

uppermost."

"Your solemnity will allow some quarter to playful fancy, I hope," said

Cei, with a shrug, "else what becomes of the ancients, whose example you

scholars are bound to revere, Messer Pietro? Life was never anything

but a perpetual see-saw between gravity and jest."

"Keep your jest then till your end of the pole is uppermost," said

Cennini, still angry, "and that is not when the great bond of our

Republic is expressing itself in ancient symbols, without which the

vulgar would be conscious of nothing beyond their own petty wants of

back and stomach, and never rise to the sense of community in religion

and law. There has been no great people without processions, and the

man who thinks himself too wise to be moved by them to anything but

contempt, is like the puddle that was proud of standing alone while the

river rushed by."

No one said anything after this indignant burst of Cennini's till he

himself spoke again.

"Hark! the trumpets of the Signoria: now comes the last stage of the

show, Melema. That is our Gonfaloniere in the middle, in the starred

mantle, with the sword carried before him. Twenty years ago we used to

see our foreign Podesta, who was our judge in civil causes, walking on

his right-hand; but our Republic has been over-doctored by clever

\_Medici\_. That is the Proposto [Spokesman or Moderator] of the Priori

on the left; then come the other seven Priori; then all the other

magistracies and officials of our Republic. You see your patron the

Segretario?"

"There is Messer Bernardo del Nero also," said Tito; "his visage is a

fine and venerable one, though it has worn rather a petrifying look

towards me."

"Ah," said Nello, "he is the dragon that guards the remnant of old

Bardo's gold, which, I fancy, is chiefly that virgin gold that falls

about the fair Romola's head and shoulders; eh, my Apollino?" he added,

patting Tito's head.

Tito had the youthful grace of blushing, but he had also the adroit and

ready speech that prevents a blush from looking like embarrassment. He

replied at once--

"And a very Pactolus it is--a stream with golden ripples. If I were an

alchemist--"

He was saved from the need for further speech by the sudden fortissimo

of drums and trumpets and fifes, bursting into the breadth of the piazza

in a grand storm of sound--a roar, a blast, and a whistling, well

befitting a city famous for its musical instruments, and reducing the

members of the closest group to a state of deaf isolation.

During this interval Nello observed Tito's fingers moving in recognition

of some one in the crowd below, but not seeing the direction of his

glance he failed to detect the object of this greeting--the sweet round

blue-eyed face under a white hood--immediately lost in the narrow border

of heads, where there was a continual eclipse of round contadina cheeks

by the harsh-lined features or bent shoulders of an old spadesman, and

where profiles turned as sharply from north to south as weathercocks

under a shifting wind.

But when it was felt that the show was ended--when the twelve prisoners

released in honour of the day, and the very \_barberi\_ or race-horses,

with the arms of their owners embroidered on their cloths, had followed

up the Signoria, and been duly consecrated to San Giovanni, and every

one was moving from the window--Nello, whose Florentine curiosity was of

that lively canine sort which thinks no trifle too despicable for

investigation, put his hand on Tito's shoulder and said--

"What acquaintance was that you were making signals to, eh, \_giovane

mio\_?"

"Some little contadina who probably mistook me for an acquaintance, for

she had honoured me with a greeting."

"Or who wished to begin an acquaintance," said Nello. "But you are

bound for the Via de' Bardi and the feast of the Muses: there is no

counting on you for a frolic, else we might have gone in search of

adventures together in the crowd, and had some pleasant fooling in

honour of San Giovanni. But your high fortune has come on you too soon:

I don't mean the professor's mantle--\_that\_ is roomy enough to hide a

few stolen chickens, but--Messer Endymion minded his manners after that

singular good fortune of his; and what says our Luigi Pulci?

"`Da quel giorno in qua ch'amor m'accese

Per lei son fatto e gentile e cortese.'"

"Nello, \_amico mio\_, thou hast an intolerable trick of making life stale

by forestalling it with thy talk," said Tito, shrugging his shoulders,

with a look of patient resignation, which was his nearest approach to

anger: "not to mention that such ill-founded babbling would be held a

great offence by that same goddess whose humble worshipper you are

always professing yourself."

"I will be mute," said Nello, laying his finger on his lips, with a

responding shrug. "But it is only under our four eyes that I talk any

folly about her."

"Pardon! you were on the verge of it just now in the hearing of others.

If you want to ruin me in the minds of Bardo and his daughter--"

"Enough, enough!" said Nello. "I am an absurd old barber. It all comes

from that abstinence of mine, in not making bad verses in my youth: for

want of letting my folly run out that way when I was eighteen, it runs

out at my tongue's end now I am at the unseemly age of fifty. But Nello

has not got his head muffled for all that; he can see a buffalo in the

snow. \_Addio, giovane mio\_."

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. A play on the name of the Dominicans (\_Domini Canes\_) which was

accepted by themselves, and which is pictorially represented in a fresco

painted for them by Simone Memmi.

Note 2. "Arte di Calimara", "arte" being, in this use of it, equivalent

to corporation.

CHAPTER NINE.

A MAN'S RANSOM.

Tito was soon down among the crowd, and, notwithstanding his indifferent

reply to Nello's question about his chance acquaintance, he was not

without a passing wish, as he made his way round the piazza to the Corso

degli Adimari, that he might encounter the pair of blue eyes which had

looked up towards him from under the square bit of white linen drapery

that formed the ordinary hood of the contadina at festa time. He was

perfectly well aware that that face was Tessa's; but he had not chosen

to say so. What had Nello to do with the matter? Tito had an innate

love of reticence--let us say a talent for it--which acted as other

impulses do, without any conscious motive, and, like all people to whom

concealment is easy, he would now and then conceal something which had

as little the nature of a secret as the fact that he had seen a flight

of crows.

But the passing wish about pretty Tessa was almost immediately eclipsed

by the recurrent recollection of that friar whose face had some

irrecoverable association for him. Why should a sickly fanatic, worn

with fasting, have looked at \_him\_ in particular, and where in all his

travels could he remember encountering that face before? Folly! such

vague memories hang about the mind like cobwebs, with tickling

importunity--best to sweep them away at a dash: and Tito had pleasanter

occupation for his thoughts. By the time he was turning out of the

Corso degli Adimari into a side-street he was caring only that the sun

was high, and that the procession had kept him longer than he had

intended from his visit to that room in the Via de' Bardi, where his

coming, he knew, was anxiously awaited. He felt the scene of his

entrance beforehand: the joy beaming diffusedly in the blind face like

the light in a semi-transparent lamp; the transient pink flush on

Romola's face and neck, which subtracted nothing from her majesty, but

only gave it the exquisite charm of womanly sensitiveness, heightened

still more by what seemed the paradoxical boy-like frankness of her look

and smile. They were the best comrades in the world during the hours

they passed together round the blind man's chair: she was constantly

appealing to Tito, and he was informing her, yet he felt himself

strangely in subjection to Romola with that simplicity of hers: he felt

for the first time, without defining it to himself, that loving awe in

the presence of noble womanhood, which is perhaps something like the

worship paid of old to a great nature-goddess, who was not all-knowing,

but whose life and power were something deeper and more primordial than

knowledge. They had never been alone together, and he could frame to

himself no probable image of love-scenes between them: he could only

fancy and wish wildly--what he knew was impossible--that Romola would

some day tell him that she loved him. One day in Greece, as he was

leaning over a wall in the sunshine, a little black-eyed peasant girl,

who had rested her water-pot on the wall, crept gradually nearer and

nearer to him, and at last shyly asked him to kiss her, putting up her

round olive cheek very innocently. Tito was used to love that came in

this unsought fashion. But Romola's love would never come in that way:

would it ever come at all?--and yet it was that topmost apple on which

he had set his mind. He was in his fresh youth--not passionate, but

impressible: it was as inevitable that he should feel lovingly towards

Romola as that the white irises should be reflected in the clear sunlit

stream; but he had no coxcombry, and he had an intimate sense that

Romola was something very much above him. Many men have felt the same

before a large-eyed, simple child.

Nevertheless, Tito had had the rapid success which would have made some

men presuming, or would have warranted him in thinking that there would

be no great presumption in entertaining an agreeable confidence that he

might one day be the husband of Romola--nay, that her father himself was

not without a vision of such a future for him. His first auspicious

interview with Bartolommeo Scala had proved the commencement of a

growing favour on the secretary's part, and had led to an issue which

would have been enough to make Tito decide on Florence as the place in

which to establish himself, even if it had held no other magnet.

Politian was professor of Greek as well as Latin at Florence,

professorial chairs being maintained there, although the university had

been removed to Pisa; but for a long time Demetrio Calcondila, one of

the most eminent and respectable among the emigrant Greeks, had also

held a Greek chair, simultaneously with the too predominant Italian.

Calcondila was now gone to Milan, and there was no counterpoise or rival

to Politian such as was desired for him by the friends who wished him to

be taught a little propriety and humility. Scala was far from being the

only friend of this class, and he found several who, if they were not

among those thirsty admirers of mediocrity that were glad to be

refreshed with his verses in hot weather, were yet quite willing to join

him in doing that moral service to Politian. It was finally agreed that

Tito should be supported in a Greek chair, as Demetrio Calcondila had

been by Lorenzo himself, who, being at the same time the affectionate

patron of Politian, had shown by precedent that there was nothing

invidious in such a measure, but only a zeal for true learning and for

the instruction of the Florentine youth.

Tito was thus sailing under the fairest breeze, and besides convincing

fair judges that his talents squared with his good fortune, he wore that

fortune so easily and unpretentiously that no one had yet been offended

by it. He was not unlikely to get into the best Florentine society:

society where there was much more plate than the circle of enamelled

silver in the centre of the brass dishes, and where it was not forbidden

by the Signory to wear the richest brocade. For where could a handsome

young scholar not be welcome when he could touch the lute and troll a

gay song? That bright face, that easy smile, that liquid voice, seemed

to give life a holiday aspect; just as a strain of gay music and the

hoisting of colours make the work-worn and the sad rather ashamed of

showing themselves. Here was a professor likely to render the Greek

classics amiable to the sons of great houses.

And that was not the whole of Tito's good fortune; for he had sold all

his jewels, except the ring he did not choose to part with, and he was

master of full five hundred gold florins.

Yet the moment when he first had this sum in his possession was the

crisis of the first serious struggle his facile, good-humoured nature

had known. An importunate thought, of which he had till now refused to

see more than the shadow as it dogged his footsteps, at last rushed upon

him and grasped him: he was obliged to pause and decide whether he would

surrender and obey, or whether he would give the refusal that must carry

irrevocable consequences. It was in the room above Nello's shop, which

Tito had now hired as a lodging, that the elder Cennini handed him the

last quota of the sum on behalf of Bernardo Rucellai, the purchaser of

the two most valuable gems.

"\_Ecco, giovane mio\_!" said the respectable printer and goldsmith, "you

have now a pretty little fortune; and if you will take my advice, you

will let me place your florins in a safe quarter, where they may

increase and multiply, instead of slipping through your fingers for

banquets and other follies which are rife among our Florentine youth.

And it has been too much the fashion of scholars, especially when, like

our Pietro Crinito, they think their scholarship needs to be scented and

broidered, to squander with one hand till they have been fain to beg

with the other. I have brought you the money, and you are free to make

a wise choice or an unwise: I shall see on which side the balance dips.

We Florentines hold no man a member of an Art till he has shown his

skill and been matriculated; and no man is matriculated to the art of

life till he has been well tempted. If you make up your mind to put

your florins out to usury, you can let me know to-morrow. A scholar may

marry, and should have something in readiness for the \_morgen-cap.

Addio\_." [Note 1.]

As Cennini closed the door behind him, Tito turned round with the smile

dying out of his face, and fixed his eyes on the table where the florins

lay. He made no other movement, but stood with his thumbs in his belt,

looking down, in that transfixed state which accompanies the

concentration of consciousness on some inward image.

"A man's ransom!"--who was it that had said five hundred florins was

more than a man's ransom? If now, under this mid-day sun, on some hot

coast far away, a man somewhat stricken in years--a man not without high

thoughts and with the most passionate heart--a man who long years ago

had rescued a little boy from a life of beggary, filth, and cruel wrong,

had reared him tenderly, and been to him as a father--if that man \_were\_

now under this summer sun toiling as a slave, hewing wood and drawing

water, perhaps being smitten and buffeted because he was not deft and

active? If he were saying to himself, "Tito will find me: he had but to

carry our manuscripts and gems to Venice; he will have raised money, and

will never rest till he finds me out"? If that were certain, could he,

Tito, see the price of the gems lying before him, and say, "I will stay

at Florence, where I am fanned by soft airs of promised love and

prosperity; I will not risk myself for his sake"? No, surely not, \_if

it were certain\_. But nothing could be farther from certainty. The

galley had been taken by a Turkish vessel on its way to Delos: \_that\_

was known by the report of the companion galley, which had escaped. But

there had been resistance, and probable bloodshed; a man had been seen

falling overboard: who were the survivors, and what had befallen them

amongst all the multitude of possibilities? Had not he, Tito, suffered

shipwreck, and narrowly escaped drowning? He had good cause for feeling

the omnipresence of casualties that threatened all projects with

futility. The rumour that there were pirates who had a settlement in

Delos was not to be depended on, or might be nothing to the purpose.

What, probably enough, would be the result if he were to quit Florence

and go to Venice; get authoritative letters--yes, he knew that might be

done--and set out for the Archipelago? Why, that he should be himself

seized, and spend all his florins on preliminaries, and be again a

destitute wanderer--with no more gems to sell.

Tito had a clearer vision of that result than of the possible moment

when he might find his father again, and carry him deliverance. It

would surely be an unfairness that he, in his full ripe youth, to whom

life had hitherto had some of the stint and subjection of a school,

should turn his back on promised love and distinction, and perhaps never

be visited by that promise again. "And yet," he said to himself, "if I

were certain that Baldassarre Calvo was alive, and that I could free

him, by whatever exertions or perils, I would go now--now I have the

money: it was useless to debate the matter before. I would go now to

Bardo and Bartolommeo Scala, and tell them the whole truth." Tito did

not say to himself so distinctly that if those two men had known the

whole truth he was aware there would have been no alternative for him

but to go in search of his benefactor, who, if alive, was the rightful

owner of the gems, and whom he had always equivocally spoken of as

"lost;" he did not say to himself--what he was not ignorant of--that

Greeks of distinction had made sacrifices, taken voyages again and

again, and sought help from crowned and mitred heads for the sake of

freeing relatives from slavery to the Turks. Public opinion did not

regard this as exceptional virtue.

This was his first real colloquy with himself: he had gone on following

the impulses of the moment, and one of those impulses had been to

conceal half the fact; he had never considered this part of his conduct

long enough to face the consciousness of his motives for the

concealment. What was the use of telling the whole? It was true, the

thought had crossed his mind several times since he had quitted Nauplia

that, after all, it was a great relief to be quit of Baldassarre, and he

would have liked to know \_who\_ it was that had fallen overboard. But

such thoughts spring inevitably out of a relation that is irksome.

Baldassarre was exacting, and had got stranger as he got older: he was

constantly scrutinising Tito's mind to see whether it answered to his

own exaggerated expectations; and age--the age of a thickset,

heavy-browed, bald man beyond sixty, whose intensity and eagerness in

the grasp of ideas have long taken the character of monotony and

repetition, may be looked at from many points of view without being

found attractive. Such a man, stranded among new acquaintances, unless

he had the philosopher's stone, would hardly find rank, youth, and

beauty at his feet. The feelings that gather fervour from novelty will

be of little help towards making the world a home for dimmed and faded

human beings; and if there is any love of which they are not widowed, it

must be the love that is rooted in memories and distils perpetually the

sweet balms of fidelity and forbearing tenderness.

But surely such memories were not absent from Tito's mind? Far in the

backward vista of his remembered life, when he was only seven years old,

Baldassarre had rescued him from blows, had taken him to a home that

seemed like opened paradise, where there was sweet food and soothing

caresses, all had on Baldassarre's knee; and from that time till the

hour they had parted, Tito had been the one centre of Baldassarre's

fatherly cares.

And he had been docile, pliable, quick of apprehension, ready to

acquire: a very bright lovely boy, a youth of even splendid grace, who

seemed quite without vices, as if that beautiful form represented a

vitality so exquisitely poised and balanced that it could know no uneasy

desires, no unrest--a radiant presence for a lonely man to have won for

himself. If he were silent when his father expected some response,

still he did not look moody; if he declined some labour--why, he flung

himself down with such a charming, half-smiling, half-pleading air, that

the pleasure of looking at him made amends to one who had watched his

growth with a sense of claim and possession: the curves of Tito's mouth

had ineffable good-humour in them. And then, the quick talent to which

everything came readily, from philosophical systems to the rhymes of a

street ballad caught up at a hearing! Would any one have said that Tito

had not made a rich return to his benefactor, or that his gratitude and

affection would fail on any great demand?

He did not admit that his gratitude had failed; but \_it was not certain\_

that Baldassarre was in slavery, not certain that he was living.

"Do I not owe something to myself?" said Tito, inwardly, with a slight

movement of his shoulders, the first he had made since he had turned to

look down at the florins. "Before I quit everything, and incur again

all the risks of which I am even now weary, I must at least have a

reasonable hope. Am I to spend my life in a wandering search? \_I

believe he is dead\_. Cennini was right about my florins: I will place

them in his hands to-morrow."

When, the next morning, Tito put this determination into act he had

chosen his colour in the game, and had given an inevitable bent to his

wishes. He had made it impossible that he should not from henceforth

desire it to be the truth that his father was dead; impossible that he

should not be tempted to baseness rather than that the precise facts of

his conduct should not remain for ever concealed.

Under every guilty secret there is hidden a brood of guilty wishes,

whose unwholesome infecting life is cherished by the darkness. The

contaminating effect of deeds often lies less in the commission than in

the consequent adjustment of our desires--the enlistment of our

self-interest on the side of falsity; as, on the other hand, the

purifying influence of public confession springs from the fact, that by

it the hope in lies is for ever swept away, and the soul recovers the

noble attitude of simplicity.

Besides, in this first distinct colloquy with himself the ideas which

had previously been scattered and interrupted had now concentrated

themselves; the little rills of selfishness had united and made a

channel, so that they could never again meet with the same resistance.

Hitherto Tito had left in vague indecision the question whether, with

the means in his power, he would not return, and ascertain his father's

fate; he had now made a definite excuse to himself for not taking that

course; he had avowed to himself a choice which he would have been

ashamed to avow to others, and which would have made him ashamed in the

resurgent presence of his father. But the inward shame, the reflex of

that outward law which the great heart of mankind makes for every

individual man, a reflex which will exist even in the absence of the

sympathetic impulses that need no law, but rush to the deed of fidelity

and pity as inevitably as the brute mother shields her young from the

attack of the hereditary enemy--that inward shame was showing its

blushes in Tito's determined assertion to himself that his father was

dead, or that at least search was hopeless.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. A sum given by the bridegroom to the bride the day after the

marriage. \_Morgengabe\_.

CHAPTER TEN.

UNDER THE PLANE-TREE.

On the day of San Giovanni it was already three weeks ago that Tito had

handed his florins to Cennini, and we have seen that as he set out

towards the Via de' Bardi he showed all the outward signs of a mind at

ease. How should it be otherwise? He never jarred with what was

immediately around him, and his nature was too joyous, too

unapprehensive, for the hidden and the distant to grasp him in the shape

of a dread. As he turned out of the hot sunshine into the shelter of a

narrow street, took off the black cloth berretta, or simple cap with

upturned lappet, which just crowned his brown curls, pushing his hair

and tossing his head backward to court the cooler air, there was no

brand of duplicity on his brow; neither was there any stamp of candour:

it was simply a finely-formed, square, smooth young brow. And the slow

absent glance he cast around at the upper windows of the houses had

neither more dissimulation in it, nor more ingenuousness, than belongs

to a youthful well-opened eyelid with its unwearied breadth of gaze; to

perfectly pellucid lenses; to the undimmed dark of a rich brown iris;

and to a pure cerulean-tinted angle of whiteness streaked with the

delicate shadows of long eyelashes. Was it that Tito's face attracted

or repelled according to the mental attitude of the observer? Was it a

cypher with more than one key? The strong, unmistakable expression in

his whole air and person was a negative one, and it was perfectly

veracious; it declared the absence of any uneasy claim, any restless

vanity, and it made the admiration that followed him as he passed among

the troop of holiday-makers a thoroughly willing tribute.

For by this time the stir of the Festa was felt even in the narrowest

side-streets; the throng which had at one time been concentrated in the

lines through which the procession had to pass, was now streaming out in

all directions in pursuit of a new object. Such intervals of a Festa

are precisely the moments when the vaguely active animal spirits of a

crowd are likely to be the most petulant and most ready to sacrifice a

stray individual to the greater happiness of the greater number. As

Tito entered the neighbourhood of San Martino, he found the throng

rather denser; and near the hostelry of the \_Bertucce\_, or Baboons,

there was evidently some object which was arresting the passengers and

forming them into a knot. It needed nothing of great interest to draw

aside passengers unfreighted with a purpose, and Tito was preparing to

turn aside into an adjoining street, when, amidst the loud laughter, his

ear discerned a distressed childish voice crying, "Loose me! Holy

Virgin, help me!" which at once determined him to push his way into the

knot of gazers. He had just had time to perceive that the distressed

voice came from a young contadina, whose white hood had fallen off in

the struggle to get her hands free from the grasp of a man in the

parti-coloured dress of a \_cerretano\_, or conjuror, who was making

laughing attempts to soothe and cajole her, evidently carrying with him

the amused sympathy of the spectators. These, by a persuasive variety

of words signifying simpleton, for which the Florentine dialect is rich

in equivalents, seemed to be arguing with the contadina against her

obstinacy. At the first moment the girl's face was turned away, and he

saw only her light-brown hair plaited and fastened with a long silver

pin; but in the next, the struggle brought her face opposite Tito's, and

he saw the baby features of Tessa, her blue eyes filled with tears, and

her under-lip quivering. Tessa, too, saw \_him\_, and through the mist of

her swelling tears there beamed a sudden hope, like that in the face of

a little child, when, held by a stranger against its will, it sees a

familiar hand stretched out.

In an instant Tito had pushed his way through the barrier of bystanders,

whose curiosity made them ready to turn aside at the sudden interference

of this handsome young signor, had grasped Tessa's waist, and had said,

"Loose this child! What right have you to hold her against her will?"

The conjuror--a man with one of those faces in which the angles of the

eyes and eyebrows, of the nostrils, mouth, and sharply-defined jaw, all

tend upward--showed his small regular teeth in an impish but not

ill-natured grin, as he let go Tessa's hands, and stretched out his own

backward, shrugging his shoulders, and bending them forward a little in

a half-apologetic, half-protesting manner.

"I mean the ragazza no evil in the world, Messere: ask this respectable

company. I was only going to show them a few samples of my skill, in

which this little damsel might have helped me the better because of her

kitten face, which would have assured them of open dealing; and I had

promised her a lapful of confetti as a reward. But what then? Messer

has doubtless better confetti at hand, and she knows it."

A general laugh among the bystanders accompanied these last words of the

conjuror, raised, probably, by the look of relief and confidence with

which Tessa clung to Tito's arm, as he drew it from her waist, and

placed her hand within it. She only cared about the laugh as she might

have cared about the roar of wild beasts from which she was escaping,

not attaching any meaning to it; but Tito, who had no sooner got her on

his arm than he foresaw some embarrassment in the situation, hastened to

get clear of observers who, having been despoiled of an expected

amusement, were sure to re-establish the balance by jests.

"See, see, little one! here is your hood," said the conjuror, throwing

the bit of white drapery over Tessa's head. "\_Orsu\_, bear me no malice;

come back to me when Messere can spare you."

"Ah! Maestro Vaiano, she'll come back presently, as the toad said to

the harrow," called out one of the spectators, seeing how Tessa started

and shrank at the action of the conjuror.

Tito pushed his way vigorously towards the corner of a side-street, a

little vexed at this delay in his progress to the Via de' Bardi, and

intending to get rid of the poor little contadina as soon as possible.

The next street, too, had its passengers inclined to make holiday

remarks on so unusual a pair; but they had no sooner entered it than he

said, in a kind but hurried manner, "Now, little one, where were you

going? Are you come by yourself to the Festa?"

"Ah, no!" said Tessa, looking frightened and distressed again; "I have

lost my mother in the crowd--her and my father-in-law. They will be

angry--he will beat me. It was in the crowd in San Pulinari--somebody

pushed me along and I couldn't stop myself, so I got away from them.

Oh, I don't know where they're gone! Please, don't leave me!"

Her eyes had been swelling with tears again, and she ended with a sob.

Tito hurried along again: the Church of the Badia was not far off. They

could enter it by the cloister that opened at the back, and in the

church he could talk to Tessa--perhaps leave her. No! it was an hour at

which the church was not open; but they paused under the shelter of the

cloister, and he said, "Have you no cousin or friend in Florence, my

little Tessa, whose house you could find; or are you afraid of walking

by yourself since you have been frightened by the conjuror? I am in a

hurry to get to Oltrarno, but if I could take you anywhere near--"

"Oh, I \_am\_ frightened: he was the devil--I know he was. And I don't

know where to go. I have nobody: and my mother meant to have her dinner

somewhere, and I don't know where. Holy Madonna! I shall be beaten."

The corners of the pouting mouth went down piteously, and the poor

little bosom with the beads on it above the green serge gown heaved so,

that there was no longer any help for it: a loud sob \_would\_ come, and

the big tears fell as if they were making up for lost time. Here was a

situation! It would have been brutal to leave her, and Tito's nature

was all gentleness. He wished at that moment that he had not been

expected in the Via de' Bardi. As he saw her lifting up her holiday

apron to catch the hurrying tears, he laid his hand, too, on the apron,

and rubbed one of the cheeks and kissed the baby-like roundness.

"My poor little Tessa! leave off crying. Let us see what can be done.

Where is your home--where do you live?"

There was no answer, but the sobs began to subside a little and the

drops to fall less quickly.

"Come! I'll take you a little way, if you'll tell me where you want to

go."

The apron fell, and Tessa's face began to look as contented as a

cherub's budding from a cloud. The diabolical conjuror, the anger and

the beating, seemed a long way off.

"I think I'll go home, if you'll take me," she said, in a half whisper,

looking up at Tito with wide blue eyes, and with something sweeter than

a smile--with a childlike calm.

"Come, then, little one," said Tito, in a caressing tone, putting her

arm within his again. "Which way is it?"

"Beyond Peretola--where the large pear-tree is."

"Peretola? Out at which gate, pazzarella? I am a stranger, you must

remember."

"Out at the Por del Prato," said Tessa, moving along with a very fast

hold on Tito's arm.

He did not know all the turnings well enough to venture on an attempt at

choosing the quietest streets; and besides, it occurred to him that

where the passengers were most numerous there was, perhaps, the most

chance of meeting with Monna Ghita and finding an end to his

knight-errant-ship. So he made straight for Porta Rossa, and on to

Ognissanti, showing his usual bright propitiatory face to the mixed

observers who threw their jests at him and his little heavy-shod maiden

with much liberality. Mingled with the more decent holiday-makers there

were frolicsome apprentices, rather envious of his good fortune;

bold-eyed women with the badge of the yellow veil; beggars who thrust

forward their caps for alms, in derision at Tito's evident haste;

dicers, sharpers, and loungers of the worst sort; boys whose tongues

were used to wag in concert at the most brutal street games: for the

streets of Florence were not always a moral spectacle in those times,

and Tessa's terror at being lost in the crowd was not wholly

unreasonable.

When they reached the Piazza d'Ognissanti, Tito slackened his pace: they

were both heated with their hurried walk, and here was a wider space

where they could take breath. They sat down on one of the stone benches

which were frequent against the walls of old Florentine houses.

"Holy Virgin!" said Tessa; "I am glad we have got away from those women

and boys; but I was not frightened, because you could take care of me."

"Pretty little Tessa!" said Tito, smiling at her. "What makes you feel

so safe with me?"

"Because you are so beautiful--like the people going into Paradise: they

are all good."

"It is a long while since you had your breakfast, Tessa," said Tito,

seeing some stalls near, with fruit and sweetmeats upon them. "Are you

hungry?"

"Yes, I think I am--if you will have some too."

Tito bought some apricots, and cakes, and comfits, and put them into her

apron.

"Come," he said, "let us walk on to the Prato, and then perhaps you will

not be afraid to go the rest of the way alone."

"But you will have some of the apricots and things," said Tessa, rising

obediently and gathering up her apron as a bag for her store.

"We will see," said Tito aloud; and to himself he said, "Here is a

little contadina who might inspire a better idyl than Lorenzo de'

Medici's `Nencia da Barberino,' that Nello's friends rave about; if I

were only a Theocritus, or had time to cultivate the necessary

experience by unseasonable walks of this sort! However, the mischief is

done now: I am so late already that another half-hour will make no

difference. Pretty little pigeon!"

"We have a garden and plenty of pears," said Tessa, "and two cows,

besides the mules; and I'm very fond of them. But my father-in-law is a

cross man: I wish my mother had not married him. I think he is wicked;

he is very ugly."

"And does your mother let him beat you, poverina? You said you were

afraid of being beaten."

"Ah, my mother herself scolds me: she loves my young sister better, and

thinks I don't do work enough. Nobody speaks kindly to me, only the

Pievano (parish priest) when I go to confession. And the men in the

Mercato laugh at me and make fun of me. Nobody ever kissed me and spoke

to me as you do; just as I talk to my little black-faced kid, because

I'm very fond of it."

It seemed not to have entered Tessa's mind that there was any change in

Tito's appearance since the morning he begged the milk from her, and

that he looked now like a personage for whom she must summon her little

stock of reverent words and signs. He had impressed her too differently

from any human being who had ever come near her before, for her to make

any comparison of details; she took no note of his dress; he was simply

a voice and a face to her, something come from Paradise into a world

where most things seemed hard and angry; and she prattled with as little

restraint as if he had been an imaginary companion born of her own

lovingness and the sunshine.

They had now reached the Prato, which at that time was a large open

space within the walls, where the Florentine youth played at their

favourite \_Calcio\_--a peculiar kind of football--and otherwise exercised

themselves. At this mid-day time it was forsaken and quiet to the very

gates, where a tent had been erected in preparation for the race. On

the border of this wide meadow, Tito paused and said--

"Now, Tessa, you will not be frightened if I leave you to walk the rest

of the way by yourself. Addio! Shall I come and buy a cup of milk from

you in the Mercato to-morrow morning, to see that you are quite safe?"

He added this question in a soothing tone, as he saw her eyes widening

sorrowfully, and the corners of her mouth falling. She said nothing at

first; she only opened her apron and looked down at her apricots and

sweetmeats. Then she looked up at him again and said complainingly--

"I thought you would have some, and we could sit down under a tree

outside the gate, and eat them together."

"Tessa, Tessa, you little siren, you would ruin me," said Tito,

laughing, and kissing both her cheeks. "I ought to have been in the Via

de' Bardi long ago. No! I must go back now; you are in no danger.

There--I'll take an apricot. Addio!"

He had already stepped two yards from her when he said the last word.

Tessa could not have spoken; she was pale, and a great sob was rising;

but she turned round as if she felt there was no hope for her, and

stepped on, holding her apron so forgetfully that the apricots began to

roll out on the grass.

Tito could not help looking after her, and seeing her shoulders rise to

the bursting sob, and the apricots fall--could not help going after her

and picking them up. It was very hard upon him: he was a long way off

the Via de' Bardi, and very near to Tessa.

"See, my silly one," he said, picking up the apricots. "Come, leave off

crying, I will go with you, and we'll sit down under the tree. Come, I

don't like to see you cry; but you know I must go kick some time."

So it came to pass that they found a great plane-tree not far outside

the gates, and they sat down under it, and all the feast was spread out

on Tessa's lap, she leaning with her back against the trunk of the tree,

and he stretched opposite to her, resting his elbows on the rough green

growth cherished by the shade, while the sunlight stole through the

boughs and played about them like a winged thing. Tessa's face was all

contentment again, and the taste of the apricots and sweetmeats seemed

very good.

"You pretty bird!" said Tito, looking at her as she sat eyeing the

remains of the feast with an evident mental debate about saving them,

since he had said he would not have any more. "To think of any one

scolding you! What sins do you tell of at confession, Tessa?"

"Oh, a great many. I am often naughty. I don't like work, and I can't

help being idle, though I know I shall be beaten and scolded; and I give

the mules the best fodder when nobody sees me, and then when the Madre

is angry I say I didn't do it, and that makes me frightened at the

devil. I think the conjuror was the devil. I am not so frightened

after I've been to confession. And see, I've got a \_Breve\_ here that a

good father, who came to Prato preaching this Easter, blessed and gave

us all." Here Tessa drew from her bosom a tiny bag carefully fastened

up. "And I think the holy Madonna will take care of me; she looks as if

she would; and perhaps if I wasn't idle, she wouldn't let me be beaten."

"If they are so cruel to you, Tessa, shouldn't you like to leave them,

and go and live with a beautiful lady who would be kind to you, if she

would have you to wait upon her?"

Tessa seemed to hold her breath for a moment or two. Then she said

doubtfully, "I don't know."

"Then should you like to be my little servant, and live with me?" said

Tito, smiling. He meant no more than to see what sort of pretty look

and answer she would give.

There was a flush of joy immediately. "Will you take me with you now?

Ah! I shouldn't go home and be beaten then." She paused a little

while, and then added more doubtfully, "But I should like to fetch my

black-faced kid."

"Yes, you must go back to your kid, my Tessa," said Tito, rising, "and I

must go the other way."

"By Jupiter!" he added, as he went from under the shade of the tree, "it

is not a pleasant time of day to walk from here to the Via de' Bardi; I

am more inclined to lie down and sleep in this shade."

It ended so. Tito had an unconquerable aversion to anything unpleasant,

even when an object very much loved and desired was on the other side of

it. He had risen early; had waited; had seen sights, and had been

already walking in the sun: he was inclined for a siesta, and inclined

all the more because little Tessa was there, and seemed to make the air

softer. He lay down on the grass again, putting his cap under his head

on a green tuft by the side of Tessa. That was not quite comfortable;

so he moved again, and asked Tessa to let him rest his head against her

lap; and in that way he soon fell asleep. Tessa sat quiet as a dove on

its nest, just venturing, when he was fast asleep, to touch the

wonderful dark curls that fell backward from his ear. She was too happy

to go to sleep--too happy to think that Tito would wake up, and that

then he would leave her, and she must go home. It takes very little

water to make a perfect pool for a tiny fish, where it will find its

world and paradise all in one, and never have a presentiment of the dry

bank. The fretted summer shade, and stillness, and the gentle breathing

of some loved life near--it would be paradise to us all, if eager

thought, the strong angel with the implacable brow, had not long since

closed the gates.

It really was a long while before the waking came--before the long dark

eyes opened at Tessa, first with a little surprise, and then with a

smile, which was soon quenched by some preoccupying thought. Tito's

deeper sleep had broken into a doze, in which he felt himself in the Via

de' Bardi, explaining his failure to appear at the appointed time. The

clear images of that doze urged him to start up at once to a sitting

posture, and as he stretched his arms and shook his cap, he said--

"Tessa, little one, you have let me sleep too long. My hunger and the

shadows together tell me that the sun has done much travel since I fell

asleep. I must lose no more time. Addio," he ended, patting her cheek

with one hand, and settling his cap with the other.

She said nothing, but there were signs in her face which made him speak

again in as serious and as chiding a tone as he could command--

"Now, Tessa, you must not cry. I shall be angry; I shall not love you

if you cry. You must go home to your black-faced kid, or if you like

you may go back to the gate and see the horses start. But I can stay

with you no longer, and if you cry, I shall think you are troublesome to

me."

The rising tears were checked by terror at this change in Tito's voice.

Tessa turned very pale, and sat in trembling silence, with her blue eyes

widened by arrested tears.

"Look now," Tito went on, soothingly, opening the wallet that hung at

his belt, "here is a pretty charm that I have had a long while--ever

since I was in Sicily, a country a long way off."

His wallet had many little matters in it mingled with small coins, and

he had the usual difficulty in laying his finger on the right thing. He

unhooked his wallet, and turned out the contents on Tessa's lap. Among

them was his onyx ring.

"Ah, my ring!" he exclaimed, slipping it on the forefinger of his

right-hand. "I forgot to put it on again this morning. Strange, I

never missed it! See, Tessa," he added, as he spread out the smaller

articles, and selected the one he was in search of. "See this pretty

little pointed bit of red coral--like your goat's horn, is it not?--and

here is a hole in it, so you can put it on the cord round your neck

along with your \_Breve\_, and then the evil spirits can't hurt you: if

you ever see them coming in the shadow round the corner, point this

little coral horn at them, and they will run away. It is a `buona

fortuna,' and will keep you from harm when I am not with you. Come,

undo the cord."

Tessa obeyed with a tranquillising sense that life was going to be

something quite new, and that Tito would be with her often. All who

remember their childhood remember the strange vague sense, when some new

experience came, that everything else was going to be changed, and that

there would be no lapse into the old monotony. So the bit of coral was

hung beside the tiny bag with the scrap of scrawled parchment in it, and

Tessa felt braver.

"And now you will give me a kiss," said Tito, economising time by

speaking while he swept in the contents of the wallet and hung it at his

waist again, "and look happy, like a good girl, and then--"

But Tessa had obediently put forward her lips in a moment, and kissed

his cheek as he hung down his head.

"Oh, you pretty pigeon!" cried Tito, laughing, pressing her round cheeks

with his hands and crushing her features together so as to give them a

general impartial kiss.

Then he started up and walked away, not looking round till he was ten

yards from her, when he just turned and gave a parting beck. Tessa was

looking after him, but he could see that she was making no signs of

distress. It was enough for Tito if she did not cry while he was

present. The softness of his nature required that all sorrow should be

hidden away from him.

"I wonder when Romola will kiss my cheek in that way?" thought Tito, as

he walked along. It seemed a tiresome distance now, and he almost

wished he had not been so soft-hearted, or so tempted to linger in the

shade. No other excuse was needed to Bardo and Romola than saying

simply that he had been unexpectedly hindered; he felt confident their

proud delicacy would inquire no farther. He lost no time in getting to

Ognissanti, and hastily taking some food there, he crossed the Arno by

the Ponte alia Carraja, and made his way as directly as possible towards

the Via de' Bardi.

But it was the hour when all the world who meant to be in particularly

good time to see the Corso were returning from the Borghi, or villages

just outside the gates, where they had dined and reposed themselves; and

the thoroughfares leading to the bridges were of course the issues

towards which the stream of sightseers tended. Just as Tito reached the

Ponte Vecchio and the entrance of the Via de' Bardi, he was suddenly

urged back towards the angle of the intersecting streets. A company on

horseback, coming from the Via Guicciardini, and turning up the Via de'

Bardi, had compelled the foot-passengers to recede hurriedly. Tito had

been walking, as his manner was, with the thumb of his right-hand

resting in his belt; and as he was thus forced to pause, and was looking

carelessly at the passing cavaliers, he felt a very thin cold hand laid

on his. He started round, and saw the Dominican friar whose upturned

face had so struck him in the morning. Seen closer, the face looked

more evidently worn by sickness and not by age; and again it brought

some strong but indefinite reminiscences to Tito.

"Pardon me, but--from your face and your ring,"--said the friar, in a

faint voice, "is not your name Titomelema?"

"Yes," said Tito, also speaking faintly, doubly jarred by the cold touch

and the mystery. He was not apprehensive or timid through his

imagination, but through his sensations and perceptions he could easily

be made to shrink and turn pale like a maiden.

"Then I shall fulfil my commission."

The friar put his hand under his scapulary, and drawing out a small

linen bag which hung round his neck, took from it a bit of parchment,

doubled and stuck firmly together with some black adhesive substance,

and placed it in Tito's hand. On the outside was written in Italian, in

a small but distinct character--

"\_Tito Melema, aged twenty-three, with a dark, beautiful face, long dark

curls, the brightest smile, and a large onyx ring on his right

forefinger\_."

Tito did not look at the friar, but tremblingly broke open the bit of

parchment. Inside, the words were--

"\_I am sold for a slave: I think they are going to take me to Antioch.

The gems alone will serve to ransom me\_."

Tito looked round at the friar, but could only ask a question with his

eyes.

"I had it at Corinth," the friar said, speaking with difficulty, like

one whose small strength had been overtaxed--"I had it from a man who

was dying."

"He is dead, then?" said Tito, with a bounding of the heart.

"Not the writer. The man who gave it me was a pilgrim, like myself, to

whom the writer had intrusted it, because he was journeying to Italy."

"You know the contents?"

"I do not know them, but I conjecture them. Your friend is in slavery:

you will go and release him. But I am unable to talk now." The friar,

whose voice had become feebler and feebler, sank down on the stone bench

against the wall from which he had risen to touch Tito's hand, adding--

"I am at San Marco; my name is Fra Luca."

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

TITO'S DILEMMA.

When Fra Luca had ceased to speak, Tito still stood by him in

irresolution, and it was not till, the pressure of the passengers being

removed, the friar rose and walked slowly into the church of Santa

Felicita, that Tito also went on his way along the Via de' Bardi.

"If this monk is a Florentine," he said to himself; "if he is going to

remain at Florence, everything must be disclosed." He felt that a new

crisis had come, but he was not, for all that, too evidently agitated to

pay his visit to Bardo, and apologise for his previous non-appearance.

Tito's talent for concealment was being fast developed into something

less neutral. It was still possible--perhaps it might be inevitable--

for him to accept frankly the altered conditions, and avow Baldassarre's

existence; but hardly without casting an unpleasant light backward on

his original reticence as studied equivocation in order to avoid the

fulfilment of a secretly recognised claim, to say nothing of his quiet

settlement of himself and investment of his florins, when, it would be

clear, his benefactor's fate had not been certified. It was at least

provisionally wise to act as if nothing had happened, and for the

present he would suspend decisive thought; there was all the night for

meditation, and no one would know the precise moment at which he had

received the letter.

So he entered the room on the second storey--where Romola and her father

sat among the parchment and the marble, aloof from the life of the

streets on holidays as well as on common days--with a face only a little

less bright than usual, from regret at appearing so late: a regret which

wanted no testimony, since he had given up the sight of the Corso in

order to express it; and then set himself to throw extra animation into

the evening, though all the while his consciousness was at work like a

machine with complex action, leaving deposits quite distinct from the

line of talk; and by the time he descended the stone stairs and issued

from the grim door in the starlight, his mind had really reached a new

stage in its formation of a purpose.

And when, the next day, after he was free from his professorial work, he

turned up the Via del Cocomero towards the convent of San Marco, his

purpose was fully shaped. He was going to ascertain from Fra Luca

precisely how much he conjectured of the truth, and on what grounds he

conjectured it; and, further, how long he was to remain at San Marco.

And on that fuller knowledge he hoped to mould a statement which would

in any case save him from the necessity of quitting Florence. Tito had

never had occasion to fabricate an ingenious lie before: the occasion

was come now--the occasion which circumstance never fails to beget on

tacit falsity; and his ingenuity was ready. For he had convinced

himself that he was not bound to go in search of Baldassarre. He had

once said that on a fair assurance of his father's existence and

whereabout, he would unhesitatingly go after him. But, after all, \_why\_

was he bound to go? What, looked at closely, was the end of all life,

but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure? And was not his own blooming

life a promise of incomparably more pleasure, not for himself only, but

for others, than the withered wintry life of a man who was past the time

of keen enjoyment, and whose ideas had stiffened into barren rigidity?

Those ideas had all been sown in the fresh soil of Tito's mind, and were

lively germs there: that was the proper order of things--the order of

nature, which treats all maturity as a mere nidus for youth.

Baldassarre had done his work, had had his draught of life: Tito said it

was \_his\_ turn now.

And the prospect was so vague:--"I think they are going to take me to

Antioch:" here was a vista! After a long voyage, to spend months,

perhaps years, in a search for which even now there was no guarantee

that it would not prove vain: and to leave behind at starting a life of

distinction and love: and to find, if he found anything, the old

exacting companionship which was known by rote beforehand. Certainly

the gems and therefore the florins were, in a sense, Baldassarre's: in

the narrow sense by which the right of possession is determined in

ordinary affairs; but in that large and more radically natural view by

which the world belongs to youth and strength, they were rather his who

could extract the most pleasure out of them. That, he was conscious,

was not the sentiment which the complicated play of human feelings had

engendered in society. The men around him would expect that he should

immediately apply those florins to his benefactor's rescue. But what

was the sentiment of society?--a mere tangle of anomalous traditions and

opinions, which no wise man would take as a guide, except so far as his

own comfort was concerned. Not that he cared for the florins save

perhaps for Romola's sake: he would give up the florins readily enough.

It was the joy that was due to him and was close to his lips, which he

felt he was not bound to thrust away from him and so travel on,

thirsting. Any maxims that required a man to fling away the good that

was needed to make existence sweet, were only the lining of human

selfishness turned outward: they were made by men who wanted others to

sacrifice themselves for their sake. He would rather that Baldassarre

should not suffer: he liked no one to suffer; but could any philosophy

prove to him that he was bound to care for another's suffering more than

for his own? To do so he must have loved Baldassarre devotedly, and he

did \_not\_ love him: was that his own fault? Gratitude! seen closely, it

made no valid claim: his father's life would have been dreary without

him: are we convicted of a debt to men for the pleasures they give

themselves?

Having once begun to explain away Baldassarre's claim, Tito's thought

showed itself as active as a virulent acid, eating its rapid way through

all the tissues of sentiment. His mind was destitute of that dread

which has been erroneously decried as if it were nothing higher than a

man's animal care for his own skin: that awe of the Divine Nemesis which

was felt by religious pagans, and, though it took a more positive form

under Christianity, is still felt by the mass of mankind simply as a

vague fear at anything which is called wrong-doing. Such terror of the

unseen is so far above mere sensual cowardice that it will annihilate

that cowardice: it is the initial recognition of a moral law restraining

desire, and checks the hard bold scrutiny of imperfect thought into

obligations which can never be proved to have any sanctity in the

absence of feeling. "It is good," sing the old Eumenides, in Aeschylus,

"that fear should sit as the guardian of the soul, forcing it into

wisdom--good that men should carry a threatening shadow in their hearts

under the full sunshine; else, how should they learn to revere the

right?" That guardianship may become needless; but only when all

outward law has become needless--only when duty and love have united in

one stream and made a common force.

As Tito entered the outer cloister of San Marco, and inquired for Fra

Luca, there was no shadowy presentiment in his mind: he felt himself too

cultured and sceptical for that: he had been nurtured in contempt for

the tales of priests whose impudent lives were a proverb, and in erudite

familiarity with disputes concerning the Chief Good, which had after

all, he considered, left it a matter of taste. Yet fear was a strong

element in Tito's nature--the fear of what he believed or saw was likely

to rob him of pleasure: and he had a definite fear that Fra Luca might

be the means of driving him from Florence.

"Fra Luca? ah, he is gone to Fiesole--to the Dominican monastery there.

He was taken on a litter in the cool of the morning. The poor Brother

is very ill. Could you leave a message for him?"

This answer was given by a \_fra converso\_, or lay brother, whose accent

told plainly that he was a raw contadino, and whose dull glance implied

no curiosity.

"Thanks; my business can wait."

Tito turned away with a sense of relief. "This friar is not likely to

live," he said to himself. "I saw he was worn to a shadow. And at

Fiesole there will be nothing to recall me to his mind. Besides, if he

should come back, my explanation will serve as well then as now. But I

wish I knew what it was that his face recalled to me."

CHAPTER TWELVE.

THE PRIZE IS NEARLY GRASPED.

Tito walked along with a light step, for the immediate fear had

vanished; the usual joyousness of his disposition reassumed its

predominance, and he was going to see Romola. Yet Romola's life seemed

an image of that loving, pitying devotedness, that patient endurance of

irksome tasks, from which he had shrunk and excused himself. But he was

not out of love with goodness, or prepared to plunge into vice: he was

in his fresh youth, with soft pulses for all charm and loveliness; he

had still a healthy appetite for ordinary human joys, and the poison

could only work by degrees. He had sold himself to evil, but at present

life seemed so nearly the same to him that he was not conscious of the

bond. He meant all things to go on as they had done before, both within

and without him: he meant to win golden opinions by meritorious

exertion, by ingenious learning, by amiable compliance: he was not going

to do anything that would throw him out of harmony with the beings he

cared for. And he cared supremely for Romola; he wished to have her for

his beautiful and loving wife. There might be a wealthier alliance

within the ultimate reach of successful accomplishments like his, but

there was no woman in all Florence like Romola. When she was near him,

and looked at him with her sincere hazel eyes, he was subdued by a

delicious influence as strong and inevitable as those musical vibrations

which take possession of us with a rhythmic empire that no sooner ceases

than we desire it to begin again.

As he trod the stone stairs, when he was still outside the door, with no

one but Maso near him, the influence seemed to have begun its work by

the mere nearness of anticipation.

"Welcome, Tito mio," said the old man's voice, before Tito had spoken.

There was a new vigour in the voice, a new cheerfulness in the blind

face, since that first interview more than two months ago. "You have

brought fresh manuscript, doubtless; but since we were talking last

night I have had new ideas: we must take a wider scope--we must go back

upon our footsteps."

Tito, paying his homage to Romola as he advanced, went, as his custom

was, straight to Bardo's chair, and put his hand in the palm that was

held to receive it, placing himself on the cross-legged leather seat

with scrolled ends, close to Bardo's elbow.

"Yes," he said, in his gentle way; "I have brought the new manuscript,

but that can wait your pleasure. I have young limbs, you know, and can

walk back up the hill without any difficulty."

He did not look at Romola as he said this, but he knew quite well that

her eyes were fixed on him with delight.

"That is well said, my son." Bardo had already addressed Tito in this

way once or twice of late. "And I perceive with gladness that you do

not shrink from labour, without which, the poet has wisely said, life

has given nothing to mortals. It is too often the `palma sine pulvere,'

the prize of glory without the dust of the race, that attracts young

ambition. But what says the Greek? `In the morning of life, work; in

the mid-day, give counsel; in the evening, pray.' It is true, I might

be thought to have reached that helpless evening; but not so, while I

have counsel within me which is yet unspoken. For my mind, as I have

often said, was shut up as by a dam; the plenteous waters lay dark and

motionless; but you, my Tito, have opened a duct for them, and they rush

forward with a force that surprises myself. And now, what I want is,

that we should go over our preliminary ground again, with a wider scheme

of comment and illustration: otherwise I may lose opportunities which I

now see retrospectively, and which may never occur again. You mark what

I am saying, Tito?"

He had just stooped to reach his manuscript, which had rolled down, and

Bardo's jealous ear was alive to the slight movement.

Tito might have been excused for shrugging his shoulders at the prospect

before him, but he was not naturally impatient; moreover, he had been

bred up in that laborious erudition, at once minute and copious, which

was the chief intellectual task of the age; and with Romola near, he was

floated along by waves of agreeable sensation that made everything seem

easy.

"Assuredly," he said; "you wish to enlarge your comments on certain

passages we have cited."

"Not only so; I wish to introduce an occasional \_excursus\_, where we

have noticed an author to whom I have given special study; for I may die

too soon to achieve any separate work. And this is not a time for

scholarly integrity and well-sifted learning to lie idle, when it is not

only rash ignorance that we have to fear, but when there are men like

Calderino, who, as Poliziano has well shown, have recourse to impudent

falsities of citation to serve the ends of their vanity and secure a

triumph to their own mistakes. Wherefore, my Tito, I think it not well

that we should let slip the occasion that lies under our hands. And now

we will turn back to the point where we have cited the passage from

Thucydides, and I wish you, by way of preliminary, to go with me through

all my notes on the Latin translation made by Lorenzo Valla, for which

the incomparable Pope Nicholas the Fifth--with whose personal notice I

was honoured while I was yet young, and when he was still Thomas of

Sarzana--paid him (I say not unduly) the sum of five hundred gold scudi.

But inasmuch as Valla, though otherwise of dubious fame, is held in

high honour for his severe scholarship, whence the epigrammatist has

jocosely said of him that since he went among the shades, Pluto himself

has not dared to speak in the ancient languages, it is the more needful

that his name should not be as a stamp warranting false wares; and

therefore I would introduce an \_excursus\_ on Thucydides, wherein my

castigations of Valla's text may find a fitting place. My Romola, thou

wilt reach the needful volumes--thou knowest them--on the fifth shelf of

the cabinet."

Tito rose at the same moment with Romola, saying, "I will reach them, if

you will point them out," and followed her hastily into the adjoining

small room, where the walls were also covered with ranges of books in

perfect order.

"There they are," said Romola, pointing upward; "every book is just

where it was when my father ceased to see them."

Tito stood by her without hastening to reach the books. They had never

been in this room together before.

"I hope," she continued, turning her eyes full on Tito, with a look of

grave confidence--"I hope he will not weary you; this work makes him so

happy."

"And me too, Romola--if you will only let me say, I love you--if you

will only think me worth loving a little."

His speech was the softest murmur, and the dark beautiful face, nearer

to hers than it had ever been before, was looking at her with beseeching

tenderness.

"I do love you," murmured Romola; she looked at him with the same simple

majesty as ever, but her voice had never in her life before sunk to that

murmur. It seemed to them both that they were looking at each other a

long while before her lips moved again; yet it was but a moment till she

said, "I know \_now\_ what it is to be happy."

The faces just met, and the dark curls mingled for an instant with the

rippling gold. Quick as lightning after that, Tito set his foot on a

projecting ledge of the book-shelves and reached down the needful

volumes. They were both contented to be silent and separate, for that

first blissful experience of mutual consciousness was all the more

exquisite for being unperturbed by immediate sensation.

It had all been as rapid as the irreversible mingling of waters, for

even the eager and jealous Bardo had not become impatient.

"You have the volumes, my Romola?" the old man said, as they came near

him again. "And now you will get your pen ready; for, as Tito marks off

the scholia we determine on extracting, it will be well for you to copy

them without delay--numbering them carefully, mind, to correspond with

the numbers in the text which he will write."

Romola always had some task which gave her a share in this joint work.

Tito took his stand at the leggio, where he both wrote and read, and she

placed herself at a table just in front of him, where she was ready to

give into her father's hands anything that he might happen to want, or

relieve him of a volume that he had done with. They had always been in

that position since the work began, yet on this day it seemed new; it

was so different now for them to be opposite each other; so different

for Tito to take a book from her, as she lifted it from her father's

knee. Yet there was no finesse to secure an additional look or touch.

Each woman creates in her own likeness the love-tokens that are offered

to her; and Romola's deep calm happiness encompassed Tito like the rich

but quiet evening light which dissipates all unrest.

They had been two hours at their work, and were just desisting because

of the fading light, when the door opened and there entered a figure

strangely incongruous with the current of their thoughts and with the

suggestions of every object around them. It was the figure of a short

stout black-eyed woman, about fifty, wearing a black velvet berretta, or

close cap, embroidered with pearls, under which surprisingly massive

black braids surmounted the little bulging forehead, and fell in rich

plaited curves over the ears, while an equally surprising carmine tint

on the upper region of the fat cheeks contrasted with the surrounding

sallowness. Three rows of pearls and a lower necklace of gold reposed

on the horizontal cushion of her neck; the embroidered border of her

trailing black velvet gown and her embroidered long-drooping sleeves of

rose-coloured damask, were slightly faded, but they conveyed to the

initiated eye the satisfactory assurance that they were the splendid

result of six months' labour by a skilled workman; and the rose-coloured

petticoat, with its dimmed white fringe and seed-pearl arabesques, was

duly exhibited in order to suggest a similar pleasing reflection. A

handsome coral rosary hung from one side of an inferential belt, which

emerged into certainty with a large clasp of silver wrought in niello;

and, on the other side, where the belt again became inferential, hung a

scarsella, or large purse, of crimson velvet, stitched with pearls. Her

little fat right-hand, which looked as if it had been made of paste, and

had risen out of shape under partial baking, held a small book of

devotions, also splendid with velvet, pearls, and silver.

The figure was already too familiar to Tito to be startling, for Monna

Brigida was a frequent visitor at Bardo's, being excepted from the

sentence of banishment passed on feminine triviality, on the ground of

her cousinship to his dead wife and her early care for Romola, who now

looked round at her with an affectionate smile, and rose to draw the

leather seat to a due distance from her father's chair, that the coming

gush of talk might not be too near his ear.

"\_La cugina\_?" said Bardo, interrogatively, detecting the short steps

and the sweeping drapery.

"Yes, it is your cousin," said Monna Brigida, in an alert voice, raising

her fingers smilingly at Tito, and then lifting up her face to be kissed

by Romola. "Always the troublesome cousin breaking in on your wisdom,"

she went on, seating herself and beginning to fan herself with the white

veil hanging over her arm. "Well, well; if I didn't bring you some news

of the world now and then, I do believe you'd forget there was anything

in life but these mouldy ancients, who want sprinkling with holy water

if all I hear about them is true. Not but what the world is bad enough

nowadays, for the scandals that turn up under one's nose at every

corner--\_I\_ don't want to hear and see such things, but one can't go

about with one's head in a bag; and it was only yesterday--well, well,

you needn't burst out at me, Bardo, I'm not going to tell anything; if

I'm not as wise as the three kings, I know how many legs go into one

boot. But, nevertheless, Florence is a wicked city--is it not true,

Messer Tito? for you go into the world. Not but what one must sin a

little--Messer Domeneddio expects that of us, else what are the blessed

sacraments for? And what I say is, we've got to reverence the saints,

and not to set ourselves up as if we could be like them, else life would

be unbearable; as it will be if things go on after this new fashion.

For what do you think? I've been at the wedding to-day--Dianora

Acciajoli's with the young Albizzi that there has been so much talk of--

and everybody wondered at its being to-day instead of yesterday; but,

\_cieli\_! such a wedding as it was might have been put off till the next

Quaresima for a penance. For there was the bride looking like a white

nun--not so much as a pearl about her--and the bridegroom as solemn as

San Giuseppe. It's true! And half the people invited were \_Piagnoni\_--

they call them \_Piagnoni\_ [funeral mourners: properly, paid mourners]

now, these new saints of Fra Girolamo's making. And to think of two

families like the Albizzi and the Acciajoli taking up such notions, when

they could afford to wear the best! Well, well, they invited me--but

they could do no other, seeing my husband was Luca Antonio's uncle by

the mother's side--and a pretty time I had of it while we waited under

the canopy in front of the house, before they let us in. I couldn't

stand in my clothes, it seemed, without giving offence; for there was

Monna Berta, who has had worse secrets in her time than any I could tell

of myself, looking askance at me from under her hood like a

\_pinzochera\_, [a Sister of the Third Order of Saint Francis: an

uncloistered nun] and telling me to read the Frate's book about widows,

from which she had found great guidance. Holy Madonna! it seems as if

widows had nothing to do now but to buy their coffins, and think it a

thousand years till they get into them, instead of enjoying themselves a

little when they've got their hands free for the first time. And what

do you think was the music we had, to make our dinner lively? A long

discourse from Fra Domenico of San Marco, about the doctrines of their

blessed Fra Girolamo--the three doctrines we are all to get by heart;

and he kept marking them off on his fingers till he made my flesh creep:

and the first is, Florence, or the Church--I don't know which, for first

he said one and then the other--shall be scourged; but if he means the

pestilence, the Signory ought to put a stop to such preaching, for it's

enough to raise the swelling under one's arms with fright: but then,

after that, he says Florence is to be regenerated; but what will be the

good of that when we're all dead of the plague, or something else? And

then, the third thing, and what he said oftenest, is, that it's all to

be in our days: and he marked that off on his thumb, till he made me

tremble like the very jelly before me. They had jellies, to be sure,

with the arms of the Albizzi and the Acciajoli raised on them in all

colours; they've not turned the world quite upside down yet. But all

their talk is, that we are to go back to the old ways: for up starts

Francesco Valori, that I've danced with in the Via Larga when he was a

bachelor and as fond of the Medici as anybody, and he makes a speech

about the old times, before the Florentines had left off crying `Popolo'

and begun to cry `Palle'--as if that had anything to do with a

wedding!--and how we ought to keep to the rules the Signory laid down

heaven knows when, that we were not to wear this and that, and not to

eat this and that--and how our manners were corrupted and we read bad

books; though he can't say that of \_me\_--"

"Stop, cousin!" said Bardo, in his imperious tone, for he had a remark

to make, and only desperate measures could arrest the rattling

lengthiness of Monna Brigida's discourse. But now she gave a little

start, pursed up her mouth, and looked at him with round eyes.

"Francesco Valori is not altogether wrong," Bardo went on. "Bernardo,

indeed, rates him not highly, and is rather of opinion that he christens

private grudges by the name of public zeal; though I must admit that my

good Bernardo is too slow of belief in that unalloyed patriotism which

was found in all its lustre amongst the ancients. But it is true, Tito,

that our manners have degenerated somewhat from that noble frugality

which, as has been well seen in the public acts of our citizens, is the

parent of true magnificence. For men, as I hear, will now spend on the

transient show of a Giostra sums which would suffice to found a library,

and confer a lasting possession on mankind. Still, I conceive, it

remains true of us Florentines that we have more of that magnanimous

sobriety which abhors a trivial lavishness that it may be grandly

open-handed on grand occasions, than can be found in any other city of

Italy; for I understand that the Neapolitan and Milanese courtiers laugh

at the scarcity of our plate, and think scorn of our great families for

borrowing from each other that furniture of the table at their

entertainments. But in the vain laughter of folly wisdom hears half its

applause."

"Laughter, indeed!" burst forth Monna Brigida again, the moment, Bardo

paused. "If anybody wanted to hear laughter at the wedding to-day they

were disappointed, for when young Niccolo Macchiavelli tried to make a

joke, and told stories out of Franco Sacchetti's book, how it was no use

for the Signoria to make rules for us women, because we were cleverer

than all the painters, and architects, and doctors of logic in the

world, for we could make black look white, and yellow look pink, and

crooked look straight, and, if anything was forbidden, we could find a

new name for it--Holy Virgin! the Piagnoni looked more dismal than

before, and somebody said Sacchetti's book was wicked. Well, I don't

read it--they can't accuse \_me\_ of reading anything. Save me from going

to a wedding again, if that's to be the fashion; for all of us who were

not Piagnoni were as comfortable as wet chickens. I was never caught in

a worse trap but once before, and that was when I went to hear their

precious Frate last Quaresima in San Lorenzo. Perhaps I never told you

about it, Messer Tito?--it almost freezes my blood when I think of it.

How he rated us poor women! and the men, too, to tell the truth, but I

didn't mind that so much. He called us cows, and lumps of flesh, and

wantons, and mischief-makers--and I could just bear that, for there were

plenty others more fleshy and spiteful than I was, though every now and

then his voice shook the very bench under me like a trumpet; but then he

came to the false hair, and, O misericordia! he made a picture--I see it

now--of a young woman lying a pale corpse, and us light-minded widows--

of course he meant me as well as the rest, for I had my plaits on, for

if one is getting old, one doesn't want to look as ugly as the Befana,

[Note 1]--us widows rushing up to the corpse, like bare-pated vultures

as we were, and cutting off its young dead hair to deck our old heads

with. Oh, the dreams I had after that! And then he cried, and wrung

his hands at us, and I cried too. And to go home, and to take off my

jewels, this very clasp, and everything, and to make them into a packet,

\_fu tutt'uno\_; and I was within a hair of sending them to the Good Men

of Saint Martin to give to the poor, but, by heaven's mercy, I bethought

me of going first to my confessor, Fra Cristoforo, at Santa Croce, and

he told me how it was all the work of the devil, this preaching and

prophesying of their Fra Girolamo, and the Dominicans were trying to

turn the world upside down, and I was never to go and hear him again,

else I must do penance for it; for the great preachers Fra Mariano and

Fra Menico had shown how Fra Girolamo preached lies--and that was true,

for I heard them both in the Duomo--and how the Pope's dream of San

Francesco propping up the Church with his arms was being fulfilled

still, and the Dominicans were beginning to pull it down. Well and

good: I went away \_con Dio\_, and made myself easy. I am not going to be

frightened by a Frate Predicatore again. And all I say is, I wish it

hadn't been the Dominicans that poor Dino joined years ago, for then I

should have been glad when I heard them say he was come back--"

"Silenzio!" said Bardo, in a loud agitated voice, while Romola half

started from her chair, clasped her hands, and looked round at Tito, as

if now she might appeal to him. Monna Brigida gave a little scream, and

bit her lip.

"Donna!" said Bardo, again, "hear once more my will. Bring no reports

about that name to this house; and thou, Romola, I forbid thee to ask.

My son is dead."

Bardo's whole frame seemed vibrating with passion, and no one dared to

break silence again. Monna Brigida lifted her shoulders and her hands

in mute dismay; then she rose as quietly as possible, gave many

significant nods to Tito and Romola, motioning to them that they were

not to move, and stole out of the room like a culpable fat spaniel who

has barked unseasonably.

Meanwhile, Tito's quick mind had been combining ideas with

lightning-like rapidity. Bardo's son was not really dead, then, as he

had supposed: he was a monk; he was "come back:" and Fra Luca--yes! it

was the likeness to Bardo and Romola that had made the face seem

half-known to him. If he were only dead at Fiesole at that moment!

This importunate selfish wish inevitably thrust itself before every

other thought. It was true that Bardo's rigid will was a sufficient

safeguard against any intercourse between Romola and her brother; but

\_not\_ against the betrayal of what he knew to others, especially when

the subject was suggested by the coupling of Romola's name with that of

the very Tito Melema whose description he had carried round his neck as

an index. No! nothing but Fra Luca's death could remove all danger; but

his death was highly probable, and after the momentary shock of the

discovery, Tito let his mind fall back in repose on that confident hope.

They had sat in silence, and in a deepening twilight for many minutes,

when Romola ventured to say--

"Shall I light the lamp, father, and shall we go on?"

"No, my Romola, we will work no more to-night. Tito, come and sit by me

here."

Tito moved from the reading-desk, and seated himself on the other side

of Bardo, close to his left elbow.

"Come nearer to me, figliuola mia," said Bardo again, after a moment's

pause. And Romola seated herself on a low stool and let her arm rest on

her father's right knee, that he might lay his hand on her hair, as he

was fond of doing.

"Tito, I never told you that I had once a son," said Bardo, forgetting

what had fallen from him in the emotion raised by their first interview.

The old man had been deeply shaken, and was forced to pour out his

feelings in spite of pride. "But he left me--he is dead to me. I have

disowned him for ever. He was a ready scholar as you are, but more

fervid and impatient, and yet sometimes rapt and self-absorbed, like a

flame fed by some fitful source; showing a disposition from the very

first to turn away his eyes from the clear lights of reason and

philosophy, and to prostrate himself under the influences of a dim

mysticism which eludes all rules of human duty as it eludes all

argument. And so it ended. We will speak no more of him: he is dead to

me. I wish his face could be blotted from that world of memory in which

the distant seems to grow clearer and the near to fade."

Bardo paused, but neither Romola nor Tito dared to speak--his voice was

too tremulous, the poise of his feelings too doubtful. But he presently

raised his hand and found Tito's shoulder to rest it on, while he went

on speaking, with an effort to be calmer.

"But \_you\_ have come to me, Tito--not quite too late. I will lose no

time in vain regret. When you are working by my side I seem to have

found a son again."

The old man, preoccupied with the governing interest of his life, was

only thinking of the much-meditated book which had quite thrust into the

background the suggestion, raised by Bernardo del Nero's warning, of a

possible marriage between Tito and Romola. But Tito could not allow the

moment to pass unused.

"Will you let me be always and altogether your son? Will you let me

take care of Romola--be her husband? I think she will not deny me. She

has said she loves me. I know I am not equal to her in birth--in

anything; but I am no longer a destitute stranger."

"Is it true, my Romola?" said Bardo, in a lower tone, an evident

vibration passing through him and dissipating the saddened aspect of his

features.

"Yes, father," said Romola, firmly. "I love Tito--I wish to marry him,

that we may both be your children and never part."

Tito's hand met hers in a strong clasp for the first time, while she was

speaking, but their eyes were fixed anxiously on her father.

"Why should it not be?" said Bardo, as if arguing against any opposition

to his assent, rather than assenting. "It would be a happiness to me;

and thou, too, Romola, wouldst be the happier for it."

He stroked her long hair gently and bent towards her.

"Ah, I have been apt to forget that thou needest some other love than

mine. And thou wilt be a noble wife. Bernardo thinks I shall hardly

find a husband fitting for thee. And he is perhaps right. For thou art

not like the herd of thy sex: thou art such a woman as the immortal

poets had a vision of when they sang the lives of the heroes--tender but

strong, like thy voice, which has been to me instead of the light in the

years of my blindness... And so thou lovest him?"

He sat upright again for a minute, and then said, in the same tone as

before, "Why should it not be? I will think of it; I will talk with

Bernardo."

Tito felt a disagreeable chill at this answer, for Bernardo del Nero's

eyes had retained their keen suspicion whenever they looked at him, and

the uneasy remembrance of Fra Luca converted all uncertainty into fear.

"Speak for me, Romola," he said, pleadingly. "Messer Bernardo is sure

to be against me."

"No, Tito," said Romola, "my godfather will not oppose what my father

firmly wills. And it is your will that I should marry Tito--is it not

true, father? Nothing has ever come to me before that I have wished for

strongly: I did not think it possible that I could care so much for

anything that could happen to myself."

It was a brief and simple plea; but it was the condensed story of

Romola's self-repressing colourless young life, which had thrown all its

passion into sympathy with aged sorrows, aged ambition, aged pride and

indignation. It had never occurred to Romola that she should not speak

as directly and emphatically of her love for Tito as of any other

subject.

"Romola mia!" said her father fondly, pausing on the words, "it is true

thou hast never urged on me any wishes of thy own. And I have no will

to resist thine; rather, my heart met Tito's entreaty at its very first

utterance. Nevertheless, I must talk with Bernardo about the measures

needful to be observed. For we must not act in haste, or do anything

unbeseeming my name. I am poor, and held of little account by the

wealthy of our family--nay, I may consider myself a lonely man--but I

must nevertheless remember that generous birth has its obligations. And

I would not be reproached by my fellow-citizens for rash haste in

bestowing my daughter. Bartolommeo Scala gave his Alessandra to the

Greek Marullo, but Marullo's lineage was well-known, and Scala himself

is of no extraction. I know Bernardo will hold that we must take time:

he will, perhaps, reproach me with want of due forethought. Be patient,

my children: you are very young."

No more could be said, and Romola's heart was perfectly satisfied. Not

so Tito's. If the subtle mixture of good and evil prepares suffering

for human truth and purity, there is also suffering prepared for the

wrong-doer by the same mingled conditions. As Tito kissed Romola on

their parting that evening, the very strength of the thrill that moved

his whole being at the sense that this woman, whose beauty it was hardly

possible to think of as anything but the necessary consequence of her

noble nature, loved him with all the tenderness that spoke in her clear

eyes, brought a strong reaction of regret that he had not kept himself

free from that first deceit which had dragged him into the danger of

being disgraced before her. There was a spring of bitterness mingling

with that fountain of sweets. Would the death of Fra Luca arrest it?

He hoped it would.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. The name given to the grotesque black-faced figures, supposed

to represent the Magi, carried about or placed in the windows on Twelfth

Night: a corruption of Epifania.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

THE SHADOW OF NEMESIS.

It was the lazy afternoon time on the seventh of September, more than

two months after the day on which Romola and Tito had confessed their

love to each other.

Tito, just descended into Nello's shop, had found the barber stretched

on the bench with his cap over his eyes; one leg was drawn up, and the

other had slipped towards the ground, having apparently carried with it

a manuscript volume of verse, which lay with its leaves crushed. In a

corner sat Sandro, playing a game at \_mora\_ by himself, and watching the

slow reply of his left fingers to the arithmetical demands of his right

with solemn-eyed interest.

Treading with the gentlest step, Tito snatched up the lute, and bending

over the barber, touched the strings lightly while he sang--

"Quant' e bella giovinezza,

Che si fugge tuttavia!

Chi vuol esser lieto sia,

Di doman non c'e certezza."

[Note 1.]

Nello was as easily awaked as a bird. The cap was off his eyes in an

instant, and he started up.

"Ah, my Apollino! I am somewhat late with my siesta on this hot day, it

seems. That comes of not going to sleep in the natural way, but taking

a potion of potent poesy. Hear you, how I am beginning to match my

words by the initial letter, like a Trovatore? That is one of my bad

symptoms: I am sorely afraid that the good wine of my understanding is

going to run off at the spigot of authorship, and I shall be left an

empty cask with an odour of dregs, like many another incomparable genius

of my acquaintance. What is it, my Orpheus?" here Nello stretched out

his arms to their full length, and then brought them round till his

hands grasped Tito's curls, and drew them out playfully. "What is it

you want of your well-tamed Nello? For I perceive a coaxing sound in

that soft strain of yours. Let me see the very needle's eye of your

desire, as the sublime poet says, that I may thread it."

"That is but a tailor's image of your sublime poet's," said Tito, still

letting his fingers fall in a light dropping way on the strings. "But

you have divined the reason of my affectionate impatience to see your

eyes open. I want, you to give me an extra touch of your art--not on my

chin, no; but on the zazzera, which is as tangled as your Florentine

politics. You have an adroit way of inserting your comb, which flatters

the skin, and stirs the animal spirits agreeably in that region; and a

little of your most delicate orange-scent would not lie amiss, for I am

bound to the Scala palace, and am to present myself in radiant company.

The young cardinal Giovanni de' Medici is to be there, and he brings

with him a certain young Bernardo Dovizi of Bibbiena, whose wit is so

rapid that I see no way of out-rivalling it save by the scent of

orange-blossoms."

Nello had already seized and flourished his comb, and pushed Tito gently

backward into the chair, wrapping the cloth round him.

"Never talk of rivalry, bel giovane mio: Bernardo Dovizi is a keen

youngster, who will never carry a net out to catch the wind; but he has

something of the same sharp-muzzled look as his brother Ser Piero, the

weasel that Piero de' Medici keeps at his beck to slip through small

holes for him. No! you distance all rivals, and may soon touch the sky

with your forefinger. They tell me you have even carried enough honey

with you to sweeten the sour Messer Angelo; for he has pronounced you

less of an ass than might have been expected, considering there is such

a good understanding between you and the Secretary."

"And between ourselves, Nello mio, that Messer Angelo has more genius

and erudition than I can find in all the other Florentine scholars put

together. It may answer very well for them to cry me up now, when

Poliziano is beaten down with grief, or illness, or something else; I

can try a flight with such a sparrow-hawk as Pietro Crinito, but for

Poliziano, he is a large-beaked eagle who would swallow me, feathers and

all, and not feel any difference."

"I will not contradict your modesty there, if you will have it so; but

you don't expect us clever Florentines to keep saying the same things

over again every day of our lives, as we must do if we always told the

truth. We cry down Dante, and we cry up Francesco Cei, just for the

sake of variety; and if we cry you up as a new Poliziano, heaven has

taken care that it shall not be quite so great a lie as it might have

been. And are you not a pattern of virtue in this wicked city? with

your ears double-waxed against all siren invitations that would lure you

from the Via de' Bardi, and the great work which is to astonish

posterity?"

"Posterity in good truth, whom it will probably astonish as the universe

does, by the impossibility of seeing what was the plan of it."

"Yes, something like that was being prophesied here the other day.

Cristoforo Landino said that the excellent Bardo was one of those

scholars who lie overthrown in their learning, like cavaliers in heavy

armour, and then get angry because they are over-ridden--which pithy

remark, it seems to me, was not a herb out of his own garden; for of all

men, for feeding one with an empty spoon and gagging one with vain

expectation by long discourse, Messer Cristoforo is the pearl. Ecco!

you are perfect now." Here Nello drew away the cloth. "Impossible to

add a grace more! But love is not always to be fed on learning, eh? I

shall have to dress the zazzera for the betrothal before long--is it not

true?"

"Perhaps," said Tito, smiling, "unless Messer Bernardo should next

recommend Bardo to require that I should yoke a lion and a wild boar to

the car of the Zecca before I can win my Alcestis. But I confess he is

right in holding me unworthy of Romola; she is a Pleiad that may grow

dim by marrying any mortal."

"\_Gnaffe\_, your modesty is in the right place there. Yet fate seems to

have measured and chiselled you for the niche that was left empty by the

old man's son, who, by the way, Cronaca was telling me, is now at San

Marco. Did you know?"

A slight electric shock passed through Tito as he rose from the chair,

but it was not outwardly perceptible, for he immediately stooped to pick

up the fallen book, and busied his fingers with flattening the leaves,

while he said--

"No; he was at Fiesole, I thought. Are you sure he is come back to San

Marco?"

"Cronaca is my authority," said Nello, with a shrug. "I don't frequent

that sanctuary, but he does. Ah," he added, taking the book from Tito's

hands, "my poor Nencia da Barberino! It jars your scholarly feelings to

see the pages dog's-eared. I was lulled to sleep by the well-rhymed

charms of that rustic maiden--`prettier than the turnip-flower,' `with a

cheek more savoury than cheese.' But to get such a well-scented notion

of the contadina, one must lie on velvet cushions in the Via Larga--not

go to look at the Fierucoloni stumping in to the Piazza della Nunziata

this evening after sundown."

"And pray who are the Fierucoloni?" said Tito, indifferently, settling

his cap.

"The contadine who came from the mountains of Pistoia, and the

Casentino, and heaven knows where, to keep their vigil in the church of

the Nunziata, and sell their yarn and dried mushrooms at the Fierucola

[the little Fair], as we call it. They make a queer show, with their

paper lanterns, howling their hymns to the Virgin on this eve of her

nativity--if you had the leisure to see them. No?--well, I have had

enough of it myself, for there is wild work in the Piazza. One may

happen to get a stone or two about one's ears or shins without asking

for it, and I was never fond of that pressing attention. Addio."

Tito carried a little uneasiness with him on his visit, which ended

earlier than he had expected, the boy-cardinal Giovanni de' Medici,

youngest of red-hatted fathers, who has since presented his broad dark

cheek very conspicuously to posterity as Pope Leo the Tenth, having been

detained at his favourite pastime of the chase, and having failed to

appear. It still wanted half an hour of sunset as he left the door of

the Scala palace, with the intention of proceeding forthwith to the Via

de' Bardi; but he had not gone far when, to his astonishment, he saw

Romola advancing towards him along the Borgo Pinti.

She wore a thick black veil and black mantle, but it was impossible to

mistake her figure and her walk; and by her side was a short stout form,

which he recognised as that of Monna Brigida, in spite of the unusual

plainness of her attire. Romola had not been bred up to devotional

observances, and the occasions on which she took the air elsewhere than

under the loggia on the roof of the house, were so rare and so much

dwelt on beforehand, because of Bardo's dislike to be left without her,

that Tito felt sure there must have been some sudden and urgent ground

for an absence of which he had heard nothing the day before. She saw

him through her veil and hastened her steps.

"Romola, has anything happened?" said Tito, turning to walk by her side.

She did not answer at the first moment, and Monna Brigida broke in.

"Ah, Messer Tito, you do well to turn round, for we are in haste. And

is it not a misfortune?--we are obliged to go round by the walls and

turn up the Via del Maglio, because of the Fair; for the contadine

coming in block up the way by the Nunziata, which would have taken us to

San Marco in half the time."

Tito's heart gave a great bound, and began to beat violently.

"Romola," he said, in a lower tone, "are you going to San Marco?"

They were now out of the Borgo Pinti and were under the city walls,

where they had wide gardens on their left-hand, and all was quiet.

Romola put aside her veil for the sake of breathing the air, and he

could see the subdued agitation in her face.

"Yes, Tito mio," she said, looking directly at him with sad eyes. "For

the first time I am doing something unknown to my father. It comforts

me that I have met you, for at least I can tell \_you\_. But if you are

going to him, it will be well for you not to say that you met me. He

thinks I am only gone to my cousin, because she sent for me. I left my

godfather with him: \_he\_ knows where I am going, and why. You remember

that evening when my brother's name was mentioned and my father spoke of

him to you?"

"Yes," said Tito, in a low tone. There was a strange complication in

his mental state. His heart sank at the probability that a great change

was coming over his prospects, while at the same time his thoughts were

darting over a hundred details of the course he would take when the

change had come; and yet he returned Romola's gaze with a hungry sense

that it might be the last time she would ever bend it on him with full

unquestioning confidence.

"The \_cugina\_ had heard that he was come back, and the evening before--

the evening of San Giovanni--as I afterwards found, he had been seen by

our good Maso near the door of our house; but when Maso went to inquire

at San Marco, Dino, that is, my brother--he was christened Bernardino,

after our godfather, but now he calls himself Fra Luca--had been taken

to the monastery at Fiesole, because he was ill. But this morning a

message came to Maso, saying that he was come back to San Marco, and

Maso went to him there. He is very ill, and he has adjured me to go and

see him. I cannot refuse it, though I hold him guilty; I still remember

how I loved him when I was a little girl, before I knew that he would

forsake my father. And perhaps he has some word of penitence to send by

me. It cost me a struggle to act in opposition to my father's feeling,

which I have always held to be just. I am almost sure you will think I

have chosen rightly, Tito, because I have noticed that your nature is

less rigid than mine, and nothing makes you angry: it would cost, you

less to be forgiving; though, if you had seen your father forsaken by

one to whom he had given his chief love--by one in whom he had planted

his labour and his hopes--forsaken when his need was becoming greatest--

even you, Tito, would find it hard to forgive."

What could he say? He was not equal to the hypocrisy of telling Romola

that such offences ought not to be pardoned; and he had not the courage

to utter any words of dissuasion.

"You are right, my Romola; you are always right, except in thinking too

well of me."

There was really some genuineness in those last words, and Tito looked

very beautiful as he uttered them, with an unusual pallor in his face,

and a slight quivering of his lip. Romola, interpreting all things

largely, like a mind prepossessed with high beliefs, had a tearful

brightness in her eyes as she looked at him, touched with keen joy that

he felt so strongly whatever she felt. But without pausing in her walk,

she said--

"And now, Tito, I wish you to leave me, for the \_cugina\_ and I shall be

less noticed if we enter the piazza alone."

"Yes, it were better you should leave us," said Monna Brigida; "for to

say the truth, Messer Tito, all eyes follow you, and let Romola muffle

herself as she will, every one wants to see what there is under her

veil, for she has that way of walking like a procession. Not that I

find fault with her for it, only it doesn't suit my steps. And, indeed,

I would rather not have us seen going to San Marco, and that's why I am

dressed as if I were one of the Piagnoni themselves, and as old as Sant'

Anna; for if it had been anybody but poor Dino, who ought to be forgiven

if he's dying, for what's the use of having a grudge against dead

people?--make them feel while they live, say I--"

No one made a scruple of interrupting Monna Brigida, and Tito, having

just raised Romola's hand to his lips, and said, "I understand, I obey

you," now turned away, lifting his cap--a sign of reverence rarely made

at that time by native Florentines, and which excited Bernardo del

Nero's contempt for Tito as a fawning Greek, while to Romola, who loved

homage, it gave him an exceptional grace.

He was half glad of the dismissal, half disposed to cling to Romola to

the last moment in which she would love him without suspicion. For it

seemed to him certain that this brother would before all things want to

know, and that Romola would before all things confide to him, what was

her father's position and her own after the years which must have

brought so much change. She would tell him that she was soon to be

publicly betrothed to a young scholar, who was to fill up the place left

vacant long ago by a wandering son. He foresaw the impulse that would

prompt Romola to dwell on that prospect, and what would follow on the

mention of the future husband's name. Fra Luca would tell all he knew

and conjectured, and Tito saw no possible falsity by which he could now

ward off the worst consequences of his former dissimulation. It was all

over with his prospects in Florence. There was Messer Bernardo del

Nero, who would be delighted at seeing confirmed the wisdom of his

advice about deferring the betrothal until Tito's character and position

had been established by a longer residence; and the history of the young

Greek professor, whose benefactor was in slavery, would be the talk

under every loggia. For the first time in his life he felt too fevered

and agitated to trust his power of self-command; he gave up his intended

visit to Bardo, and walked up and down under the walls until the yellow

light in the west had quite faded, when, without any distinct purpose,

he took the first turning, which happened to be the Via San Sebastiano,

leading him directly towards the Piazza dell' Annunziata.

He was at one of those lawless moments which come to us all if we have

no guide but desire, and if the pathway where desire leads us seems

suddenly closed; he was ready to follow any beckoning that offered him

an immediate purpose.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1.

"Beauteous is life in blossom!

And it fleeteth--fleeteth ever;

Whoso would be joyful--let him!

There's no surety for the morrow."

\_Carnival Song by Lorenzo de' Medici\_.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

THE PEASANTS' FAIR.

The moving crowd and the strange mixture of noises that burst on him at

the entrance of the piazza, reminded Tito of what Nello had said to him

about the Fierucoloni, and he pushed his way into the crowd with a sort

of pleasure in the hooting and elbowing, which filled the empty moments,

and dulled that calculation of the future which had so new a dreariness

for him, as he foresaw himself wandering away solitary in pursuit of

some unknown fortune, that his thought had even glanced towards going in

search of Baldassarre after all.

At each of the opposite inlets he saw people struggling into the piazza,

while above them paper lanterns, held aloft on sticks, were waving

uncertainly to and fro. A rude monotonous chant made a distinctly

traceable strand of noise, across which screams, whistles, gibing chants

in piping boyish voices, the beating of drums, and the ringing of little

bells, met each other in confused din. Every now and then one of the

dim floating lights disappeared with a smash from a stone launched more

or less vaguely in pursuit of mischief, followed by a scream and renewed

shouts. But on the outskirts of the whirling tumult there were groups

who were keeping this vigil of the Nativity of the Virgin in a more

methodical manner than by fitful stone-throwing and gibing. Certain

ragged men, darting a hard sharp glance around them while their tongues

rattled merrily, were inviting country people to game with them on fair

and open-handed terms; two masquerading figures on stilts, who had

snatched lanterns from the crowd, were swaying the lights to and fro in

meteoric fashion, as they strode hither and thither; a sage trader was

doing a profitable business at a small covered stall, in hot

\_berlingozzi\_, a favourite farinaceous delicacy; one man standing on a

barrel, with his back firmly planted against a pillar of the loggia in

front of the Foundling Hospital (Spedale degl' Innocenti), was selling

efficacious pills, invented by a doctor of Salerno, warranted to prevent

toothache and death by drowning; and not far off, against another

pillar, a tumbler was showing off his tricks on a small platform; while

a handful of 'prentices, despising the slack entertainment of guerilla

stone-throwing, were having a private concentrated match of that

favourite Florentine sport at the narrow entrance of the Via de'

Febbrai.

Tito, obliged to make his way through chance openings in the crowd,

found himself at one moment close to the trotting procession of

barefooted, hard-heeled contadine, and could see their sun-dried,

bronzed faces, and their strange, fragmentary garb, dim with hereditary

dirt, and of obsolete stuffs and fashions, that made them look, in the

eyes of the city people, like a way-worn ancestry returning from a

pilgrimage on which they had set out a century ago. Just then it was

the hardy, scant-feeding peasant-women from the mountains of Pistoia,

who wore entering with a year's labour in a moderate bundle of yarn on

their backs, and in their hearts that meagre hope of good and that wide

dim fear of harm, which were somehow to be cared for by the Blessed

Virgin, whose miraculous image, painted by the angels, was to have the

curtain drawn away from it on this Eve of her Nativity, that its potency

might stream forth without obstruction.

At another moment he was forced away towards the boundary of the piazza,

where the more stationary candidates for attention and small coin had

judiciously placed themselves, in order to be safe in their rear. Among

these Tito recognised his acquaintance Bratti, who stood with his back

against a pillar, and his mouth pursed up in disdainful silence, eyeing

every one who approached him with a cold glance of superiority, and

keeping his hand fast on a serge covering which concealed the contents

of the basket slung before him. Rather surprised at a deportment so

unusual in an anxious trader, Tito went nearer and saw two women go up

to Bratti's basket with a look of curiosity, whereupon the pedlar drew

the covering tighter, and looked another way. It was quite too

provoking, and one of the women was fain to ask what there was in his

basket?

"Before I answer that, Monna, I must know whether you mean to buy. I

can't show such wares as mine in this fair for every fly to settle on

and pay nothing. My goods are a little too choice for that. Besides,

I've only two left, and I've no mind to soil them; for with the chances

of the pestilence that wise men talk of, there is likelihood of their

being worth their weight in gold. No, no: \_andate con Dio\_."

The two women looked at each other.

"And what may be the price?" said the second.

"Not within what you are likely to have in your purse, buona donna,"

said Bratti, in a compassionately supercilious tone. "I recommend you

to trust in Messer Domeneddio and the saints: poor people can do no

better for themselves."

"Not so poor!" said the second woman, indignantly, drawing out her

money-bag. "Come, now! what do you say to a grosso?"

"I say you may get twenty-one quattrini for it," said Bratti, coolly;

"but not of me, for I haven't got that small change."

"Come; two, then?" said the woman, getting exasperated, while her

companion looked at her with some envy. "It will hardly be above two, I

think."

After further bidding, and further mercantile coquetry, Bratti put on an

air of concession.

"Since you've set your mind on it," he said, slowly raising the cover,

"I should be loth to do you a mischief; for Maestro Gabbadeo used to

say, when a woman sets her mind on a thing and doesn't get it, she's in

worse danger of the pestilence than before. Ecco! I have but two left;

and let me tell you, the fellow to them is on the finger of Maestro

Gabbadeo, who is gone to Bologna--as wise a doctor as sits at any door."

The precious objects were two clumsy iron rings, beaten into the fashion

of old Roman rings, such as were sometimes disinterred. The rust on

them, and the entirely hidden character of their potency, were so

satisfactory, that the grossi were paid without grumbling, and the first

woman, destitute of those handsome coins, succeeded after much show of

reluctance on Bratti's part in driving a bargain with some of her yarn,

and carried off the remaining ring in triumph. Bratti covered up his

basket, which was now filled with miscellanies, probably obtained under

the same sort of circumstances as the yarn, and, moving from his pillar,

came suddenly upon Tito, who, if he had had time, would have chosen to

avoid recognition.

"By the head of San Giovanni, now," said Bratti, drawing Tito back to

the pillar, "this is a piece of luck. For I was talking of you this

morning, Messer Greco; but, I said, he is mounted up among the signori

now--and I'm glad of it, for I was at the bottom of his fortune--but I

can rarely get speech of him, for he's not to be caught lying on the

stones now--not he! But it's your luck, not mine, Messer Greco, save

and except some small trifle to satisfy me for my trouble in the

transaction."

"You speak in riddles, Bratti," said Tito. "Remember, I don't sharpen

my wits, as you do, by driving hard bargains for iron rings: you must be

plain."

"By the Holy 'Vangels! it was an easy bargain I gave them. If a Hebrew

gets thirty-two per cent, I hope a Christian may get a little more. If

I had not borne a conscience, I should have got twice the money and

twice the yarn. But, talking of rings, it is your ring--that very ring

you've got on your finger--that I could get you a purchaser for; ay, and

a purchaser with a deep money-bag."

"Truly?" said Tito, looking at his ring and listening.

"A Genoese who is going straight away into Hungary, as I understand. He

came and looked all over my shop to see if I had any old things I didn't

know the price of; I warrant you, he thought I had a pumpkin on my

shoulders. He had been rummaging all the shops in Florence. And he had

a ring on--not like yours, but something of the same fashion; and as he

was talking of rings, I said I knew a fine young man, a particular

acquaintance of mine, who had a ring of that sort. And he said, `Who is

he, pray? Tell him I'll give him his price for it.' And I thought of

going after you to Nello's to-morrow; for it's my opinion of you, Messer

Greco, that you're not one who'd see the Arno run broth, and stand by

without dipping your finger."

Tito had lost no word of what Bratti had said, yet his mind had been

very busy all the while. Why should he keep the ring? It had been a

mere sentiment, a mere fancy, that had prevented him from selling it

with the other gems; if he had been wiser and had sold it, he might

perhaps have escaped that identification by Fra Luca. It was true that

it had been taken from Baldassarre's finger and put on his own as soon

as his young hand had grown to the needful size; but there was really no

valid good to anybody in those superstitious scruples about inanimate

objects. The ring had helped towards the recognition of him. Tito had

begun to dislike recognition, which was a claim from the past. This

foreigner's offer, if he would really give a good price, was an

opportunity for getting rid of the ring without the trouble of seeking a

purchaser.

"You speak with your usual wisdom, Bratti," said Tito. "I have no

objection to hear what your Genoese will offer. But when and where

shall I have speech of him?"

"To-morrow, at three hours after sunrise, he will be at my shop, and if

your wits are of that sharpness I have always taken them to be, Messer

Greco, you will ask him a heavy price; for he minds not money. It's my

belief he's buying for somebody else, and not for himself--perhaps for

some great signor."

"It is well," said Tito. "I will be at your shop, if nothing hinders."

"And you will doubtless deal nobly by me for old acquaintance' sake,

Messer Greco, so I will not stay to fix the small sum you will give me

in token of my service in the matter. It seems to me a thousand years

now till I get out of the piazza, for a fair is a dull, not to say a

wicked thing, when one has no more goods to sell."

Tito made a hasty sign of assent and adieu, and moving away from the

pillar, again found himself pushed towards the middle of the piazza and

back again, without the power of determining his own course. In this

zigzag way he was earned along to the end of the piazza opposite the

church, where, in a deep recess formed by an irregularity in the line of

houses, an entertainment was going forward which seemed to be especially

attractive to the crowd. Loud bursts of laughter interrupted a

monologue which was sometimes slow and oratorical, at others rattling

and buffoonish. Here a girl was being pushed forward into the inner

circle with apparent reluctance, and there a loud laughing minx was

finding a way with her own elbows. It was a strange light that was

spread over the piazza. There were the pale stars breaking out above,

and the dim waving lanterns below, leaving all objects indistinct except

when they were seen close under the fitfully moving lights; but in this

recess there was a stronger light, against which the heads of the

encircling spectators stood in dark relief as Tito was gradually pushed

towards them, while above them rose the head of a man wearing a white

mitre with yellow cabalistic figures upon it.

"Behold, my children!" Tito heard him saying, "behold your opportunity!

neglect not the holy sacrament of matrimony when it can be had for the

small sum of a white quattrino--the cheapest matrimony ever offered, and

dissolved by special bull beforehand at every man's own will and

pleasure. Behold the bull!" Here the speaker held up a piece of

parchment with huge seals attached to it. "Behold the indulgence

granted by his Holiness Alexander the Sixth, who, being newly elected

Pope for his peculiar piety, intends to reform and purify the Church,

and wisely begins by abolishing that priestly abuse which keeps too

large a share of this privileged matrimony to the clergy and stints the

laity. Spit once, my sons, and pay a white quattrino! This is the

whole and sole price of the indulgence. The quattrino is the only

difference the Holy Father allows to be put any longer between us and

the clergy--who spit and pay nothing."

Tito thought he knew the voice, which had a peculiarly sharp ring, but

the face was too much in shadow from the lights behind for him to be

sure of the features. Stepping as near as he could, he saw within the

circle behind the speaker an altar-like table raised on a small

platform, and covered with a red drapery stitched all over with yellow

cabalistical figures. Half-a-dozen thin tapers burned at the back of

this table, which had a conjuring apparatus scattered over it, a large

open book in the centre, and at one of the front angles a monkey

fastened by a cord to a small ring and holding a small taper, which in

his incessant fidgety movements fell more or less aslant, whilst an

impish boy in a white surplice occupied himself chiefly in cuffing the

monkey, and adjusting the taper. The man in the mitre also wore a

surplice, and over it a chasuble on which the signs of the zodiac were

rudely marked in black upon a yellow ground. Tito was sure now that he

recognised the sharp upward-tending angles of the face under the mitre:

it was that of Maestro Vaiano, the mountebank, from whom he had rescued

Tessa. Pretty little Tessa! Perhaps she too had come in among the

troops of contadine.

"Come, my maidens! This is the time for the pretty who can have many

chances, and for the ill-favoured who have few. Matrimony to be had--

hot, eaten, and done with as easily as \_berlingozzi\_! And see!" here

the conjuror held up a cluster of tiny bags. "To every bride I give a

\_Breve\_ with a secret in it--the secret alone worth the money you pay

for the matrimony. The secret how to--no, no, I will not tell you what

the secret is about, and that makes it a double secret. Hang it round

your neck if you like, and never look at it; I don't say \_that\_ will not

be the best, for then you will see many things you don't expect: though

if you open it you may break your leg, \_e vero\_, but you will know a

secret! Something nobody knows but me! And mark--I give you the

\_Breve\_, I don't sell it, as many another holy man would: the quattrino

is for the matrimony, and the \_Breve\_ you get for nothing. \_Orsu,

giovanetti\_, come like dutiful sons of the Church and buy the Indulgence

of his Holiness Alexander the Sixth."

This buffoonery just fitted the taste of the audience; the \_fierucola\_

was but a small occasion, so the townsmen might be contented with jokes

that were rather less indecent than those they were accustomed to hear

at every carnival, put into easy rhyme by the Magnifico and his poetic

satellites; while the women, over and above any relish of the fun,

really began to have an itch for the \_Brevi\_. Several couples had

already gone through the ceremony, in which the conjuror's solemn

gibberish and grimaces over the open book, the antics of the monkey, and

even the preliminary spitting, had called forth peals of laughter; and

now a well-looking, merry-eyed youth of seventeen, in a loose tunic and

red cap, pushed forward, holding by the hand a plump brunette, whose

scanty ragged dress displayed her round arms and legs very

picturesquely.

"Fetter us without delay, Maestro!" said the youth, "for I have got to

take my bride home and paint her under the light of a lantern."

"Ha! Mariotto, my son, I commend your pious observance..." The

conjuror was going on, when a loud chattering behind warned him that an

unpleasant crisis had arisen with his monkey.

The temper of that imperfect acolyth was a little tried by the

over-active discipline of his colleague in the surplice, and a sudden

cuff administered as his taper fell to a horizontal position, caused him

to leap back with a violence that proved too much for the slackened knot

by which his cord was fastened. His first leap was to the other end of

the table, from which position his remonstrances were so threatening

that the imp in the surplice took up a wand by way of an equivalent

threat, whereupon the monkey leaped on to the head of a tall woman in

the foreground, dropping his taper by the way, and chattering with

increased emphasis from that eminence. Great was the screaming and

confusion, not a few of the spectators having a vague dread of the

Maestro's monkey, as capable of more hidden mischief than mere teeth and

claws could inflict; and the conjuror himself was in some alarm lest any

harm should happen to his familiar. In the scuffle to seize the

monkey's string, Tito got out of the circle, and, not caring to contend

for his place again, he allowed himself to be gradually pushed towards

the church of the Nunziata, and to enter amongst the worshippers.

The brilliant illumination within seemed to press upon his eyes with

palpable force after the pale scattered lights and broad shadows of the

piazza, and for the first minute or two he could see nothing distinctly.

That yellow splendour was in itself something supernatural and heavenly

to many of the peasant-women, for whom half the sky was hidden by

mountains, and who went to bed in the twilight; and the uninterrupted

chant from the choir was repose to the ear after the hellish hubbub of

the crowd outside. Gradually the scene became clearer, though still

there was a thin yellow haze from incense mingling with the breath of

the multitude. In a chapel on the left-hand of the nave, wreathed with

silver lamps, was seen unveiled the miraculous fresco of the

Annunciation, which, in Tito's oblique view of it from the right-hand

side of the nave, seemed dark with the excess of light around it. The

whole area of the great church was filled with peasant-women, some

kneeling, some standing; the coarse bronzed skins, and the dingy

clothing of the rougher dwellers on the mountains, contrasting with the

softer-lined faces and white or red head-drapery of the well-to-do

dwellers in the valley, who were scattered in irregular groups. And

spreading high and far over the walls and ceiling there was another

multitude, also pressing close against each other, that they might be

nearer the potent Virgin. It was the crowd of votive waxen images, the

effigies of great personages, clothed in their habit as they lived:

Florentines of high name in their black silk lucco, as when they sat in

council; popes, emperors, kings, cardinals, and famous condottieri with

plumed morion seated on their chargers; all notable strangers who passed

through Florence or had aught to do with its affairs--Mohammedans, even,

in well-tolerated companionship with Christian cavaliers; some of them

with faces blackened and robes tattered by the corroding breath of

centuries, others fresh and bright in new red mantle or steel corselet,

the exact doubles of the living. And wedged in with all these were

detached arms, legs, and other members, with only here and there a gap

where some image had been removed for public disgrace, or had fallen

ominously, as Lorenzo's had done six months before. It was a perfect

resurrection-swarm of remote mortals and fragments of mortals,

reflecting, in their varying degrees of freshness, the sombre dinginess

and sprinkled brightness of the crowd below.

Tito's glance wandered over the wild multitude in search of something.

He had already thought of Tessa, and the white hoods suggested the

possibility that he might detect her face under one of them. It was at

least a thought to be courted, rather than the vision of Romola looking

at him with changed eyes. But he searched in vain; and he was leaving

the church, weary of a scene which had no variety, when, just against

the doorway, he caught sight of Tessa, only two yards off him. She was

kneeling with her back against the wall, behind a group of

peasant-women, who were standing and looking for a spot nearer to the

sacred image. Her head hung a little aside with a look of weariness,

and her blue eyes were directed rather absently towards an altar-piece

where the Archangel Michael stood in his armour, with young face and

floating hair, amongst bearded and tonsured saints. Her right-hand,

holding a bunch of cocoons, fell by her side listlessly, and her round

cheek was paled, either by the light or by the weariness that was

expressed in her attitude: her lips were pressed poutingly together, and

every now and then her eyelids half fell: she was a large image of a

sweet sleepy child. Tito felt an irresistible desire to go up to her

and get her pretty trusting looks and prattle: this creature who was

without moral judgment that could condemn him, whose little loving

ignorant soul made a world apart, where he might feel in freedom from

suspicions and exacting demands, had a new attraction for him now. She

seemed a refuge from the threatened isolation that would come with

disgrace. He glanced cautiously round, to assure himself that Monna

Ghita was not near, and then, slipping quietly to her side, kneeled on

one knee, and said, in the softest voice, "Tessa!"

She hardly started, any more than she would have started at a soft

breeze that fanned her gently when she was needing it. She turned her

head and saw Tito's face close to her: it was very much more beautiful

than the Archangel Michael's, who was so mighty and so good that he

lived with the Madonna and all the saints and was prayed to along with

them. She smiled in happy silence, for that nearness of Tito quite

filled her mind.

"My little Tessa! you look very tired. How long have you been kneeling

here?"

She seemed to be collecting her thoughts for a minute or two, and at

last she said--

"I'm very hungry."

"Come, then; come with me."

He lifted her from her knees, and led her out under the cloisters

surrounding the atrium, which were then open, and not yet adorned with

the frescoes of Andrea del Sarto.

"How is it you are all by yourself, and so hungry, Tessa?"

"The Madre is ill; she has very bad pains in her legs, and sent me to

bring these cocoons to the Santissima Nunziata, because they're so

wonderful; see!"--she held up the bunch of cocoons, which were arranged

with fortuitous regularity on a stem,--"and she had kept them to bring

them herself, but she couldn't, and so she sent me because she thinks

the Holy Madonna may take away her pains; and somebody took my bag with

the bread and chestnuts in it, and the people pushed me back, and I was

so frightened coming in the crowd, and I couldn't get anywhere near the

Holy Madonna, to give the cocoons to the Padre, but I must--oh, I must."

"Yes, my little Tessa, you shall take them; but first come and let me

give you some berlingozzi. There are some to be had not far off."

"Where did you come from?" said Tessa, a little bewildered. "I thought

you would never come to me again, because you never came to the Mercato

for milk any more. I set myself Aves to say, to see if they would bring

you back, but I left off, because they didn't."

"You see I come when you want some one to take care of you, Tessa.

Perhaps the Aves fetched me, only it took them a long while. But what

shall you do if you are here all alone? Where shall you go?"

"Oh, I shall stay and sleep in the church--a great many of them do--in

the church and all about here--I did once when I came with my mother;

and the \_patrigno\_ is coming with the mules in the morning."

They were out in the piazza now, where the crowd was rather less riotous

than before, and the lights were fewer, the stream of pilgrims having

ceased. Tessa clung fast to Tito's arm in satisfied silence, while he

led her towards the stall where he remembered seeing the eatables.

Their way was the easier because there was just now a great rush towards

the middle of the piazza, where the masqued figures on stilts had found

space to execute a dance. It was very pretty to see the guileless thing

giving her cocoons into Tito's hand, and then eating her berlingozzi

with the relish of a hungry child. Tito had really come to take care of

her, as he did before, and that wonderful happiness of being with him

had begun again for her. Her hunger was soon appeased, all the sooner

for the new stimulus of happiness that had roused her from her languor,

and, as they turned away from the stall, she said nothing about going

into the church again, but looked round as if the sights in the piazza

were not without attraction to her now she was safe under Tito's arm.

"How can they do that?" she exclaimed, looking up at the dancers on

stilts. Then, after a minute's silence, "Do you think Saint Christopher

helps them?"

"Perhaps. What do you think about it, Tessa?" said Tito, slipping his

right arm round her, and looking down at her fondly.

"Because Saint Christopher is so very tall; and he is very good: if

anybody looks at him he takes care of them all day. He is on the wall

of the church--too tall to stand up there--but I saw him walking through

the streets one San Giovanni, carrying the little Gesu."

"You pretty pigeon! Do you think anybody could help taking care of

\_you\_, if you looked at them?"

"Shall you always come and take care of me?" said Tessa, turning her

face up to him, as he crushed her cheek with his left-hand. "And shall

you always be a long while first?"

Tito was conscious that some bystanders were laughing at them, and

though the licence of street fun, among artists and young men of the

wealthier sort as well as among the populace, made few adventures

exceptional, still less disreputable, he chose to move away towards the

end of the piazza.

"Perhaps I shall come again to you very soon, Tessa," he answered,

rather dreamily, when they had moved away. He was thinking that when

all the rest had turned their backs upon him, it would be pleasant to

have this little creature adoring him and nestling against him. The

absence of presumptuous self-conceit in Tito made him feel all the more

defenceless under prospective obloquy: he needed soft looks and caresses

too much ever to be impudent.

"In the Mercato?" said Tessa. "Not to-morrow morning, because the

\_patrigno\_ will be there, and he is so cross. Oh! but you have money,

and he will not be cross if you buy some salad. And there are some

chestnuts. Do you like chestnuts?"

He said nothing, but continued to look down at her with a dreamy

gentleness, and Tessa felt herself in a state of delicious wonder;

everything seemed as new as if she were being earned on a chariot of

clouds.

"Holy Virgin!" she exclaimed again presently. "There is a holy father

like the Bishop I saw at Prato."

Tito looked up too, and saw that he had unconsciously advanced to within

a few yards of the conjuror, Maestro Vaiano, who for the moment was

forsaken by the crowd. His face was turned away from them, and he was

occupied with the apparatus on his altar or table, preparing a new

diversion by the time the interest in the dancing should be exhausted.

The monkey was imprisoned under the red cloth, out of reach of mischief,

and the youngster in the white surplice was holding a sort of dish or

salver, from which his master was taking some ingredient. The

altar-like table, with its gorgeous cloth, the row of tapers, the sham

episcopal costume, the surpliced attendant, and even the movements of

the mitred figure, as he alternately bent his head and then raised

something before the lights, were a sufficiently near parody of sacred

things to rouse poor little Tessa's veneration; and there was some

additional awe produced by the mystery of their apparition in this spot,

for when she had seen an altar in the street before, it had been on

Corpus Christi Day, and there had been a procession to account for it.

She crossed herself and looked up at Tito, but then, as if she had had

time for reflection, said, "It is because of the Nativita."

Meanwhile Vaiano had turned round, raising his hands to his mitre with

the intention of changing his dress, when his quick eye recognised Tito

and Tessa who were both looking at him, their faces being shone upon by

the light of his tapers, while his own was in shadow.

"Ha! my children!" he said, instantly, stretching out his hands in a

benedictory attitude, "you are come to be married. I commend your

penitence--the blessing of Holy Church can never come too late."

But whilst he was speaking, he had taken in the whole meaning of Tessa's

attitude and expression, and he discerned an opportunity for a new kind

of joke which required him to be cautious and solemn.

"Should you like to be married to me, Tessa?" said Tito, softly, half

enjoying the comedy, as he saw the pretty childish seriousness on her

face, half prompted by hazy previsions which belonged to the

intoxication of despair.

He felt her vibrating before she looked up at him and said, timidly,

"Will you let me?"

He answered only by a smile, and by leading her forward in front of the

\_cerretano\_, who, seeing an excellent jest in Tessa's evident delusion,

assumed a surpassing sacerdotal solemnity, and went through the mimic

ceremony with a liberal expenditure of \_lingua furbesca\_ or thieves'

Latin. But some symptoms of a new movement in the crowd urged him to

bring it to a speedy conclusion and dismiss them with hands outstretched

in a benedictory attitude over their kneeling figures. Tito, disposed

always to cultivate goodwill, though it might be the least select, put a

piece of four grossi into his hand as he moved away, and was thanked by

a look which, the conjuror felt sure, conveyed a perfect understanding

of the whole affair.

But Tito himself was very far from that understanding, and did not, in

fact, know whether, the next moment, he should tell Tessa of the joke

and laugh at her for a little goose, or whether he should let her

delusion last, and see what would come of it--see what she would say and

do next.

"Then you will not go away from me again," said Tessa, after they had

walked a few steps, "and you will take me to where you live." She spoke

meditatively, and not in a questioning tone. But presently she added,

"I must go back once to the Madre though, to tell her I brought the

cocoons, and that I am married, and shall not go back again."

Tito felt the necessity of speaking now; and in the rapid thought

prompted by that necessity, he saw that by undeceiving Tessa he should

be robbing himself of some at least of that pretty trustfulness which

might, by-and-by, be his only haven from contempt. It would spoil Tessa

to make her the least particle wiser or more suspicious.

"Yes, my little Tessa," he said, caressingly, "you must go back to the

Madre; but you must not tell her you are married--you must keep that a

secret from everybody; else some very great harm would happen to me, and

you would never see me again."

She looked up at him with fear in her face.

"You must go back and feed your goats and mules, and do just as you have

always done before, and say no word to any one about me."

The corners of her mouth fell a little.

"And then, perhaps, I shall come and take care of you again when you

want me, as I did before. But you must do just what I tell you, else

you will not see me again."

"Yes, I will, I will," she said, in a loud whisper, frightened at that

blank prospect.

They were silent a little while; and then Tessa, looking at her hand,

said--

"The Madre wears a betrothal ring. She went to church and had it put

on, and then after that, an other day, she was married. And so did the

cousin Nannina. But then \_she\_ married Gollo," added the poor little

thing, entangled in the difficult comparison between her own ease and

others within her experience.

"But you must not wear a betrothal ring, my Tessa, because no one must

know you are married," said Tito, feeling some insistance necessary.

"And the \_buona fortuna\_ that I gave you did just as well for betrothal.

Some people are betrothed with rings and some are not."

"Yes, it is true, they would see the ring," said Tessa, trying to

convince herself that a thing she would like very much was really not

good for her.

They were now near the entrance of the church again, and she remembered

her cocoons which were still in Tito's hand.

"Ah, you must give me the \_boto\_," she said; "and we must go in, and I

must take it to the Padre, and I must tell the rest of my beads, because

I was too tired before."

"Yes, you must go in, Tessa; but I will not go in. I must leave you

now," said Tito, too feverish and weary to re-enter that stifling heat,

and feeling that this was the least difficult way of parting with her.

"And not come back? Oh, where do you go?" Tessa's mind had never

formed an image of his whereabout or his doings when she did not see

him: he had vanished, and her thought, instead of following him, had

stayed in the same spot where he was with her.

"I shall come back some time, Tessa," said Tito, taking her under the

cloisters to the door of the church. "You must not cry--you must go to

sleep, when you have said your beads. And here is money to buy your

breakfast. Now kiss me, and look happy, else I shall not come again."

She made a great effort over herself as she put up her lips to kiss him,

and submitted to be gently turned round, with her face towards the door

of the church. Tito saw her enter; and then with a shrug at his own

resolution, leaned against a pillar, took off his cap, rubbed his hair

backward, and wondered where Romola was now, and what she was thinking

of him. Poor little Tessa had disappeared behind the curtain among the

crowd of peasants; but the love which formed one web with all his

worldly hopes, with the ambitions and pleasures that must make the solid

part of his days--the love that was identified with his larger self--was

not to be banished from his consciousness. Even to the man who presents

the most elastic resistance to whatever is unpleasant, there will come

moments when the pressure from without is too strong for him, and he

must feel the smart and the bruise in spite of himself. Such a moment

had come to Tito. There was no possible attitude of mind, no scheme of

action by which the uprooting of all his newly-planted hopes could be

made otherwise than painful.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

THE DYING MESSAGE.

When Romola arrived at the entrance of San Marco she found one of the

Frati waiting there in expectation of her arrival. Monna Brigida

retired into the adjoining church, and Romola was conducted to the door

of the chapter-house in the outer cloister, whither the invalid had been

conveyed; no woman being allowed admission beyond this precinct.

When the door opened, the subdued external light blending with that of

two tapers placed behind a truckle-bed, showed the emaciated face of Fra

Luca, with the tonsured crown of golden hair above it, and with

deep-sunken hazel eyes fixed on a small crucifix which he held before

him. He was propped up into nearly a sitting posture; and Romola was

just conscious, as she threw aside her veil, that there was another monk

standing by the bed, with the black cowl drawn over his head, and that

he moved towards the door as she entered; just conscious that in the

background there was a crucified form rising high and pale on the

frescoed wall, and pale faces of sorrow looking out from it below.

The next moment her eyes met Fra Luca's as they looked up at her from

the crucifix, and she was absorbed in that pang of recognition which

identified this monkish emaciated form with the image of her fair young

brother.

"Dino!" she said, in a voice like a low cry of pain. But she did not

bend towards him; she held herself erect, and paused at two yards'

distance from him. There was an unconquerable repulsion for her in that

monkish aspect; it seemed to her the brand of the dastardly

undutifulness which had left her father desolate--of the grovelling

superstition which could give such undutifulness the name of piety. Her

father, whose proud sincerity and simplicity of life had made him one of

the few frank pagans of his time, had brought her up with a silent

ignoring of any claims the Church could have to regulate the belief and

action of beings with a cultivated reason. The Church, in her mind,

belonged to that actual life of the mixed multitude from which they had

always lived apart, and she had no ideas that could render her brother's

course an object of any other feeling than incurious, indignant

contempt. Yet the lovingness of Romola's soul had clung to that image

in the past, and while she stood rigidly aloof, there was a yearning

search in her eyes for something too faintly discernible.

But there was no corresponding emotion in the face of the monk. He

looked at the little sister returned to him in her full womanly beauty,

with the far-off gaze of a revisiting spirit.

"My sister!" he said, with a feeble and interrupted but yet distinct

utterance, "it is well thou hast not longer delayed to come, for I have

a message to deliver to thee, and my time is short."

Romola took a step nearer: the message, she thought, would be one of

affectionate penitence to her father, and her heart began to open.

Nothing could wipe out the long years of desertion; but the culprit,

looking back on those years with the sense of irremediable wrong

committed, would call forth pity. Now, at the last, there would be

understanding and forgiveness. Dino would pour out some natural filial

feeling; he would ask questions about his father's blindness--how

rapidly it had come on? how the long dark days had been filled? what the

life was now in the home where he himself had been nourished?--and the

last message from the dying lips would be one of tenderness and regret.

"Romola," Fra Luca began, "I have had a vision concerning thee. Thrice

I have had it in the last two months: each time it has been clearer.

Therefore I came from Fiesole, deeming it a message from heaven that I

was bound to deliver. And I gather a promise of mercy to thee in this,

that my breath is preserved in order to--"

The difficult breathing which continually interrupted him would not let

him finish the sentence.

Romola had felt her heart chilling again. It was a vision, then, this

message--one of those visions she had so often heard her father allude

to with bitterness. Her indignation rushed to her lips.

"Dino, I thought you had some words to send to my father. You forsook

him when his sight was failing; you made his life very desolate. Have

you never cared about that? never repented? What is this religion of

yours, that places visions before natural duties?"

The deep-sunken hazel eyes turned slowly towards her, and rested upon

her in silence for some moments, as if he were meditating whether he

should answer her.

"No," he said at last; speaking as before, in a low passionless tone, as

of some spirit not human, speaking through dying human organs. "No; I

have never repented fleeing from the stifling poison-breath of sin that

was hot and thick around me, and threatened to steal over my senses like

besotting wine. My father could not hear the voice that called me night

and day; he knew nothing of the demon-tempters that tried to drag me

back from following it. My father has lived amidst human sin and misery

without believing in them: he has been like one busy picking shining

stones in a mine, while there was a world dying of plague above him. I

spoke, but he listened with scorn. I told him the studies he wished me

to live for were either childish trifling--dead toys--or else they must

be made warm and living by pulses that beat to worldly ambitions and

fleshly lusts, for worldly ambitions and fleshly lusts made all the

substance of the poetry and history he wanted me to bend my eyes on

continually."

"Has not my father led a pure and noble life, then?" Romola burst

forth, unable to hear in silence this implied accusation against her

father. "He has sought no worldly honours; he has been truthful; he has

denied himself all luxuries; he has lived like one of the ancient sages.

He never wished you to live for worldly ambitions and fleshly lusts; he

wished you to live as he himself has done, according to the purest

maxims of philosophy, in which he brought you up."

Romola spoke partly by rote, as all ardent and sympathetic young

creatures do; but she spoke with intense belief. The pink flush was in

her face, and she quivered from head to foot. Her brother was again

slow to answer; looking at her passionate face with strange passionless

eyes.

"What were the maxims of philosophy to me? They told me to be strong,

when I felt myself weak; when I was ready, like the blessed Saint

Benedict, to roll myself among thorns, and court smarting wounds as a

deliverance from temptation. For the Divine love had sought me, and

penetrated me, and created a great need in me; like a seed that wants

room to grow. I had been brought up in carelessness of the true faith;

I had not studied the doctrines of our religion; but it seemed to take

possession of me like a rising flood. I felt that there was a life of

perfect love and purity for the soul; in which there would be no uneasy

hunger after pleasure, no tormenting questions, no fear of suffering.

Before I knew the history of the saints, I had a foreshadowing of their

ecstasy. For the same truth had penetrated even into pagan philosophy:

that it is a bliss within the reach of man to die to mortal needs, and

live in the life of God as the Unseen Perfectness. But to attain that I

must forsake the world: I must have no affection, no hope, wedding me to

that which passeth away; I must live with my fellow-beings only as human

souls related to the eternal unseen life. That need was urging me

continually: it came over me in visions when my mind fell away weary

from the vain words which record the passions of dead men: it came over

me after I had been tempted into sin and had turned away with loathing

from the scent of the emptied cup. And in visions I saw the meaning of

the Crucifix."

He paused, breathing hard for a minute or two: but Romola was not

prompted to speak again. It was useless for her mind to attempt any

contact with the mind of this unearthly brother: as useless as for her

hand to try and grasp a shadow. When he spoke again his heaving chest

was quieter.

"I felt whom I must follow: but I saw that even among the servants of

the Cross who professed to have renounced the world, my soul would be

stifled with the fumes of hypocrisy, and lust, and pride. God had not

chosen me, as he chose Saint Dominic and Saint Francis, to wrestle with

evil in the Church and in the world. He called upon me to flee: I took

the sacred vows and I fled--fled to lands where danger and scorn and

want bore me continually, like angels, to repose on the bosom of God. I

have lived the life of a hermit, I have ministered to pilgrims; but my

task has been short: the veil has worn very thin that divides me from my

everlasting rest. I came back to Florence that--"

"Dino, you \_did\_ want to know if my father was alive," interrupted

Romola, the picture of that suffering life touching her again with the

desire for union and forgiveness.

"--That before I died I might urge others of our brethren to study the

Eastern tongues, as I had not done, and go out to greater ends than I

did; and I find them already bent on the work. And since I came,

Romola, I have felt that I was sent partly to thee--not to renew the

bonds of earthly affection, but to deliver the heavenly warning conveyed

in a vision. For I have had that vision thrice. And through all the

years since first the Divine voice called me, while I was yet in the

world, I have been taught and guided by visions. For in the painful

linking together of our waking thoughts we can never be sure that we

have not mingled our own error with the light we have prayed for; but in

visions and dreams we are passive, and our souls are as an instrument in

the Divine hand. Therefore listen, and speak not again--for the time is

short."

Romola's mind recoiled strongly from listening to this vision. Her

indignation had subsided, but it was only because she had felt the

distance between her brother and herself widening. But while Fra Luca

was speaking, the figure of another monk had entered, and again stood on

the other side of the bed, with the cowl drawn over his head.

"Kneel, my daughter, for the Angel of Death is present, and waits while

the message of heaven is delivered: bend thy pride before it is bent for

thee by a yoke of iron," said a strong rich voice, startlingly in

contrast with Fra Luca's.

The tone was not that of imperious command, but of quiet self-possession

and assurance of the right, blended with benignity. Romola, vibrating

to the sound, looked round at the figure on the opposite side of the

bed. His face was hardly discernible under the shadow of the cowl, and

her eyes fell at once on his hands, which were folded across his breast

and lay in relief on the edge of his black mantle. They had a marked

physiognomy which enforced the influence of the voice: they were very

beautiful and almost of transparent delicacy. Romola's disposition to

rebel against command, doubly active in the presence of monks, whom she

had been taught to despise, would have fixed itself on any repulsive

detail as a point of support. But the face was hidden, and the hands

seemed to have an appeal in them against all hardness. The next moment

the right-hand took the crucifix to relieve the fatigued grasp of Fra

Luca, and the left touched his lips with a wet sponge which lay near.

In the act of bending, the cowl was pushed back, and the features of the

monk had the full light of the tapers on them. They were very marked

features, such as lend themselves to popular description. There was the

high arched nose, the prominent under-lip, the coronet of thick dark

hair above the brow, all seeming to tell of energy and passion; there

were the blue-grey eyes, shining mildly under auburn eyelashes, seeming,

like the hands, to tell of acute sensitiveness. Romola felt certain

they were the features of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, the prior of San

Marco, whom she had chiefly thought of as more offensive than other

monks, because he was more noisy. Her rebellion was rising against the

first impression, which had almost forced her to bend her knees.

"Kneel, my daughter," the penetrating voice said again, "the pride of

the body is a barrier against the gifts that purify the soul."

He was looking at her with mild fixedness while he spoke, and again she

felt that subtle mysterious influence of a personality by which it has

been given to some rare men to move their fellows.

Slowly Romola fell on her knees, and in the very act a tremor came over

her; in the renunciation of her proud erectness, her mental attitude

seemed changed, and she found herself in a now state of passiveness.

Her brother began to speak again--

"Romola, in the deep night, as I lay awake, I saw my father's room--the

library--with all the books and the marbles and the leggio, where I used

to stand and read; and I saw you--you were revealed to me as I see you

now, with fair long hair, sitting before my father's chair. And at the

leggio stood a man whose face I could not see. I looked, and looked,

and it was a blank to me, even as a painting effaced; and I saw him move

and take thee, Romola, by the hand; and then I saw thee take my father

by the hand; and you all three went down the stone steps into the

streets, the man whose face was a blank to me leading the way. And you

stood at the altar in Santa Croce, and the priest who married you had

the face of death; and the graves opened, and the dead in their shrouds

rose and followed you like a bridal train. And you passed on through

the streets and the gates into the valley, and it seemed to me that he

who led you hurried you more than you could bear, and the dead were

weary of following you, and turned back to their graves. And at last

you came to a stony place where there was no water, and no trees or

herbage; but instead of water, I saw written parchment unrolling itself

everywhere, and instead of trees and herbage I saw men of bronze and

marble springing up and crowding round you. And my father was faint for

want of water and fell to the ground; and the man whose face was a blank

loosed thy hand and departed: and as he went I could see his face; and

it was the face of the Great Tempter. And thou, Romola, didst wring thy

hands and seek for water, and there was none. And the bronze and marble

figures seemed to mock thee and hold out cups of water, and when thou

didst grasp them and put them to my father's lips, they turned to

parchment. And the bronze and marble figures seemed to turn into demons

and snatch my father's body from thee, and the parchments shrivelled up,

and blood ran everywhere instead of them, and fire upon the blood, till

they all vanished, and the plain was bare and stony again, and thou wast

alone in the midst of it. And then it seemed that the night fell and I

saw no more... Thrice I have had that vision, Romola. I believe it is

a revelation meant for thee: to warn thee against marriage as a

temptation of the enemy; it calls upon thee to dedicate thyself--"

His pauses had gradually become longer and more frequent, and he was now

compelled to cease by a severe fit of gasping, in which his eyes were

turned on the crucifix as on a light that was vanishing. Presently he

found strength to speak again, but in a feebler, scarcely audible tone.

"To renounce the vain philosophy and corrupt thoughts of the heathens:

for in the hour of sorrow and death their pride will turn to mockery,

and the unclean gods will--"

The words died away.

In spite of the thought that was at work in Romola, telling her that

this vision was no more than a dream, fed by youthful memories and ideal

convictions, a strange awe had come over her. Her mind was not apt to

be assailed by sickly fancies; she had the vivid intellect and the

healthy human passion, which are too keenly alive to the constant

relations of things to have any morbid craving after the exceptional.

Still the images of the vision she despised jarred and distressed her

like painful and cruel cries. And it was the first time she had

witnessed the struggle with approaching death: her young life had been

sombre, but she had known nothing of the utmost human needs; no acute

suffering--no heart-cutting sorrow; and this brother, come back to her

in his hour of supreme agony, was like a sudden awful apparition from an

invisible world. The pale faces of sorrow in the fresco on the opposite

wall seemed to have come nearer, and to make one company with the pale

face on the bed.

"Frate," said the dying voice.

Fra Girolamo leaned down. But no other word came for some moments.

"Romola," it said next.

She leaned forward too: but again there was silence. The words were

struggling in vain.

"Fra Girolamo, give her--"

"The crucifix," said the voice of Fra Girolamo.

No other sound came from the dying lips.

"Dino!" said Romola, with a low but piercing cry, as the certainty came

upon her that the silence of misunderstanding could never be broken.

"Take the crucifix, my daughter," said Fra Girolamo, after a few

minutes. "His eyes behold it no more."

Romola stretched out her hand to the crucifix, and this act appeared to

relieve the tension of her mind. A great sob burst from her. She bowed

her head by the side of her dead brother, and wept aloud.

It seemed to her as if this first vision of death must alter the

daylight for her for evermore.

Fra Girolamo moved towards the door, and called in a lay Brother who was

waiting outside. Then he went up to Romola and said in a tone of gentle

command, "Rise, my daughter, and be comforted. Our brother is with the

blessed. He has left you the crucifix, in remembrance of the heavenly

warning--that it may be a beacon to you in the darkness."

She rose from her knees, trembling, folded her veil over her head, and

hid the crucifix under her mantle. Fra Girolamo then led the way out

into the cloistered court, lit now only by the stars and by a lantern

which was held by some one near the entrance. Several other figures in

the dress of the dignified laity were grouped about the same spot. They

were some of the numerous frequenters of San Marco, who had come to

visit the Prior, and having heard that he was in attendance on the dying

Brother in the chapter-house, had awaited him here.

Romola was dimly conscious of footsteps and rustling forms moving aside:

she heard the voice of Fra Girolamo saying, in a low tone, "Our brother

is departed;" she felt a hand laid on her arm. The next moment the door

was opened, and she was out in the wide piazza of San Marco, with no one

but Monna Brigida, and the servant carrying the lantern.

The fresh sense of space revived her, and helped her to recover her

self-mastery. The scene which had just closed upon her was terribly

distinct and vivid, but it began to narrow under the returning

impressions of the life that lay outside it. She hastened her steps,

with nervous anxiety to be again with her father--and with Tito--for

were they not together in her absence? The images of that vision, while

they clung about her like a hideous dream not yet to be shaken off, made

her yearn all the more for the beloved faces and voices that would

assure her of her waking life.

Tito, we know, was not with Bardo; his destiny was being shaped by a

guilty consciousness, urging on him the despairing belief that by this

time Romola possessed the knowledge which would lead to their final

separation.

And the lips that could have conveyed that knowledge were for ever

closed. The prevision that Fra Luca's words had imparted to Romola had

been such as comes from the shadowy region where human souls seek wisdom

apart from the human sympathies which are the very life and substance of

our wisdom; the revelation that might have come from the simple

questions of filial and brotherly affection had been carried into

irrevocable silence.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

A FLORENTINE JOKE.

Early the next morning Tito was returning from Bratti's shop in the

narrow thoroughfare of the Ferravecchi. The Genoese stranger had

carried away the onyx ring, and Tito was carrying away fifty florins.

It did just cross his mind that if, after all, Fortune, by one of her

able devices, saved him from the necessity of quitting Florence, it

would be better for him not to have parted with his ring, since he had

been understood to wear it for the sake of peculiar memories and

predilections; still, it was a slight matter, not worth dwelling on with

any emphasis, and in those moments he had lost his confidence in

fortune. The feverish excitement of the first alarm which had impelled

his mind to travel into the future had given place to a dull, regretful

lassitude. He cared so much for the pleasures that could only come to

him through the good opinion of his fellow-men, that he wished now he

had never risked ignominy by shrinking from what his fellow-men called

obligations.

But our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act

apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds

never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our

consciousness; and that dreadful vitality of deeds was pressing hard on

Tito for the first time.

He was going back to his lodgings in the Piazza di San Giovanni, but he

avoided passing through the Mercato Vecchio, which was his nearest way,

lest he should see Tessa. He was not in the humour to seek anything; he

could only await the first sign of his altering lot.

The piazza with its sights of beauty was lit up by that warm morning

sunlight under which the autumn dew still lingers, and which invites to

an idlesse undulled by fatigue. It was a festival morning, too, when

the soft warmth seems to steal over one with a special invitation to

lounge and gaze. Here, too, the signs of the fair were present; in the

spaces round the octagonal baptistery, stalls were being spread with

fruit and flowers, and here and there laden mules were standing quietly

absorbed in their nose-bags, while their drivers were perhaps gone

through the hospitable sacred doors to kneel before the blessed Virgin

on this morning of her Nativity. On the broad marble steps of the Duomo

there were scattered groups of beggars and gossiping talkers: here an

old crone with white hair and hard sunburnt face encouraging a

round-capped baby to try its tiny bare feet on the warmed marble, while

a dog sitting near snuffed at the performance suspiciously; there a

couple of shaggy-headed boys leaning to watch a small pale cripple who

was cutting a face on a cherry-stone; and above them on the wide

platform men were making changing knots in laughing desultory chat, or

else were standing in close couples gesticulating eagerly.

But the largest and most important company of loungers was that towards

which Tito had to direct his steps. It was the busiest time of the day

with Nello, and in this warm season and at an hour when clients were

numerous, most men preferred being shaved under the pretty red and white

awning in front of the shop rather than within narrow walls. It is not

a sublime attitude for a man, to sit with lathered chin thrown backward,

and have his nose made a handle of; but to be shaved was a fashion of

Florentine respectability, and it is astonishing how gravely men look at

each other when they are all in the fashion. It was the hour of the

day, too, when yesterday's crop of gossip was freshest, and the barber's

tongue was always in its glory when his razor was busy; the deft

activity of those two instruments seemed to be set going by a common

spring. Tito foresaw that it would be impossible for him to escape

being drawn into the circle; he must smile and retort, and look

perfectly at his ease. Well! it was but the ordeal of swallowing bread

and cheese pills after all. The man who let the mere anticipation of

discovery choke him was simply a man of weak nerves.

But just at that time Tito felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and no

amount of previous resolution could prevent the very unpleasant

sensation with which that sudden touch jarred him. His face, as he

turned it round, betrayed the inward shock; but the owner of the hand

that seemed to have such evil magic in it broke into a light laugh. He

was a young man about Tito's own age, with keen features, small

close-clipped head, and close-shaven lip and chin, giving the idea of a

mind as little encumbered as possible with material that was not

nervous. The keen eyes were bright with hope and friendliness, as so

many other young eyes have been that have afterwards closed on the world

in bitterness and disappointment; for at that time there were none but

pleasant predictions about Niccolo Macchiavelli, as a young man of

promise, who was expected to mend the broken fortunes of his ancient

family.

"Why, Melema, what evil dream did you have last night, that you took my

light grasp for that of a \_sbirro\_ or something worse?"

"Ah, Messer Niccolo!" said Tito, recovering himself immediately; "it

must have been an extra amount of dulness in my veins this morning that

shuddered at the approach of your wit. But the fact is, I have had a

bad night."

"That is unlucky, because you will be expected to shine without any

obstructing fog to-day in the Rucellai Gardens. I take it for granted

you are to be there."

"Messer Bernardo did me the honour to invite me," said Tito; "but I

shall be engaged elsewhere."

"Ah! I remember, you are in love," said Macchiavelli, with a shrug,

"else you would never have such inconvenient engagements. Why, we are

to eat a peacock and ortolans under the loggia among Bernardo Rucellai's

rare trees; there are to be the choicest spirits in Florence and the

choicest wines. Only, as Piero de' Medici is to be there, the choice

spirits may happen to be swamped in the capping of impromptu verses. I

hate that game; it is a device for the triumph of small wits, who are

always inspired the most by the smallest occasions."

"What is that you are saying about Piero de' Medici and small wits,

Messer Niccolo?" said Nello, whose light figure was at that moment

predominating over the Herculean frame of Niccolo Caparra.

That famous worker in iron, whom we saw last with bared muscular arms

and leathern apron in the Mercato Vecchio, was this morning dressed in

holiday suit, and as he sat submissively while Nello skipped round him,

lathered him, seized him by the nose, and scraped him with magical

quickness, he looked much as a lion might if it had donned linen and

tunic and was preparing to go into society.

"A private secretary will never rise in the world if he couples great

and small in that way," continued Nello. "When great men are not

allowed to marry their sons and daughters as they like, small men must

not expect to marry their words as they like. Have you heard the news

Domenico Cennini, here, has been telling us?--that Pagolantonio Soderini

has given Ser Piero da Bibbiena a box on the ear for setting on Piero

de' Medici to interfere with the marriage between young Tommaso Soderini

and Fiammetta Strozzi, and is to be sent ambassador to Venice as a

punishment?"

"I don't know which I envy him most," said Macchiavelli, "the offence or

the punishment. The offence will make him the most popular man in all

Florence, and the punishment will take him among the only people in

Italy who have known how to manage their own affairs."

"Yes, if Soderini stays long enough at Venice," said Cennini, "he may

chance to learn the Venetian fashion, and bring it home with him. The

Soderini have been fast friends of the Medici, but what has happened is

likely to open Pagolantonio's eyes to the good of our old Florentine

trick of choosing a new harness when the old one galls us; if we have

not quite lost the trick in these last fifty years."

"Not we," said Niccolo Caparra, who was rejoicing in the free use of his

lips again. "Eat eggs in Lent and the snow will melt. That's what I

say to our people when they get noisy over their cups at San Gallo, and

talk of raising a \_romor\_ (insurrection): I say, never do you plan a

\_romor\_; you may as well try to fill Arno with buckets. When there's

water enough Arno will be full, and that will not be till the torrent is

ready."

"Caparra, that oracular speech of yours is due to my excellent shaving,"

said Nello. "You could never have made it with that dark rust on your

chin. Ecco, Messer Domenico, I am ready for you now. By the way, my

bel erudito," continued Nello, as he saw Tito moving towards the door,

"here has been old Maso seeking for you, but your nest was empty. He

will come again presently. The old man looked mournful, and seemed in

haste. I hope there is nothing wrong in the Via de' Bardi."

"Doubtless Messer Tito knows that Bardo's son is dead," said Cronaca,

who had just come up.

Tito's heart gave a leap--had the death happened before Romola saw him?

"No, I had not heard it," he said, with no more discomposure than the

occasion seemed to warrant, turning and leaning against the doorpost, as

if he had given up his intention of going away. "I knew that his sister

had gone to see him. Did he die before she arrived?"

"No," said Cronaca; "I was in San Marco at the time, and saw her come

out from the chapter-house with Fra Girolamo, who told us that the dying

man's breath had been preserved as by a miracle, that he might make a

disclosure to his sister."

Tito felt that his fate was decided. Again his mind rushed over all the

circumstances of his departure from Florence, and he conceived a plan of

getting back his money from Cennini before the disclosure had become

public. If he once had his money he need not stay long in endurance of

scorching looks and biting words. He would wait now, and go away with

Cennini and get the money from him at once. With that project in his

mind he stood motionless--his hands in his belt, his eyes fixed absently

on the ground. Nello, glancing at him, felt sure that he was absorbed

in anxiety about Romola, and thought him such a pretty image of

self-forgetful sadness, that he just perceptibly pointed his razor at

him, and gave a challenging look at Piero di Cosimo, whom he had never

forgiven for his refusal to see any prognostics of character in his

favourite's handsome face. Piero, who was leaning against the other

doorpost, close to Tito, shrugged his shoulders: the frequent recurrence

of such challenges from Nello had changed the painter's first

declaration of neutrality into a positive inclination to believe ill of

the much-praised Greek.

"So you have got your Fra Girolamo back again, Cronaca? I suppose we

shall have him preaching again this next Advent," said Nello.

"And not before there is need," said Cronaca, gravely. "We have had the

best testimony to his words since the last Quaresima; for even to the

wicked wickedness has become a plague; and the ripeness of vice is

turning to rottenness in the nostrils even of the vicious. There has

not been a change since the Quaresima, either in Rome or at Florence,

but has put a new seal on the Frate's words--that the harvest of sin is

ripe, and that God will reap it with a sword."

"I hope he has had a new vision, however," said Francesco Cei,

sneeringly. "The old ones are somewhat stale. Can't your Frate get a

poet to help out his imagination for him?"

"He has no lack of poets about him," said Cronaca, with quiet contempt,

"but they are great poets and not little ones; so they are contented to

be taught by him, and no more think the truth stale which God has given

him to utter, than they think the light of the moon is stale. But

perhaps certain high prelates and princes who dislike the Frate's

denunciations might be pleased to hear that, though Giovanni Pico, and

Poliziano, and Marsilio Ficino, and most other men of mark in Florence,

reverence Fra Girolamo, Messer Francesco Cei despises him."

"Poliziano?" said Cei, with a scornful laugh. "Yes, doubtless he

believes in your new Jonah; witness the fine orations he wrote for the

envoys of Sienna, to tell Alexander the Sixth that the world and the

Church were never so well off as since he became Pope."

"Nay, Francesco," said Macchiavelli, smiling, "a various scholar must

have various opinions. And as for the Frate, whatever we may think of

his saintliness, you judge his preaching too narrowly. The secret of

oratory lies, not in saying new things, but in saying things with a

certain power that moves the hearers--without which, as old Filelfo has

said, your speaker deserves to be called, `non oratorem, sed aratorem.'

And, according to that test, Fra Girolamo is a great orator."

"That is true, Niccolo," said Cennini, speaking from the shaving-chair,

"but part of the secret lies in the prophetic visions. Our people--no

offence to you, Cronaca--will run after anything in the shape of a

prophet, especially if he prophesies terrors and tribulations."

"Rather say, Cennini," answered Cronaca, "that the chief secret lies in

the Frate's pure life and strong faith, which stamp him as a messenger

of God."

"I admit it--I admit it," said Cennini, opening his palms, as he rose

from the chair. "His life is spotless: no man has impeached it."

"He is satisfied with the pleasant lust of arrogance," Cei burst out,

bitterly. "I can see it in that proud lip and satisfied eye of his. He

hears the air filled with his own name--Fra Girolamo Savonarola, of

Ferrara; the prophet, the saint, the mighty preacher, who frightens the

very babies of Florence into laying down their wicked baubles."

"Come, come, Francesco, you are out of humour with waiting," said the

conciliatory Nello. "Let me stop your mouth with a little lather. I

must not have my friend Cronaca made angry: I have a regard for his

chin; and his chin is in no respect altered since he became a Piagnone.

And for my own part, I confess, when the Frate was preaching in the

Duomo last Advent, I got into such a trick of slipping in to listen to

him that I might have turned Piagnone too, if I had not been hindered by

the liberal nature of my art; and also by the length of the sermons,

which are sometimes a good while before they get to the moving point.

But, as Messer Niccolo here says, the Frate lays hold of the people by

some power over and above his prophetic visions. Monks and nuns who

prophesy are not of that rareness. For what says Luigi Pulci?

`Dombruno's sharp-cutting scimitar had the fame of being enchanted;

but,' says Luigi, `I am rather of opinion that it cut sharp because it

was of strongly-tempered steel.' Yes, yes; Paternosters may shave

clean, but they must be said over a good razor."

"See, Nello!" said Macchiavelli, "what doctor is this advancing on his

Bucephalus? I thought your piazza was free from those furred and

scarlet-robed lackeys of death. This man looks as if he had had some

such night adventure as Boccaccio's Maestro Simone, and had his bonnet

and mantle pickled a little in the gutter; though he himself is as sleek

as a miller's rat."

"A-ah!" said Nello, with a low long-drawn intonation, as he looked up

towards the advancing figure--a round-headed, round-bodied personage,

seated on a raw young horse, which held its nose out with an air of

threatening obstinacy, and by a constant effort to back and go off in an

oblique line showed free views about authority very much in advance of

the age.

"And I have a few more adventures in pickle for him," continued Nello,

in an undertone, "which I hope will drive his inquiring nostrils to

another quarter of the city. He's a doctor from Padua; they say he has

been at Prato for three months, and now he's come to Florence to see

what he can net. But his great trick is making rounds among the

contadini. And do you note those great saddle-bags he carries? They

are to hold the fat capons and eggs and meal he levies on silly clowns

with whom coin is scarce. He vends his own secret medicines, so he

keeps away from the doors of the druggists; and for this last week he

has taken to sitting in my piazza for two or three hours every day, and

making it a resort for asthmas and squalling bambini. It stirs my gall

to see the toad-faced quack fingering the greasy quattrini, or bagging a

pigeon in exchange for his pills and powders. But I'll put a few thorns

in his saddle, else I'm no Florentine. Laudamus! he is coming to be

shaved; that's what I've waited for. Messer Domenico, go not away:

wait; you shall see a rare bit of fooling, which I devised two days ago.

Here, Sandro!"

Nello whispered in the ear of Sandro, who rolled his solemn eyes,

nodded, and, following up these signs of understanding with a slow

smile, took to his heels with surprising rapidity.

"How is it with you, Maestro Tacco?" said Nello, as the doctor, with

difficulty, brought his horse's head round towards the barber's shop.

"That is a fine young horse of yours, but something raw in the mouth,

eh?"

"He is an accursed beast, the \_vermocane\_ seize him!" said Maestro

Tacco, with a burst of irritation, descending from his saddle and

fastening the old bridle, mended with string, to an iron staple in the

wall. "Nevertheless," he added, recollecting himself, "a sound beast

and a valuable, for one who wanted to purchase, and get a profit by

training him. I had him cheap."

"Rather too hard riding for a man who carries your weight of learning:

eh, Maestro?" said Nello. "You seem hot."

"Truly, I am likely to be hot," said the doctor, taking off his bonnet,

and giving to full view a bald low head and flat broad face, with high

ears, wide lipless mouth, round eyes, and deep arched lines above the

projecting eyebrows, which altogether made Nello's epithet "toad-faced"

dubiously complimentary to the blameless batrachian. "Riding from

Peretola, when the sun is high, is not the same thing as kicking your

heels on a bench in the shade, like your Florence doctors. Moreover, I

have had not a little pulling to get through the carts and mules into

the Mercato, to find out the husband of a certain Monna Ghita, who had

had a fatal seizure before I was called in; and if it had not been that

I had to demand my fees--"

"Monna Ghita!" said Nello, as the perspiring doctor interrupted himself

to rub his head and face. "Peace be with her angry soul! The Mercato

will want a whip the more if her tongue is laid to rest."

Tito, who had roused himself from his abstraction, and was listening to

the dialogue, felt a new rush of the vague half-formed ideas about

Tessa, which had passed through his mind the evening before: if Monna

Ghita were really taken out of the way, it would be easier for him to

see Tessa again--whenever he wanted to see her.

"\_Gnaffe\_, Maestro," Nello went on, in a sympathising tone, "you are the

slave of rude mortals, who, but for you, would die like brutes, without

help of pill or powder. It is pitiful to see your learned lymph oozing

from your pores as if it were mere vulgar moisture. You think my

shaving will cool and disencumber you? One moment and I have done with

Messer Francesco here. It seems to me a thousand years till I wait upon

a man who carries all the science of Arabia in his head and saddle-bags.

Ecco!"

Nello held up the shaving-cloth with an air of invitation, and Maestro

Tacco advanced and seated himself under a preoccupation with his heat

and his self-importance, which made him quite deaf to the irony conveyed

in Nello's officiously polite speech.

"It is but fitting that a great medicus like you," said Nello, adjusting

the cloth, "should be shaved by the same razor that has shaved the

illustrious Antonio Benevieni, the greatest master of the chirurgic

art."

"The chirurgic art!" interrupted the doctor, with an air of contemptuous

disgust. "Is it your Florentine fashion to put the masters of the

science of medicine on a level with men who do carpentry on broken

limbs, and sew up wounds like tailors, and carve away excrescences as a

butcher trims meat? \_Via\_! A manual art, such as any artificer might

learn, and which has been practised by simple barbers like yourself--on

a level with the noble science of Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna,

which penetrates into the occult influences of the stars and plants and

gems!--a science locked up from the vulgar!"

"No, in truth, Maestro," said Nello, using his lather very deliberately,

as if he wanted to prolong the operation to the utmost, "I never thought

of placing them on a level: I know your science comes next to the

miracles of Holy Church for mystery. But there, you see, is the pity of

it,"--here Nello fell into a tone of regretful sympathy--"your high

science is sealed from the profane and the vulgar, and so you become an

object of envy and slander. I grieve to say it, but there are low

fellows in this city--mere \_sgherri\_, who go about in nightcaps and long

beards, and make it their business to sprinkle gall in every man's broth

who is prospering. Let me tell you--for you are a stranger--this is a

city where every man had need carry a large nail ready to fasten on the

wheel of Fortune when his side happens to be uppermost. Already there

are stories--mere fables doubtless--beginning to be buzzed about

concerning you, that make me wish I could hear of your being well on

your way to Arezzo. I would not have a man of your metal stoned, for

though San Stefano was stoned, he was not great in medicine like San

Cosmo and San Damiano..."

"What stories? what fables?" stammered Maestro Tacco. "What do you

mean?"

"\_Lasso\_! I fear me you are come into the trap for your cheese,

Maestro. The fact is, there is a company of evil youths who go prowling

about the houses of our citizens carrying sharp tools in their

pockets;--no sort of door, or window, or shutter, but they will pierce

it. They are possessed with a diabolical patience to watch the doings

of people who fancy themselves private. It must be they who have done

it--it must be they who have spread the stories about you and your

medicines. Have you by chance detected any small aperture in your door,

or window-shutter? No? Well, I advise you to look; for it is now

commonly talked of that you have been seen in your dwelling at the Canto

di Paglia, making your secret specifics by night: pounding dried toads

in a mortar, compounding a salve out of mashed worms, and making your

pills from the dried livers of rats which you mix with saliva emitted

during the utterance of a blasphemous incantation--which indeed these

witnesses profess to repeat."

"It is a pack of lies!" exclaimed the doctor, struggling to get

utterance, and then desisting in alarm at the approaching razor.

"It is not to me, or any of this respectable company, that you need to

say that, doctor. \_We\_ are not the heads to plant such carrots as those

in. But what of that? What are a handful of reasonable men against a

crowd with stones in their hands? There are those among us who think

Cecco d'Ascoli was an innocent sage--and we all know how he was burnt

alive for being wiser than his fellows. Ah, doctor, it is not by living

at Padua that you can learn to know Florentines. My belief is, they

would stone the Holy Father himself, if they could find a good excuse

for it; and they are persuaded that you are a necromancer, who is trying

to raise the pestilence by selling secret medicines--and I am told your

specifics have in truth an evil smell."

"It is false!" burst out the doctor, as Nello moved away his razor; "it

is false! I will show the pills and the powders to these honourable

signori--and the salve--it has an excellent odour--an odour of--of

salve." He started up with the lather on his chin, and the cloth round

his neck, to search in his saddle-bag for the belied medicines, and

Nello in an instant adroitly shifted the shaving-chair till it was in

the close vicinity of the horse's head, while Sandro, who had now

returned, at a sign from his master placed himself near the bridle.

"Behold, Messeri!" said the doctor, bringing a small box of medicines

and opening it before them.

"Let any signor apply this box to his nostrils and he will find an

honest odour of medicaments--not indeed of pounded gems, or rare

vegetables from the East, or stones found in the bodies of birds; for I

practise on the diseases of the vulgar, for whom heaven has provided

cheaper and less powerful remedies according to their degree: and there

are even remedies known to our science which are entirely free of cost--

as the new \_tussis\_ may be counteracted in the poor, who can pay for no

specifics, by a resolute holding of the breath. And here is a paste

which is even of savoury odour, and is infallible against melancholia,

being concocted under the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus; and I have

seen it allay spasms."

"Stay, Maestro," said Nello, while the doctor had his lathered face

turned towards the group near the door, eagerly holding out his box, and

lifting out one specific after another; "here comes a crying contadina

with her baby. Doubtless she is in search of you; it is perhaps an

opportunity for you to show this honourable company a proof of your

skill. Here, buona donna! here is the famous doctor. Why, what is the

matter with the sweet \_bimbo\_?"

This question was addressed to a sturdy-looking, broad-shouldered

contadina, with her head-drapery folded about her face so that little

was to be seen but a bronzed nose and a pair of dark eyes and eyebrows.

She carried her child packed up in the stiff mummy-shaped case in which

Italian babies have been from time immemorial introduced into society,

turning its face a little towards her bosom, and making those sorrowful

grimaces which women are in the habit of using as a sort of pulleys to

draw down reluctant tears.

"Oh, for the love of the Holy Madonna!" said the woman, in a wailing

voice; "will you look at my poor bimbo? I know I can't pay you for it,

but I took it into the Nunziata last night, and it's turned a worse

colour than before; it's the convulsions. But when I was holding it

before the Santissima Nunziata, I remembered they said there was a new

doctor come who cured everything; and so I thought it might be the will

of the Holy Madonna that I should bring it to you."

"Sit down, Maestro, sit down," said Nello. "Here is an opportunity for

you; here are honourable witnesses who will declare before the

Magnificent Eight that they have seen you practising honestly and

relieving a poor woman's child. And then if your life is in danger, the

Magnificent Eight will put you in prison a little while just to insure

your safety, and after that, their sbirri will conduct you out of

Florence by night, as they did the zealous Frate Minore who preached

against the Jews. What! our people are given to stone-throwing; but we

have magistrates."

The doctor, unable to refuse, seated himself in the shaving-chair,

trembling, half with fear and half with rage, and by this time quite

unconscious of the lather which Nello had laid on with such profuseness.

He deposited his medicine-case on his knees, took out his precious

spectacles (wondrous Florentine device!) from his wallet, lodged them

carefully above his flat nose and high ears, and lifting up his brows,

turned towards the applicant.

"O Santiddio! look at him," said the woman, with a more piteous wail

than ever, as she held out the small mummy, which had its head

completely concealed by dingy drapery wound round the head of the

portable cradle, but seemed to be struggling and crying in a demoniacal

fashion under this imprisonment. "The fit is on him! \_Ohime\_! I know

what colour he is; it's the evil eye--oh!"

The doctor, anxiously holding his knees together to support his box,

bent his spectacles towards the baby, and said cautiously, "It may be a

new disease; unwind these rags, Monna!"

The contadina, with sudden energy, snatched off the encircling linen,

when out struggled--scratching, grinning, and screaming--what the doctor

in his fright fully believed to be a demon, but what Tito recognised as

Vaiano's monkey, made more formidable by an artificial blackness, such

as might have come from a hasty rubbing up the chimney.

Up started the unfortunate doctor, letting his medicine-box fall, and

away jumped the no less terrified and indignant monkey, finding the

first resting-place for his claws on the horse's mane, which he used as

a sort of rope-ladder till he had fairly found his equilibrium, when he

continued to clutch it as a bridle. The horse wanted no spur under such

a rider, and, the already loosened bridle offering no resistance, darted

off across the piazza, with the monkey, clutching, grinning, and

blinking, on his neck.

"\_Il cavallo! Il Diavolo\_!" was now shouted on all sides by the idle

rascals who gathered from all quarters of the piazza, and was echoed in

tones of alarm by the stall-keepers, whose vested interests seemed in

some danger; while the doctor, out of his wits with confused terror at

the Devil, the possible stoning, and the escape of his horse, took to

his heels with spectacles on nose, lathered face, and the shaving-cloth

about his neck, crying--"Stop him! stop him! for a powder--a florin--

stop him for a florin!" while the lads, outstripping him, clapped their

hands and shouted encouragement to the runaway.

The \_cerretano\_, who had not bargained for the flight of his monkey

along with the horse, had caught up his petticoats with much celerity,

and showed a pair of parti-coloured hose above his contadina's shoes,

far in advance of the doctor. And away went the grotesque race up the

Corso degli Adimari--the horse with the singular jockey, the contadina

with the remarkable hose, and the doctor in lather and spectacles, with

furred mantle outflying.

It was a scene such as Florentines loved, from the potent and reverend

signor going to council in his lucco, down to the grinning youngster,

who felt himself master of all situations when his bag was filled with

smooth stones from the convenient dry bed of the torrent. The

grey-headed Domenico Cennini laughed no less heartily than the younger

men, and Nello was triumphantly secure of the general admiration.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, snapping his fingers when the first burst of

laughter was subsiding. "I have cleared my piazza of that unsavoury

fly-trap, \_mi pare\_. Maestro Tacco will no more come here again to sit

for patients than he will take to licking marble for his dinner."

"You are going towards the Piazza della Signoria, Messer Domenico," said

Macchiavelli. "I will go with you, and we shall perhaps see who has

deserved the \_palio\_ among these racers. Come, Melema, will you go

too?"

It had been precisely Tito's intention to accompany Cennini, but before

he had gone many steps, he was called back by Nello, who saw Maso

approaching.

Maso's message was from Romola. She wished Tito to go to the Via de'

Bardi as soon as possible. She would see him under the loggia, at the

top of the house, as she wished to speak to him alone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

UNDER THE LOGGIA.

The loggia at the top of Bardo's house rose above the buildings on each

side of it, and formed a gallery round quadrangular walls. On the side

towards the street the roof was supported by columns; but on the

remaining sides, by a wall pierced with arched openings, so that at the

back, looking over a crowd of irregular, poorly-built dwellings towards

the hill of Bogoli, Romola could at all times have a walk sheltered from

observation. Near one of those arched openings, close to the door by

which he had entered the loggia, Tito awaited her, with a sickening

sense of the sunlight that slanted before him and mingled itself with

the ruin of his hopes. He had never for a moment relied on Romola's

passion for him as likely to be too strong for the repulsion created by

the discovery of his secret; he had not the presumptuous vanity which

might have hindered him from feeling that her love had the same root

with her belief in him. But as he imagined her coming towards him in

her radiant beauty, made so loveably mortal by her soft hazel eyes, he

fell into wishing that she had been something lower, if it were only

that she might let him clasp her and kiss her before they parted. He

had had no real caress from her--nothing but now and then a long glance,

a kiss, a pressure of the hand; and he had so often longed that they

should be alone together. They were going to be alone now; but he saw

her standing inexorably aloof from him. His heart gave a great throb as

he saw the door move: Romola was there. It was all like a flash of

lightning: he felt, rather than saw, the glory about her head, the

tearful appealing eyes; he felt, rather than heard, the cry of love with

which she said, "Tito!"

And in the same moment she was in his arms, and sobbing with her face

against his.

How poor Romola had yearned through the watches of the night to see that

bright face! The new image of death; the strange bewildering doubt

infused into her by the story of a life removed from her understanding

and sympathy; the haunting vision, which she seemed not only to hear

uttered by the low gasping voice, but to live through, as if it had been

her own dream, had made her more conscious than ever that it was Tito

who had first brought the warm stream of hope and gladness into her

life, and who had first turned away the keen edge of pain in the

remembrance of her brother. She would tell Tito everything; there was

no one else to whom she could tell it. She had been restraining herself

in the presence of her father all the morning; but now, that

long-pent-up sob might come forth. Proud and self-controlled to all the

world beside, Romola was as simple and unreserved as a child in her love

for Tito. She had been quite contented with the days when they had only

looked at each other; but now, when she felt the need of clinging to

him, there was no thought that hindered her.

"My Romola! my goddess!" Tito murmured with passionate fondness, as he

clasped her gently, and kissed the thick golden ripples on her neck. He

was in paradise: disgrace, shame, parting--there was no fear of them any

longer. This happiness was too strong to be marred by the sense that

Romola was deceived in him; nay, he could only rejoice in her delusion;

for, after all, concealment had been wisdom. The only thing he could

regret was his needless dread; if, indeed, the dread had not been worth

suffering for the sake of this sudden rapture.

The sob had satisfied itself, and Romola raised her head. Neither of

them spoke; they stood looking at each other's faces with that sweet

wonder which belongs to young love--she with her long white hands on the

dark-brown curls, and he with his dark fingers bathed in the streaming

gold. Each was so beautiful to the other; each was experiencing that

undisturbed mutual consciousness for the first time. The cold pressure

of a new sadness on Romola's heart made her linger the more in that

silent soothing sense of nearness and love; and Tito could not even seek

to press his lips to hers, because that would be change.

"Tito," she said at last, "it has been altogether painful, but I must

tell you everything. Your strength will help me to resist the

impressions that will not be shaken off by reason."

"I know, Romola--I know he is dead," said Tito; and the long lustrous

eyes told nothing of the many wishes that would have brought about that

death long ago if there had been such potency in mere wishes. Romola

only read her own pure thoughts in their dark depths, as we read letters

in happy dreams.

"So changed, Tito! It pierced me to think that it was Dino. And so

strangely hard: not a word to my father; nothing but a vision that he

wanted to tell me. And yet it was so piteous--the struggling breath,

and the eyes that seemed to look towards the crucifix, and yet not to

see it. I shall never forget it; it seems as if it would come between

me and everything I shall look at."

Romola's heart swelled again, so that she was forced to break off. But

the need she felt to disburden her mind to Tito urged her to repress the

rising anguish. When she began to speak again, her thoughts had

travelled a little.

"It was strange, Tito. The vision was about our marriage, and yet he

knew nothing of you."

"What was it, my Romola? Sit down and tell me," said Tito, leading her

to the bench that stood near. A fear had come across him lest the

vision should somehow or other relate to Baldassarre; and this sudden

change of feeling prompted him to seek a change of position.

Romola told him all that had passed, from her entrance into San Marco,

hardly leaving out one of her brother's words, which had burnt

themselves into her memory as they were spoken. But when she was at the

end of the vision, she paused; the rest came too vividly before her to

be uttered, and she sat looking at the distance, almost unconscious for

the moment that Tito was near her. \_His\_ mind was at ease now; that

vague vision had passed over him like white mist, and left no mark. But

he was silent, expecting her to speak again.

"I took it," she went on, as if Tito had been reading her thoughts; "I

took the crucifix; it is down below in my bedroom."

"And now, my Romola," said Tito, entreatingly, "you will banish these

ghastly thoughts. The vision was an ordinary monkish vision, bred of

fasting and fanatical ideas. It surely has no weight with you."

"No, Tito; no. But poor. Dino, \_he\_ believed it was a divine message.

It is strange," she went on meditatively, "this life of men possessed

with fervid beliefs that seem like madness to their fellow-beings. Dino

was not a vulgar fanatic; and that Fra Girolamo--his very voice seems to

have penetrated me with a sense that there is some truth in what moves

them: some truth of which I know nothing."

"It was only because your feelings were highly wrought, my Romola. Your

brother's state of mind was no more than a form of that theosophy which

has been the common disease of excitable dreamy minds in all ages; the

same ideas that your father's old antagonist, Marsilio Ficino, pores

over in the New Platonists; only your brother's passionate nature drove

him to act out what other men write and talk about. And for Fra

Girolamo, he is simply a narrow-minded monk, with a gift of preaching

and infusing terror into the multitude. Any words or any voice would

have shaken you at that moment. When your mind has had a little repose,

you will judge of such things as you have always done before."

"Not about poor Dino," said Romola. "I was angry with him; my heart

seemed to close against him while he was speaking; but since then I have

thought less of what was in my own mind and more of what was in his.

Oh, Tito! it was very piteous to see his young life coming to an end in

that way. That yearning look at the crucifix when he was gasping for

breath--I can never forget it. Last night I looked at the crucifix a

long while, and tried to see that it would help him, until at last it

seemed to me by the lamplight as if the suffering face shed pity."

"My Romola, promise me to resist such thoughts; they are fit for sickly

nuns, not for my golden-tressed Aurora, who looks made to scatter all

such twilight fantasies. Try not to think of them now; we shall not

long be alone together."

The last words were uttered in a tone of tender beseeching, and he

turned her face towards him with a gentle touch of his right-hand.

Romola had had her eyes fixed absently on the arched opening, but she

had not seen the distant hill; she had all the while been in the chapter

house, looking at the pale images of sorrow and death.

Tito's touch and beseeching voice recalled her; and now in the warm

sunlight she saw that rich dark beauty which seemed to gather round it

all images of joy--purple vines festooned between the elms, the strong

corn perfecting itself under the vibrating heat, bright winged creatures

hurrying and resting among the flowers, round limbs beating the earth in

gladness with cymbals held aloft, light melodies chanted to the

thrilling rhythm of strings--all objects and all sounds that tell of

Nature revelling in her force. Strange, bewildering transition from

those pale images of sorrow and death to this bright youthfulness, as of

a sun-god who knew nothing of night! What thought could reconcile that

worn anguish in her brother's face--that straining after something

invisible--with this satisfied strength and beauty, and make it

intelligible that they belonged to the same world? Or was there never

any reconciling of them, but only a blind worship of clashing deities,

first in mad joy and then in wailing? Romola for the first time felt

this questioning need like a sudden uneasy dizziness and want of

something to grasp; it was an experience hardly longer than a sigh, for

the eager theorising of ages is compressed, as in a seed, in the

momentary want of a single mind. But there was no answer to meet the

need, and it vanished before the returning rush of young sympathy with

the glad loving beauty that beamed upon her in new radiance, like the

dawn after we have looked away from it to the grey west.

"Your mind lingers apart from our love, my Romola," Tito said, with a

soft reproachful murmur. "It seems a forgotten thing to you."

She looked at the beseeching eyes in silence, till the sadness all

melted out of her own.

"My joy!" she said, in her full clear voice.

"Do you really care for me enough, then, to banish those chill fancies,

or shall you always be suspecting me as the Great Tempter?" said Tito,

with his bright smile.

"How should I not care for you more than for everything else?

Everything I had felt before in all my life--about my father, and about

my loneliness--was a preparation to love you. You would laugh at me,

Tito, if you knew what sort of man I used to think I should marry--some

scholar with deep lines in his face, like Alamanno Rinuccini, and with

rather grey hair, who would agree with my father in taking the side of

the Aristotelians, and be willing to live with him. I used to think

about the love I read of in the poets, but I never dreamed that anything

like that could happen to me here in Florence in our old library. And

then \_you\_ came, Tito, and were so much to my father, and I began to

believe that life could be happy for me too."

"My goddess! is there any woman like you?" said Tito, with a mixture of

fondness and wondering admiration at the blended majesty and simplicity

in her.

"But, dearest," he went on, rather timidly, "if you minded more about

our marriage, you would persuade your father and Messer Bernardo not to

think of any more delays. But you seem not to mind about it."

"Yes, Tito, I will, I do mind. But I am sure my godfather will urge

more delay now, because of Dino's death. He has never agreed with my

father about disowning Dino, and you know he has always said that we

ought to wait until you have been at least a year in Florence. Do not

think hardly of my godfather. I know he is prejudiced and narrow, but

yet he is very noble. He has often said that it is folly in my father

to want to keep his library apart, that it may bear his name; yet he

would try to get my father's wish carried out. That seems to me very

great and noble--that power of respecting a feeling which he does not

share or understand."

"I have no rancour against Messer Bernardo for thinking you too precious

for me, my Romola," said Tito: and that was true. "But your father,

then, knows of his son's death?"

"Yes, I told him--I could not help it. I told him where I had been, and

that I had seen Dino die; but nothing else; and he has commanded me not

to speak of it again. But he has been very silent this morning, and has

had those restless movements which always go to my heart; they look as

if he were trying to get outside the prison of his blindness. Let us go

to him now. I had persuaded him to try to sleep, because he slept

little in the night. Your voice will soothe him, Tito: it always does."

"And not one kiss? I have not had one," said Tito, in his gentle

reproachful tone, which gave him an air of dependence very charming in a

creature with those rare gifts that seem to excuse presumption.

The sweet pink blush spread itself with the quickness of light over

Romola's face and neck as she bent towards him. It seemed impossible

that their kisses could ever become common things.

"Let us walk once round the loggia," said Romola, "before we go down."

"There is something grim and grave to me always about Florence," said

Tito, as they paused in the front of the house, where they could see

over the opposite roofs to the other side of the river, "and even in its

merriment there is something shrill and hard--biting rather than gay. I

wish we lived in Southern Italy, where thought is broken, not by

weariness, but by delicious languors such as never seem to come over the

`ingenia acerrima Florentina.' I should like to see you under that

southern sun, lying among the flowers, subdued into mere enjoyment,

while I bent over you and touched the lute and sang to you some little

unconscious strain that seemed all one with the light and the warmth.

You have never known that happiness of the nymphs, my Romola."

"No; but I have dreamed of it often since you came. I am very thirsty

for a deep draught of joy--for a life all bright like you. But we will

not think of it now, Tito; it seems to me as if there would always be

pale sad faces among the flowers, and eyes that look in vain. Let us

go."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

THE PORTRAIT.

When Tito left the Via de' Bardi that day in exultant satisfaction at

finding himself thoroughly free from the threatened peril, his thoughts,

no longer claimed by the immediate presence of Romola and her father,

recurred to those futile hours of dread in which he was conscious of

having not only felt but acted as he would not have done if he had had a

truer foresight. He would not have parted with his ring; for Romola,

and others to whom it was a familiar object, would be a little struck

with the apparent sordidness of parting with a gem he had professedly

cherished, unless he feigned as a reason the desire to make some special

gift with the purchase-money; and Tito had at that moment a nauseating

weariness of simulation. He was well out of the possible consequences

that might have fallen on him from that initial deception, and it was no

longer a load on his mind; kind fortune had brought him immunity, and he

thought it was only fair that she should. Who was hurt by it? The

results to Baldassarre were too problematical to be taken into account.

But he wanted now to be free from any hidden shackles that would gall

him, though ever so little, under his ties to Romola. He was not aware

that that very delight in immunity which prompted resolutions not to

entangle himself again, was deadening the sensibilities which alone

could save him from entanglement.

But, after all, the sale of the ring was a slight matter. Was it also a

slight matter that little Tessa was under a delusion which would

doubtless fill her small head with expectations doomed to

disappointment? Should he try to see the little thing alone again and

undeceive her at once, or should he leave the disclosure to time and

chance? Happy dreams are pleasant, and they easily come to an end with

daylight and the stir of life. The sweet, pouting, innocent, round

thing! It was impossible not to think of her. Tito thought he should

like some time to take her a present that would please her, and just

learn if her step-father treated her more cruelly now her mother was

dead. Or, should he at once undeceive Tessa, and then tell Romola about

her, so that they might find some happier lot for the poor thing? No:

that unfortunate little incident of the \_cerretano\_ and the marriage,

and his allowing Tessa to part from him in delusion, must never be known

to Romola, and since no enlightenment could expel it from Tessa's mind,

there would always be a risk of betrayal; besides even little Tessa

might have some gall in her when she found herself disappointed in her

love--yes, she \_must\_ be a little in love with him, and that might make

it well that he should not see her again. Yet it was a trifling

adventure such as a country girl would perhaps ponder on till some ruddy

contadino made acceptable love to her, when she would break her

resolution of secrecy and get at the truth that she was free.

\_Dunque\_--good-bye, Tessa! kindest wishes! Tito had made up his mind

that the silly little affair of the \_cerretano\_ should have no further

consequences for himself; and people are apt to think that resolutions

taken on their own behalf will be firm. As for the fifty-five florins,

the purchase-money of the ring, Tito had made up his mind what to do

with some of them; he would carry out a pretty ingenious thought which

would set him more at ease in accounting for the absence of his ring to

Romola, and would also serve him as a means of guarding her mind from

the recurrence of those monkish fancies which were especially repugnant

to him; and with this thought in his mind, he went to the Via Gualfonda

to find Piero di Cosimo, the artist who at that time was pre-eminent in

the fantastic mythological design which Tito's purpose required.

Entering the court on which Piero's dwelling opened, Tito found the

heavy iron knocker on the door thickly bound round with wool and

ingeniously fastened with cords. Remembering the painter's practice of

stuffing his ears against obtrusive noises, Tito was not much surprised

at this mode of defence against visitors' thunder, and betook himself

first to tapping modestly with his knuckles, and then to a more

importunate attempt to shake the door. In rain! Tito was moving away,

blaming himself for wasting his time on this visit, instead of waiting

till he saw the painter again at Nello's, when a little girl entered the

court with a basket of eggs on her arm, went up to the door, and

standing on tiptoe, pushed up a small iron plate that ran in grooves,

and putting her mouth to the aperture thus disclosed, called out in a

piping voice, "Messer Piero!"

In a few moments Tito heard the sound of bolts, the door opened, and

Piero presented himself in a red night-cap and a loose brown serge

tunic, with sleeves rolled up to the shoulder. He darted a look of

surprise at Tito, but without further notice of him stretched out his

hand to take the basket from the child, re-entered the house, and

presently returning with the empty basket, said, "How much to pay?"

"Two grossoni, Messer Piero; they are all ready boiled, my mother says."

Piero took the coin out of the leathern scarsella at his belt, and the

little maiden trotted away, not without a few upward glances of awed

admiration at the surprising young signor.

Piero's glance was much less complimentary as he said--

"What do you want at my door, Messer Greco? I saw you this morning at

Nello's; if you had asked me then, I could have told you that I see no

man in this house without knowing his business and agreeing with him

beforehand."

"Pardon, Messer Piero," said Tito, with his imperturbable good-humour;

"I acted without sufficient reflection. I remembered nothing but your

admirable skill in inventing pretty caprices, when a sudden desire for

something of that sort prompted me to come to you."

The painter's manners were too notoriously odd to all the world for this

reception to be held a special affront; but even if Tito had suspected

any offensive intention, the impulse to resentment would have been less

strong in him than the desire to conquer goodwill.

Piero made a grimace which was habitual with him when he was spoken to

with flattering suavity. He grinned, stretched out the corners of his

mouth, and pressed down his brows, so as to defy any divination of his

feelings under that kind of stroking.

"And what may that need be?" he said, after a moment's pause. In his

heart he was tempted by the hinted opportunity of applying his

invention.

"I want a very delicate miniature device taken from certain fables of

the poets, which you will know how to combine for me. It must be

painted on a wooden case--I will show you the size--in the form of a

triptych. The inside may be simple gilding: it is on the outside I want

the device. It is a favourite subject with you Florentines--the triumph

of Bacchus and Ariadne; but I want it treated in a new way. A story in

Ovid will give you the necessary hints. The young Bacchus must be

seated in a ship, his head bound with clusters of grapes, and a spear

entwined with vine-leaves in his hand: dark-berried ivy must wind about

the masts and sails, the oars must be thyrsi, and flowers must wreathe

themselves about the poop; leopards and tigers must be crouching before

him, and dolphins must be sporting round. But I want to have the

fair-haired Ariadne with him, made immortal with her golden crown--that

is not in Ovid's story, but no matter, you will conceive it all--and

above there must be young Loves, such as you know how to paint, shooting

with roses at the points of their arrows--"

"Say no more!" said Piero. "I have Ovid in the vulgar tongue. Find me

the passage. I love not to be choked with other men's thoughts. You

may come in."

Piero led the way through the first room, where a basket of eggs was

deposited on the open hearth, near a heap of broken egg-shells and a

bank of ashes. In strange keeping with that sordid litter, there was a

low bedstead of carved ebony, covered carelessly with a piece of rich

oriental carpet, that looked as if it had served to cover the steps to a

Madonna's throne; and a carved \_cassone\_, or large chest, with painted

devices on its sides and lid. There was hardly any other furniture in

the large room, except casts, wooden steps, easels and rough boxes, all

festooned with cobwebs.

The next room was still larger, but it was also much more crowded.

Apparently Piero was keeping the Festa, for the double door underneath

the window which admitted the painter's light from above, was thrown

open, and showed a garden, or rather thicket, in which fig-trees and

vines grew in tangled trailing wildness among nettles and hemlocks, and

a tall cypress lifted its dark head from a stifling mass of yellowish

mulberry-leaves. It seemed as if that dank luxuriance had begun to

penetrate even within the walls of the wide and lofty room; for in one

corner, amidst a confused heap of carved marble fragments and rusty

armour, tufts of long grass and dark feathery fennel had made their way,

and a large stone vase, tilted on one side, seemed to be pouring out the

ivy that streamed around. All about the walls hung pen and oil-sketches

of fantastic sea-monsters; dances of satyrs and maenads; Saint

Margaret's resurrection out of the devouring dragon; Madonnas with the

supernal light upon them; studies of plants and grotesque heads; and on

irregular rough shelves a few books were scattered among great drooping

bunches of corn, bullocks' horns, pieces of dried honeycomb, stones with

patches of rare-coloured lichen, skulls and bones, peacocks' feathers,

and large birds' wings. Rising from amongst the dirty litter of the

floor were lay figures: one in the frock of a Vallombrosan monk,

strangely surmounted by a helmet with barred visor, another smothered

with brocade and skins hastily tossed over it. Amongst this

heterogeneous still life, several speckled and white pigeons were

perched or strutting, too tame to fly at the entrance of men; three

corpulent toads were crawling in an intimate friendly way near the

door-stone; and a white rabbit, apparently the model for that which was

frightening Cupid in the picture of Mars and Venus placed on the central

easel, was twitching its nose with much content on a box full of bran.

"And now, Messer Greco," said Piero, making a sign to Tito that he might

sit down on a low stool near the door, and then standing over him with

folded arms, "don't be trying to see everything at once, like Messer

Domeneddio, but let me know how large you would have this same

triptych."

Tito indicated the required dimensions, and Piero marked them on a piece

of paper.

"And now for the book," said Piero, reaching down a manuscript volume.

"There's nothing about the Ariadne there," said Tito, giving him the

passage; "but you will remember I want the crowned Ariadne by the side

of the young Bacchus: she must have golden hair."

"Ha!" said Piero, abruptly, pursing up his lips again. "And you want

them to be likenesses, eh?" he added, looking down into Tito's face.

Tito laughed and blushed. "I know you are great at portraits, Messer

Piero; but I could not ask Ariadne to sit for you, because the painting

is a secret."

"There it is! I want her to sit to me. Giovanni Vespucci wants me to

paint him a picture of Oedipus and Antigone at Colonos, as he has

expounded it to me: I have a fancy for the subject, and I want Bardo and

his daughter to sit for it. Now, you ask them; and then I'll put the

likeness into Ariadne."

"Agreed, if I can prevail with them. And your price for the Bacchus and

Ariadne?"

"\_Baie\_! If you get them to let me paint them, that will pay me. I'd

rather not have your money: you may pay for the case."

"And when shall I sit for you?" said Tito; "for if we have one likeness,

we must have two."

"I don't want \_your\_ likeness; I've got it already," said Piero, "only

I've made you look frightened. I must take the fright out of it for

Bacchus."

As he was speaking, Piero laid down the book and went to look among some

paintings, propped with their faces against the wall. He returned with

an oil-sketch in his hand.

"I call this as good a bit of portrait as I ever did," he said, looking

at it as he advanced. "Yours is a face that expresses fear well,

because it's naturally a bright one. I noticed it the first time I saw

you. The rest of the picture is hardly sketched; but I've painted \_you\_

in thoroughly."

Piero turned the sketch, and held it towards Tito's eyes. He saw

himself with his right-hand uplifted, holding a wine-cup, in the

attitude of triumphant joy, but with his face turned away from the cup

with an expression of such intense fear in the dilated eyes and pallid

lips, that he felt a cold stream through his veins, as if he were being

thrown into sympathy with his imaged self.

"You are beginning to look like it already," said Piero, with a short

laugh, moving the picture away again. "He's seeing a ghost--that fine

young man. I shall finish it some day, when I've settled what sort of

ghost is the most terrible--whether it should look solid, like a dead

man come to life, or half transparent, like a mist."

Tito, rather ashamed of himself for a sudden sensitiveness strangely

opposed to his usual easy self-command, said carelessly--

"That is a subject after your own heart, Messer Piero--a revel

interrupted by a ghost. You seem to love the blending of the terrible

with the gay. I suppose that is the reason your shelves are so well

furnished with death's-heads, while you are painting those roguish Loves

who are running away with the armour of Mars. I begin to think you are

a Cynic philosopher in the pleasant disguise of a cunning painter."

"Not I, Messer Greco; a philosopher is the last sort of animal I should

choose to resemble. I find it enough to live, without spinning lies to

account for life. Fowls cackle, asses bray, women chatter, and

philosophers spin false reasons--that's the effect the sight of the

world brings out of them. Well, I am an animal that paints instead of

cackling, or braying, or spinning lies. And now, I think, our business

is done; you'll keep to your side of the bargain about the Oedipus and

Antigone?"

"I will do my best," said Tito--on this strong hint, immediately moving

towards the door.

"And you'll let me know at Nello's. No need to come here again."

"I understand," said Tito, laughingly, lifting his hand in sign of

friendly parting.

CHAPTER NINETEEN.

THE OLD MAN'S HOPE.

Messer Bernardo del Nero was as inexorable as Romola had expected in his

advice that the marriage should be deferred till Easter, and in this

matter Bardo was entirely under the ascendancy of his sagacious and

practical friend. Nevertheless, Bernardo himself, though he was as far

as ever from any susceptibility to the personal fascination in Tito

which was felt by others, could not altogether resist that argument of

success which is always powerful with men of the world. Tito was making

his way rapidly in high quarters. He was especially growing in favour

with the young Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, who had even spoken of

Tito's forming part of his learned retinue on an approaching journey to

Rome; and the bright young Greek who had a tongue that was always ready

without ever being quarrelsome, was more and more wished for at gay

suppers in the Via Larga, and at Florentine games in which he had no

pretension to excel, and could admire the incomparable skill of Piero

de' Medici in the most graceful manner in the world. By an unfailing

sequence, Tito's reputation as an agreeable companion in "magnificent"

society made his learning and talent appear more lustrous: and he was

really accomplished enough to prevent an exaggerated estimate from being

hazardous to him. Messer Bernardo had old prejudices and attachments

which now began to argue down the newer and feebler prejudice against

the young Greek stranger who was rather too supple. To the old

Florentine it was impossible to despise the recommendation of standing

well with the best Florentine families, and since Tito began to be

thoroughly received into that circle whose views were the unquestioned

standard of social value, it seemed irrational not to admit that there

was no longer any check to satisfaction in the prospect of such a

son-in-law for Bardo, and such a husband for Romola. It was undeniable

that Tito's coming had been the dawn of a new life for both father and

daughter, and the first promise had even been surpassed. The blind old

scholar--whose proud truthfulness would never enter into that commerce

of feigned and preposterous admiration which, varied by a corresponding

measurelessness in vituperation, made the woof of all learned

intercourse--had fallen into neglect even among his fellow-citizens, and

when he was alluded to at all, it had long been usual to say that,

though his blindness and the loss of his son were pitiable misfortunes,

he was tiresome in contending for the value of his own labours; and that

his discontent was a little inconsistent in a man who had been openly

regardless of religious rites, and who in days past had refused offers

made to him from various quarters, on the slight condition that he would

take orders, without which it was not easy for patrons to provide for

every scholar. But since Tito's coming, there was no longer the same

monotony in the thought that Bardo's name suggested; the old man, it was

understood, had left off his plaints, and the fair daughter was no

longer to be shut up in dowerless pride, waiting for a \_parentado\_. The

winning manners and growing favour of the handsome Greek who was

expected to enter into the double relation of son and husband helped to

make the new interest a thoroughly friendly one, and it was no longer a

rare occurrence when a visitor enlivened the quiet library. Elderly men

came from that indefinite prompting to renew former intercourse which

arises when an old acquaintance begins to be newly talked about; and

young men whom Tito had asked leave to bring once, found it easy to go

again when they overtook him on his way to the Via de' Bardi, and,

resting their hands on his shoulder, fell into easy chat with him. For

it was pleasant to look at Romola's beauty; to see her, like old

Firenzuola's type of womanly majesty, "sitting with a certain grandeur,

speaking with gravity, smiling with modesty, and casting around, as it

were, an odour of queenliness;" [Note 1] and she seemed to unfold like a

strong white lily under this genial breath of admiration and homage; it

was all one to her with her new bright life in Tito's love.

Tito had even been the means of strengthening the hope in Bardo's mind

that he might before his death receive the longed-for security

concerning his library: that it should not be merged in another

collection; that it should not be transferred to a body of monks, and be

called by the name of a monastery; but that it should remain for ever

the Bardi Library, for the use of Florentines. For the old habit of

trusting in the Medici could not die out while their influence was still

the strongest lever in the State; and Tito, once possessing the ear of

the Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, might do more even than Messer

Bernardo towards winning the desired interest, for he could demonstrate

to a learned audience the peculiar value of Bardi's collection. Tito

himself talked sanguinely of such a result, willing to cheer the old

man, and conscious that Romola repaid those gentle words to her father

with a sort of adoration that no direct tribute to herself could have

won from her.

This question of the library was the subject of more than one discussion

with Bernardo del Nero when Christmas was turned and the prospect of the

marriage was becoming near--but always out of Bardo's hearing. For

Bardo nursed a vague belief, which they dared not disturb, that his

property, apart from the library, was adequate to meet all demands. He

would not even, except under a momentary pressure of angry despondency,

admit to himself that the will by which he had disinherited Dino would

leave Romola the heir of nothing but debts; or that he needed anything

from patronage beyond the security that a separate locality should be

assigned to his library, in return for a deed of gift by which he made

it over to the Florentine Republic.

"My opinion is," said Bernardo to Romola, in a consultation they had

under the loggia, "that since you are to be married, and Messer Tito

will have a competent income, we should begin to wind up the affairs,

and ascertain exactly the sum that would be necessary to save the

library from being touched, instead of letting the debts accumulate any

longer. Your father needs nothing but his shred of mutton and his

macaroni every day, and I think Messer Tito may engage to supply that

for the years that remain; he can let it be in place of the

\_morgen-cap\_."

"Tito has always known that my life is bound up with my father's," said

Romola; "and he is better to my father than I am: he delights in making

him happy."

"Ah, he's not made of the same clay as other men, is he?" said Bernardo,

smiling. "Thy father has thought of shutting woman's folly out of thee

by cramming thee with Greek and Latin; but thou hast been as ready to

believe in the first pair of bright eyes and the first soft words that

have come within reach of thee, as if thou couldst say nothing by heart

but Paternosters, like other Christian men's daughters."

"Now, godfather," said Romola, shaking her head playfully, "as if it

were only bright eyes and soft words that made me love Tito! You know

better. You know I love my father and you because you are both good,

and I love Tito too because he is so good. I see it, I feel it, in

everything he says and does. And if he is handsome, too, why should I

not love him the better for that? It seems to me beauty is part of the

finished language by which goodness speaks. You know \_you\_ must have

been a very handsome youth, godfather,"--she looked up with one of her

happy, loving smiles at the stately old man--"you were about as tall as

Tito, and you had very fine eyes; only you looked a little sterner and

prouder, and--"

"And Romola likes to have all the pride to herself?" said Bernardo, not

inaccessible to this pretty coaxing. "However, it is well that in one

way Tito's demands are more modest than those of any Florentine husband

of fitting rank that we should have been likely to find for you; he

wants no dowry."

So it was settled in that way between Messer Bernardo del Nero, Romola,

and Tito. Bardo assented with a wave of the hand when Bernardo told him

that he thought it would be well now to begin to sell property and clear

off debts; being accustomed to think of debts and property as a sort of

thick wood that his imagination never even penetrated, still less got

beyond. And Tito set about winning Messer Bernardo's respect by

inquiring, with his ready faculty, into Florentine money-matters, the

secrets of the \_Monti\_ or public funds, the values of real property, and

the profits of banking.

"You will soon forget that Tito is not a Florentine, godfather," said

Romola. "See how he is learning everything about Florence."

"It seems to me he is one of the \_demoni\_, who are of no particular

country, child," said Bernardo, smiling. "His mind is a little too

nimble to be weighted with all the stuff we men carry about in our

hearts."

Romola smiled too, in happy confidence.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. "Quando una donna e grande, ben formata, porta ben sua persona,

siede con una certa grandezza, parla con gravita, ride con modestia, e

finalmente getta quasi un odor di Regina; allora noi diciamo quella

donna pare una maesta, ella ha una maesta."--Firenzuola: \_Della Bellezza

delle Donne\_.

CHAPTER TWENTY.

THE DAY OF THE BETROTHAL.

It was the last week of the Carnival, and the streets of Florence were

at their fullest and noisiest: there were the masqued processions,

chanting songs, indispensable now they had once been introduced by

Lorenzo the Magnificent; there was the favourite rigoletto, or round

dance, footed "in piazza" under the blue frosty sky; there were

practical jokes of all sorts, from throwing comfits to throwing stones--

especially stones. For the boys and striplings, always a strong element

in Florentine crowds, became at the height of Carnival-time as loud and

unmanageable as tree-crickets, and it was their immemorial privilege to

bar the way with poles to all passengers, until a tribute had been paid

towards furnishing those lovers of strong sensations with suppers and

bonfires: to conclude with the standing entertainment of stone-throwing,

which was not entirely monotonous, since the consequent maiming was

various, and it was not always a single person who was killed. So that

the pleasures of the Carnival were of a checkered kind, and if a painter

were called upon to represent them truly, he would have to make a

picture in which there would be so much grossness and barbarity that it

must be turned with its face to the wall, except when it was taken down

for the grave historical purpose of justifying a reforming zeal which,

in ignorance of the facts, might be unfairly condemned for its

narrowness. Still there was much of that more innocent picturesque

merriment which is never wanting among a people with quick animal

spirits and sensitive organs: there was not the heavy sottishness which

belongs to the thicker northern blood, nor the stealthy fierceness which

in the more southern regions of the peninsula makes the brawl lead to

the dagger-thrust.

It was the high morning, but the merry spirits of the Carnival were

still inclined to lounge and recapitulate the last night's jests, when

Tito Melema was walking at a brisk pace on the way to the Via de' Bardi.

Young Bernardo Dovizi, who now looks at us out of Raphael's portrait as

the keen-eyed Cardinal da Bibbiena, was with him; and, as they went,

they held animated talk about some subject that had evidently no

relation to the sights and sounds through which they were pushing their

way along the Por' Santa Maria. Nevertheless, as they discussed,

smiled, and gesticulated, they both, from time to time, cast quick

glances around them, and at the turning towards the Lung' Arno, leading

to the Ponte Rubaconte, Tito had become aware, in one of these rapid

surveys, that there was some one not far off him by whom he very much

desired not to be recognised at that moment. His time and thoughts were

thoroughly preoccupied, for he was looking forward to a unique occasion

in his life: he was preparing for his betrothal, which was to take place

on the evening of this very day. The ceremony had been resolved upon

rather suddenly; for although preparations towards the marriage had been

going forward for some time--chiefly in the application of Tito's

florins to the fitting up of rooms in Bardo's dwelling, which, the

library excepted, had always been scantily furnished--it had been

intended to defer both the betrothal and the marriage until after

Easter, when Tito's year of probation, insisted on by Bernardo del Nero,

would have been complete. But when an express proposition had come,

that Tito should follow the Cardinal Giovanni to Rome to help Bernardo

Dovizi with his superior knowledge of Greek in arranging a library, and

there was no possibility of declining what lay so plainly on the road to

advancement, he had become urgent in his entreaties that the betrothal

might take place before his departure: there would be the less delay

before the marriage on his return, and it would be less painful to part

if he and Romola were outwardly as well as inwardly pledged to each

other--if he had a claim which defied Messer Bernardo or any one else to

nullify it. For the betrothal, at which rings were exchanged and mutual

contracts were signed, made more than half the legality of marriage, to

be completed on a separate occasion by the nuptial benediction.

Romola's feeling had met Tito's in this wish, and the consent of the

elders had been won.

And now Tito was hastening, amidst arrangements for his departure the

next day, to snatch a morning visit to Romola, to say and hear any last

words that were needful to be said before their meeting for the

betrothal in the evening. It was not a time when any recognition could

be pleasant that was at all likely to detain him; still less a

recognition by Tessa. And it was unmistakably Tessa whom he had caught

sight of moving along, with a timid and forlorn look, towards that very

turn of the Lung' Arno which he was just rounding. As he continued his

talk with the young Dovizi, he had an uncomfortable undercurrent of

consciousness which told him that Tessa had seen him and would certainly

follow him: there was no escaping her along this direct road by the

Arno, and over the Ponte Rubaconte. But she would not dare to speak to

him or approach him while he was not alone, and he would continue to

keep Dovizi with him till they reached Bardo's door. He quickened his

pace, and took up new threads of talk; but all the while the sense that

Tessa was behind him, though he had no physical evidence of the fact,

grew stronger and stronger; it was very irritating--perhaps all the more

so because a certain tenderness and pity for the poor little thing made

the determination to escape without any visible notice of her, a not

altogether agreeable resource. Yet Tito persevered and carried his

companion to the door, cleverly managing his "addio" without turning his

face in a direction where it was possible for him to see an importunate

pair of blue eyes; and as he went up the stone steps, he tried to get

rid of unpleasant thoughts by saying to himself that after all Tessa

might not have seen him, or, if she had, might not have followed him.

But--perhaps because that possibility could not be relied on strongly--

when the visit was over, he came out of the doorway with a quick step

and an air of unconsciousness as to anything that might be on his

right-hand or his left. Our eyes are so constructed, however, that they

take in a wide angle without asking any leave of our will; and Tito knew

that there was a little figure in a white hood standing near the

doorway--knew it quite well, before he felt a hand laid on his arm. It

was a real grasp, and not a light, timid touch; for poor Tessa, seeing

his rapid step, had started forward with a desperate effort. But when

he stopped and turned towards her, her face wore a frightened look, as

if she dreaded the effect of her boldness.

"Tessa!" said Tito, with more sharpness in his voice than she had ever

heard in it before. "Why are you here? You must not follow me--you

must not stand about door-places waiting for me."

Her blue eyes widened with tears, and she said nothing. Tito was afraid

of something worse than ridicule, if he were seen in the Via de' Bardi

with a girlish contadina looking pathetically at him. It was a street

of high silent-looking dwellings, not of traffic; but Bernardo del Nero,

or some one almost as dangerous, might come up at any moment. Even if

it had not been the day of his betrothal, the incident would have been

awkward and annoying. Yet it would be brutal--it was impossible--to

drive Tessa away with harsh words. That accursed folly of his with the

\_cerretano\_--that it should have lain buried in a quiet way for months,

and now start up before him as this unseasonable crop of vexation! He

could not speak harshly, but he spoke hurriedly.

"Tessa, I cannot--must not talk to you here. I will go on to the bridge

and wait for you there. Follow me slowly."

He turned and walked fast to the Ponte Rubaconte, and there leaned

against the wall of one of the quaint little houses that rise at even

distances on the bridge, looking towards the way by which Tessa would

come. It would have softened a much harder heart than Tito's to see the

little thing advancing with her round face much paled and saddened since

he had parted from it at the door of the "Nunziata." Happily it was the

least frequented of the bridges, and there were scarcely any passengers

on it at this moment. He lost no time in speaking as soon as she came

near him.

"Now, Tessa, I have very little time. You must not cry. Why did you

follow me this morning? You must not do so again."

"I thought," said Tessa, speaking in a whisper, and struggling against a

sob that \_would\_ rise immediately at this new voice of Tito's--"I

thought you wouldn't be so long before you came to take care of me

again. And the \_patrigno\_ beats me, and I can't bear it any longer.

And always when I come for a holiday I walk about to find you, and I

can't. Oh, please don't send me away from you again! It has been so

long, and I cry so now, because you never come to me. I can't help it,

for the days are so long, and I don't mind about the goats and kids, or

anything--and I can't--"

The sobs came fast now, and the great tears. Tito felt that he could

not do otherwise than comfort her. Send her away--yes; that he \_must\_

do, at once. But it was all the more impossible to tell her anything

that would leave her in a state of hopeless grief. He saw new trouble

in the background, but the difficulty of the moment was too pressing for

him to weigh distant consequences.

"Tessa, my little one," he said, in his old caressing tones, "you must

not cry. Bear with the cross \_patrigno\_ a little longer. I will come

back to you. But I'm going now to Rome--a long, long way off. I shall

come back in a few weeks, and then I promise you to come and see you.

Promise me to be good and wait for me."

It was the well-remembered voice again, and the mere sound was half

enough to soothe Tessa. She looked up at him with trusting eyes, that

still glittered with tears, sobbing all the while, in spite of her

utmost efforts to obey him. Again he said, in a gentle voice--

"Promise me, my Tessa."

"Yes," she whispered. "But you won't be long?"

"No, not long. But I must \_go now\_. And remember what I told you,

Tessa. Nobody must know that you ever see me, else you will lose me for

ever. And now, when I have left you, go straight home, and never follow

me again. Wait till I come to you. Good-bye, my little Tessa: I \_will\_

come."

There was no help for it; he must turn and leave her without looking

behind him to see how she bore it, for he had no time to spare. When he

did look round he was in the Via de' Benci, where there was no seeing

what was happening on the bridge; but Tessa was too trusting and

obedient not to do just what he had told her.

Yes, the difficulty was at an end for that day; yet this return of Tessa

to him, at a moment when it was impossible for him to put an end to all

difficulty with her by undeceiving her, was an unpleasant incident to

carry in his memory. But Tito's mind was just now thoroughly penetrated

with a hopeful first love, associated with all happy prospects

flattering to his ambition; and that future necessity of grieving Tessa

could be scarcely more to him than the far-off cry of some little

suffering animal buried in the thicket, to a merry cavalcade in the

sunny plain. When, for the second time that day, Tito was hastening

across the Ponte Rubaconte, the thought of Tessa caused no perceptible

diminution of his happiness. He was well muffled in his mantle, less,

perhaps, to protect him from the cold than from the additional notice

that would have been drawn upon him by his dainty apparel. He leaped up

the stone steps by two at a time, and said hurriedly to Maso, who met

him--

"Where is the damigella?"

"In the library; she is quite ready, and Monna Brigida and Messer

Bernardo are already there with Ser Braccio, but none of the rest of the

company."

"Ask her to give me a few minutes alone; I will await her in the

\_salotto\_."

Tito entered a room which had been fitted up in the utmost contrast with

the half-pallid, half-sombre tints of the library. The walls were

brightly frescoed with "caprices" of nymphs and loves sporting under the

blue among flowers and birds. The only furniture besides the red

leather seats and the central table were two tall white vases, and a

young faun playing the flute, modelled by a promising youth named

Michelangelo Buonarotti. It was a room that gave a sense of being in

the sunny open air.

Tito kept his mantle round him, and looked towards the door. It was not

long before Romola entered, all white and gold, more than ever like a

tall lily. Her white silk garment was bound by a golden girdle, which

fell with large tassels; and above that was the rippling gold of her

hair, surmounted by the white mist of her long veil, which was fastened

on her brow by a band of pearls, the gift of Bernardo del Nero, and was

now parted off her face so that it all floated backward.

"Regina mia!" said Tito, as he took her hand and kissed it, still

keeping his mantle round him. He could not help going backward to look

at her again, while she stood in calm delight, with that exquisite

self-consciousness which rises under the gaze of admiring love.

"Romola, will you show me the next room now?" said Tito, checking

himself with the remembrance that the time might be short. "You said I

should see it when you had arranged everything."

Without speaking, she led the way into a long narrow room, painted

brightly like the other, but only with birds and flowers. The furniture

in it was all old; there were old faded objects for feminine use or

ornament, arranged in an open cabinet between the two narrow windows;

above the cabinet was the portrait of Romola's mother; and below this,

on the top of the cabinet, stood the crucifix which Romola had brought

from San Marco.

"I have brought something under my mantle," said Tito, smiling; and

throwing off the large loose garment, he showed the little tabernacle

which had been painted by Piero di Cosimo. The painter had carried out

Tito's intention charmingly, and so far had atoned for his long delay.

"Do you know what this is for, my Romola?" added Tito, taking her by the

hand, and leading her towards the cabinet. "It is a little shrine,

which is to hide away from you for ever that remembrancer of sadness.

You have done with sadness now; and we will bury all images of it--bury

them in a tomb of joy. See!"

A slight quiver passed across Romola's face as Tito took hold of the

crucifix. But she had no wish to prevent his purpose; on the contrary,

she herself wished to subdue certain importunate memories and

questionings which still flitted like unexplained shadows across her

happier thought.

He opened the triptych and placed the crucifix within the central space;

then closing it again, taking out the key, and setting the little

tabernacle in the spot where the crucifix had stood, said--

"Now, Romola, look and see if you are satisfied with the portraits old

Piero has made of us. Is it not a dainty device? and the credit of

choosing it is mine."

"Ah! it is you--it is perfect!" said Romola, looking with moist joyful

eyes at the miniature Bacchus, with his purple clusters. "And I am

Ariadne, and you are crowning me! Yes, it is true, Tito; you have

crowned my poor life."

They held each other's hands while she spoke, and both looked at their

imaged selves. But the reality was far more beautiful; she all

lily-white and golden, and he with his dark glowing beauty above the

purple red-bordered tunic.

"And it was our good strange Piero who painted it?" said Romola. "Did

you put it into his head to paint me as Antigone, that he might have my

likeness for this?"

"No, it was he who made my getting leave for him to paint you and your

father, a condition of his doing this for me."

"Ah! I see now what it was you gave up your precious ring for. I

perceived you had some cunning plan to give me pleasure."

Tito did not blench. Romola's little illusions about himself had long

ceased to cause him anything but satisfaction. He only smiled and

said--

"I might have spared my ring; Piero will accept no money from me; he

thinks himself paid by painting you. And now, while I am away, you will

look every day at those pretty symbols of our life together--the ship on

the calm sea, and the ivy that never withers, and those Loves that have

left off wounding us and shower soft petals that are like our kisses;

and the leopards and tigers, they are the troubles of your life that are

all quelled now; and the strange sea-monsters, with their merry eyes--

let us see--they are the dull passages in the heavy books, which have

begun to be amusing since we have sat by each other."

"Tito mio!" said Romola, in a half-laughing voice of love; "but you will

give me the key?" she added, holding out her hand for it.

"Not at all!" said Tito, with playful decision, opening his scarsella

and dropping in the little key. "I shall drown it in the Arno."

"But if I ever wanted to look at the crucifix again?"

"Ah! for that very reason it is hidden--hidden by these images of youth

and joy."

He pressed a light kiss on her brow, and she said no more, ready to

submit, like all strong souls, when she felt no valid reason for

resistance.

And then they joined the waiting company, which made a dignified little

procession as it passed along the Ponte Rubaconte towards Santa Croce.

Slowly it passed, for Bardo, unaccustomed for years to leave his own

house, walked with a more timid step than usual; and that slow pace

suited well with the gouty dignity of Messer Bartolommeo Scala, who

graced the occasion by his presence, along with his daughter Alessandra.

It was customary to have very long troops of kindred and friends at the

\_sposalizio\_, or betrothal, and it had even been found necessary in time

past to limit the number by law to no more than \_four hundred\_--two

hundred on each side; for since the guests were all feasted after this

initial ceremony, as well as after the \_nozze\_, or marriage, the very

first stage of matrimony had become a ruinous expense, as that scholarly

Benedict, Leonardo Bruno, complained in his own case. But Bardo, who in

his poverty had kept himself proudly free from any appearance of

claiming the advantages attached to a powerful family name, would have

no invitations given on the strength of mere friendship; and the modest

procession of twenty that followed the \_sposi\_ were, with three or four

exceptions, friends of Bardo's and Tito's selected on personal grounds.

Bernardo del Nero walked as a vanguard before Bardo, who was led on the

right by Tito, while Romola held her father's other hand. Bardo had

himself been married at Santa Croce, and had insisted on Romola's being

betrothed and married there, rather than in the little church of Santa

Lucia close by their house, because he had a complete mental vision of

the grand church where he hoped that a burial might be granted him among

the Florentines who had deserved well. Happily the way was short and

direct, and lay aloof from the loudest riot of the Carnival, if only

they could return before any dances or shows began in the great piazza

of Santa Croce. The west was red as they passed the bridge, and shed a

mellow light on the pretty procession, which had a touch of solemnity in

the presence of the blind father. But when the ceremony was over, and

Tito and Romola came out on to the broad steps of the church, with the

golden links of destiny on their fingers, the evening had deepened into

struggling starlight, and the servants had their torches lit.

While they came out, a strange dreary chant, as of a \_Miserere\_, met

their ears, and they saw that at the extreme end of the piazza there

seemed to be a stream of people impelled by something approaching from

the Borgo de' Greci.

"It is one of their masqued processions, I suppose," said Tito, who was

now alone with Romola, while Bernardo took charge of Bardo.

And as he spoke there came slowly into view, at a height far above the

heads of the onlookers, a huge and ghastly image of Winged Time with his

scythe and hour-glass, surrounded by his winged children, the Hours. He

was mounted on a high car completely covered with black, and the

bullocks that drew the car were also covered with black, their horns

alone standing out white above the gloom; so that in the sombre shadow

of the houses it seemed to those at a distance as if Time and his

children were apparitions floating through the air. And behind them

came what looked like a troop of the sheeted dead gliding above

blackness. And as they glided slowly, they chanted in a wailing strain.

A cold horror seized on Romola, for at the first moment it seemed as if

her brother's vision, which could never be effaced from her mind, was

being half fulfilled. She clung to Tito, who, divining what was in her

thoughts, said--

"What dismal fooling sometimes pleases your Florentines! Doubtless this

is an invention of Piero di Cosimo, who loves such grim merriment."

"Tito, I wish it had not happened. It will deepen the images of that

vision which I would fain be rid of."

"Nay, Romola, you will look only at the images of our happiness now. I

have locked all sadness away from you."

"But it is still there--it is only hidden," said Romola, in a low tone,

hardly conscious that she spoke.

"See, they are all gone now!" said Tito. "You will forget this ghastly

mummery when we are in the light, and can see each other's eyes. My

Ariadne must never look backward now--only forward to Easter, when she

will triumph with her Care-dispeller."

PART TWO.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE.

FLORENCE EXPECTS A GUEST.

It was the 17th of November 1494: more than eighteen months since Tito

and Romola had been finally united in the joyous Easter time, and had

had a rainbow-tinted shower of comfits thrown over them, after the

ancient Greek fashion, in token that the heavens would shower sweets on

them through all their double life.

Since that Easter a great change had come over the prospects of

Florence; and as in the tree that bears a myriad of blossoms, each

single bud with its fruit is dependent on the primary circulation of the

sap, so the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand

political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of

Italy.

In this very November, little more than a week ago, the spirit of the

old centuries seemed to have re-entered the breasts of Florentines. The

great bell in the palace tower had rung out the hammer-sound of alarm,

and the people had mustered with their rusty arms, their tools and

impromptu cudgels, to drive out the Medici. The gate of San Gallo had

been fairly shut on the arrogant, exasperating Piero, galloping away

towards Bologna with his hired horsemen frightened behind him, and shut

on his keener young brother, the cardinal, escaping in the disguise of a

Franciscan monk: a price had been set on both their heads. After that,

there had been some sacking of houses, according to old precedent; the

ignominious images, painted on the public buildings, of the men who had

conspired against the Medici in days gone by, were effaced; the exiled

enemies of the Medici were invited home. The half-fledged tyrants were

fairly out of their splendid nest in the Via Larga, and the Republic had

recovered the use of its will again.

But now, a week later, the great palace in the Via Larga had been

prepared for the reception of another tenant; and if drapery roofing the

streets with unwonted colour, if banners and hangings pouring out of the

windows, if carpets and tapestry stretched over all steps and pavement

on which exceptional feet might tread, were an unquestionable proof of

joy, Florence was very joyful in the expectation of its new guest. The

stream of colour flowed from the palace in the Via Larga round by the

Cathedral, then by the great Piazza della Signoria, and across the Ponte

Vecchio to the Porta San Frediano--the gate that looks towards Pisa.

There, near the gate, a platform and canopy had been erected for the

Signoria; and Messer Luca Corsini, doctor of law, felt his heart

palpitating a little with the sense that he had a Latin oration to read;

and every chief elder in Florence had to make himself ready, with smooth

chin and well-lined silk lucco, to walk in procession; and the well-born

youths were looking at their rich new tunics after the French mode which

was to impress the stranger as having a peculiar grace when worn by

Florentines; and a large body of the clergy, from the archbishop in his

effulgence to the train of monks, black, white, and grey, were

consulting betimes in the morning how they should marshal themselves,

with their burden of relics and sacred banners and consecrated jewels,

that their movements might be adjusted to the expected arrival of the

illustrious visitor, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

An unexampled visitor! For he had come through the passes of the Alps

with such an army as Italy had not seen before: with thousands of

terrible Swiss, well used to fight for love and hatred as well as for

hire; with a host of gallant cavaliers proud of a name; with an

unprecedented infantry, in which every man in a hundred carried an

arquebus; nay, with cannon of bronze, shooting not stones but iron

balls, drawn not by bullocks but by horses, and capable of firing a

second time before a city could mend the breach made by the first ball.

Some compared the new-comer to Charlemagne, reputed rebuilder of

Florence, welcome conqueror of degenerate kings, regulator and

benefactor of the Church, some preferred the comparison to Cyrus,

liberator of the chosen people, restorer of the Temple. For he had come

across the Alps with the most glorious projects: he was to march through

Italy amidst the jubilees of a grateful and admiring people; he was to

satisfy all conflicting complaints at Rome; he was to take possession,

by virtue of hereditary right and a little fighting, of the kingdom of

Naples; and from that convenient starting-point he was to set out on the

conquest of the Turks, who were partly to be cut to pieces and partly

converted to the faith of Christ. It was a scheme that seemed to befit

the Most Christian King, head of a nation which, thanks to the devices

of a subtle Louis the Eleventh who had died in much fright as to his

personal prospects ten years before, had become the strongest of

Christian monarchies; and this antitype of Cyrus and Charlemagne was no

other than the son of that subtle Louis--the young Charles the Eighth of

France.

Surely, on a general statement, hardly anything could seem more

grandiose, or fitter to revive in the breasts of men the memory of great

dispensations by which new strata had been laid in the history of

mankind. And there was a very widely spread conviction that the advent

of the French king and his army into Italy was one of those events at

which marble statues might well be believed to perspire, phantasmal

fiery warriors to fight in the air, and quadrupeds to bring forth

monstrous births--that it did not belong to the usual order of

Providence, but was in a peculiar sense the work of God. It was a

conviction that rested less on the necessarily momentous character of a

powerful foreign invasion than on certain moral emotions to which the

aspect of the times gave the form of presentiments: emotions which had

found a very remarkable utterance in the voice of a single man.

That man was Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Prior of the Dominican convent of

San Marco in Florence. On a September morning, when men's ears were

ringing with the news that the French army had entered Italy, he had

preached in the Cathedral of Florence from the text, "Behold I, even I,

do bring a flood of waters upon the earth." He believed it was by

supreme guidance that he had reached just so far in his exposition of

Genesis the previous Lent; and he believed the "flood of water"--emblem

at once of avenging wrath and purifying mercy--to be the divinely--

indicated symbol of the French army. His audience, some of whom were

held to be among the choicest spirits of the age--the most cultivated

men in the most cultivated of Italian cities--believed it too, and

listened with shuddering awe. For this man had a power rarely

paralleled, of impressing his beliefs on others, and of swaying very

various minds. And as long as four years ago he had proclaimed from the

chief pulpit of Florence that a scourge was about to descend on Italy,

and that by this scourge the Church was to be purified. Savonarola

appeared to believe, and his hearers more or less waveringly believed,

that he had a mission like that of the Hebrew prophets, and that the

Florentines amongst whom his message was delivered were in some sense a

second chosen people. The idea of prophetic gifts was not a remote one

in that age: seers of visions, circumstantial heralds of things to be,

were far from uncommon either outside or inside the cloister; but this

very fact made Savonarola stand out the more conspicuously as a grand

exception. While in others the gift of prophecy was very much like a

farthing candle illuminating small corners of human destiny with

prophetic gossip, in Savonarola it was like a mighty beacon shining far

out for the warning and guidance of men. And to some of the soberest

minds the supernatural character of his insight into the future gathered

a strong attestation from the peculiar conditions of the age.

At the close of 1492, the year in which Lorenzo de' Medici died and Tito

Melema came as a wanderer to Florence, Italy was enjoying a peace and

prosperity unthreatened by any near and definite danger. There was no

fear of famine, for the seasons had been plenteous in corn, and wine,

and oil; new palaces had been rising in all fair cities, new villas on

pleasant slopes and summits; and the men who had more than their share

of these good things were in no fear of the larger number who had less.

For the citizens' armour was getting rusty, and populations seemed to

have become tame, licking the hands of masters who paid for a ready-made

army when they wanted it, as they paid for goods of Smyrna. Even the

fear of the Turk had ceased to be active, and the Pope found it more

immediately profitable to accept bribes from him for a little

prospective poisoning than to form plans either for conquering or for

converting him.

Altogether this world, with its partitioned empire and its roomy

universal Church, seemed to be a handsome establishment for the few who

were lucky or wise enough to reap the advantages of human folly: a world

in which lust and obscenity, lying and treachery, oppression and murder,

were pleasant, useful, and when properly managed, not dangerous. And as

a sort of fringe or adornment to the substantial delights of tyranny,

avarice, and lasciviousness, there was the patronage of polite learning

and the fine arts, so that flattery could always be had in the choicest

Latin to be commanded at that time, and sublime artists were at hand to

paint the holy and the unclean with impartial skill. The Church, it was

said, had never been so disgraced in its head, had never shown so few

signs of renovating, vital belief in its lower members; nevertheless it

was much more prosperous than in some past days. The heavens were fair

and smiling above; and below there were no signs of earthquake.

Yet at that time, as we have seen, there was a man in Florence who for

two years and more had been preaching that a scourge was at hand; that

the world was certainly not framed for the lasting convenience of

hypocrites, libertines, and oppressors. From the midst of those smiling

heavens he had seen a sword hanging--the sword of God's justice--which

was speedily to descend with purifying punishment on the Church and the

world. In brilliant Ferrara, seventeen years before, the contradiction

between men's lives and their professed beliefs had pressed upon him

with a force that had been enough to destroy his appetite for the world,

and at the age of twenty-three had driven him into the cloister. He

believed that God had committed to the Church the sacred lamp of truth

for the guidance and salvation of men, and he saw that the Church, in

its corruption, had become a sepulchre to hide the lamp. As the years

went on scandals increased and multiplied, and hypocrisy seemed to have

given place to impudence. Had the world, then, ceased to have a

righteous Ruler? Was the Church finally forsaken? No, assuredly: in

the Sacred Book there was a record of the past in which might be seen as

in a glass what would be in the days to come, and the book showed that

when the wickedness of the chosen people, type of the Christian Church,

had become crying, the judgments of God had descended on them. Nay,

reason itself declared that vengeance was imminent, for what else would

suffice to turn men from their obstinacy in evil? And unless the Church

were reclaimed, how could the promises be fulfilled, that the heathens

should be converted and the whole world become subject to the one true

law? He had seen his belief reflected in visions--a mode of seeing

which had been frequent with him from his youth up.

But the real force of demonstration for Girolamo Savonarola lay in his

own burning indignation at the sight of wrong; in his fervent belief in

an Unseen Justice that would put an end to the wrong, and in an Unseen

Purity to which lying and uncleanness were an abomination. To his

ardent, power-loving soul, believing in great ends, and longing to

achieve those ends by the exertion of its own strong will, the faith in

a supreme and righteous Ruler became one with the faith in a speedy

divine interposition that would punish and reclaim.

Meanwhile, under that splendid masquerade of dignities sacred and

secular which seemed to make the life of lucky Churchmen and princely

families so luxurious and amusing, there were certain conditions at work

which slowly tended to disturb the general festivity. Ludovico Sforza--

copious in gallantry, splendid patron of an incomparable Leonardo da

Vinci--holding the ducal crown of Milan in his grasp, and wanting to put

it on his own head rather than let it rest on that of a feeble nephew

who would take very little to poison him, was much afraid of the

Spanish-born old King Ferdinand and the Crown Prince Alfonso of Naples,

who, not liking cruelty and treachery which were useless to themselves,

objected to the poisoning of a near relative for the advantage of a

Lombard usurper; the royalties of Naples again were afraid of their

suzerain, Pope Alexander Borgia; all three were anxiously watching

Florence, lest with its midway territory it should determine the game by

underhand backing; and all four, with every small state in Italy, were

afraid of Venice--Venice the cautious, the stable, and the strong, that

wanted to stretch its arms not only along both sides of the Adriatic but

across to the ports of the western coast, Lorenzo de' Medici, it was

thought, did much to prevent the fatal outbreak of such jealousies,

keeping up the old Florentine alliance with Naples and the Pope, and yet

persuading Milan that the alliance was for the general advantage. But

young Piero de' Medici's rash vanity had quickly nullified the effect of

his father's wary policy, and Ludovico Sforza, roused to suspicion of a

league against him, thought of a move which would checkmate his

adversaries: he determined to invite the French king to march into

Italy, and, as heir of the house of Anjou, take possession of Naples.

Ambassadors--"orators," as they were called in those haranguing times--

went and came; a recusant cardinal, determined not to acknowledge a Pope

elected by bribery (and his own particular enemy), went and came also,

and seconded the invitation with hot rhetoric; and the young king seemed

to lend a willing ear. So that in 1493 the rumour spread and became

louder and louder that Charles the Eighth of France was about to cross

the Alps with a mighty army; and the Italian populations, accustomed,

since Italy had ceased to be the heart of the Roman empire, to look for

an arbitrator from afar, began vaguely to regard his coming as a means

of avenging their wrongs and redressing their grievances.

And in that rumour Savonarola had heard the assurance that his prophecy

was being verified. What was it that filled the ears of the prophets of

old but the distant tread of foreign armies, coming to do the work of

justice? He no longer looked vaguely to the horizon for the coming

storm: he pointed to the rising cloud. The French army was that new

deluge which was to purify the earth from iniquity; the French king,

Charles the Eighth, was the instrument elected by God, as Cyrus had been

of old, and all men who desired good rather than evil were to rejoice in

his coming. For the scourge would fall destructively on the impenitent

alone. Let any city of Italy, let Florence above all--Florence beloved

of God, since to its ear the warning voice had been specially sent--

repent and turn from its ways, like Nineveh of old, and the storm-cloud

would roll over it and leave only refreshing raindrops.

Fra Girolamo's word was powerful; yet now that the new Cyrus had already

been three months in Italy, and was not far from the gates of Florence,

his presence was expected there with mixed feelings, in which fear and

distrust certainly predominated. At present it was not understood that

he had redressed any grievances; and the Florentines clearly had nothing

to thank him for. He held their strong frontier fortresses, which Piero

de' Medici had given up to him without securing any honourable terms in

return; he had done nothing to quell the alarming revolt of Pisa, which

had been encouraged by his presence to throw off the Florentine yoke;

and "orators," even with a prophet at their head, could win no assurance

from him, except that he would settle everything when he was once within

the walls of Florence. Still, there was the satisfaction of knowing

that the exasperating Piero de' Medici had been fairly pelted out for

the ignominious surrender of the fortresses, and in that act of energy

the spirit of the Republic had recovered some of its old fire.

The preparations for the equivocal guest were not entirely those of a

city resigned to submission. Behind the bright drapery and banners

symbolical of joy, there were preparations of another sort made with

common accord by government and people. Well hidden within walls there

were hired soldiers of the Republic, hastily called in from the

surrounding districts; there were old arms duly furbished, and sharp

tools and heavy cudgels laid carefully at hand, to be snatched up on

short notice; there were excellent boards and stakes to form barricades

upon occasion, and a good supply of stones to make a surprising hail

from the upper windows. Above all, there were people very strongly in

the humour for fighting any personage who might be supposed to have

designs of hectoring over them, they having lately tasted that new

pleasure with much relish. This humour was not diminished by the sight

of occasional parties of Frenchmen, coming beforehand to choose their

quarters, with a hawk, perhaps, on their left wrist, and, metaphorically

speaking, a piece of chalk in their right-hand to mark Italian doors

withal; especially as creditable historians imply that many sons of

France were at that time characterised by something approaching to a

swagger, which must have whetted the Florentine appetite for a little

stone-throwing.

And this was the temper of Florence on the morning of the 17th of

November 1494.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO.

THE PRISONERS.

The sky was grey, but that made little difference in the Piazza del

Duomo, which was covered with its holiday sky of blue drapery, and its

constellations of yellow lilies and coats of arms. The sheaves of

banners were unfurled at the angles of the Baptistery, but there was no

carpet yet on the steps of the Duomo, for the marble was being trodden

by numerous feet that were not at all exceptional. It was the hour of

the Advent sermons, and the very same reasons which had flushed the

streets with holiday colour were reasons why the preaching in the Duomo

could least of all be dispensed with.

But not all the feet in the Piazza were hastening towards the steps.

People of high and low degree were moving to and fro with the brisk pace

of men who had errands before them; groups of talkers were thickly

scattered, some willing to be late for the sermon, and others content

not to hear it at all.

The expression on the faces of these apparent loungers was not that of

men who are enjoying the pleasant laziness of an opening holiday. Some

were in close and eager discussion; others were listening with keen

interest to a single spokesman, and yet from time to time turned round

with a scanning glance at any new passer-by. At the corner, looking

towards the Via de' Cerretani--just where the artificial rainbow light

of the Piazza ceased, and the grey morning fell on the sombre stone

houses--there was a remarkable cluster of the working people, most of

them bearing on their dress or persons the signs of their daily labour,

and almost all of them carrying some weapon, or some tool which might

serve as a weapon upon occasion. Standing in the grey light of the

street, with bare brawny arms and soiled garments, they made all the

more striking the transition from the brightness of the Piazza. They

were listening to the thin notary, Ser Cioni, who had just paused on his

way to the Duomo. His biting words could get only a contemptuous

reception two years and a half before in the Mercato, but now he spoke

with the more complacent humour of a man whose party is uppermost, and

who is conscious of some influence with the people.

"Never talk to me," he was saying, in his incisive voice, "never talk to

me of bloodthirsty Swiss or fierce French infantry: they might as well

be in the narrow passes of the mountains as in our streets; and peasants

have destroyed the finest armies of our condottieri in time past, when

they had once got them between steep precipices. I tell you,

Florentines need be afraid of no army in their own streets."

"That's true, Ser Cioni," said a man whose arms and hands were

discoloured by crimson dye, which looked like blood-stains, and who had

a small hatchet stuck in his belt; "and those French cavaliers, who came

in squaring themselves in their smart doublets the other day, saw a

sample of the dinner we could serve up for them. I was carrying my

cloth in Ognissanti, when I saw my fine Messeri going by, looking round

as if they thought the houses of the Vespucci and the Agli a poor pick

of lodgings for them, and eyeing us Florentines, like top-knotted cocks

as they are, as if they pitied us because we didn't know how to strut.

`Yes, my fine \_Galli\_,' says I, `stick out your stomachs; I've got a

meat-axe in my belt that will go inside you all the easier;' when

presently the old cow lowed, [Note 1] and I knew something had

happened--no matter what. So I threw my cloth in at the first doorway,

and took hold of my meat-axe and ran after my fine cavaliers towards the

Vigna Nuova. And, `What is it, Guccio?' said I, when he came up with

me. `I think it's the Medici coming back,' said Guccio. \_Bembe\_! I

expected so! And up we reared a barricade, and the Frenchmen looked

behind and saw themselves in a trap; and up comes a good swarm of our

\_Ciompi\_ [Note 2] and one of them with a big scythe he had in his hand

mowed off one of the fine cavalier's feathers:--it's true! And the

lasses peppered a few stones down to frighten them. However, Piero de'

Medici wasn't come after all; and it was a pity; for we'd have left him

neither legs nor wings to go away with again."

"Well spoken, Oddo," said a young butcher, with his knife at his belt;

"and it's my belief Piero will be a good while before he wants to come

back, for he looked as frightened as a hunted chicken, when we hustled

and pelted him in the piazza. He's a coward, else he might have made a

better stand when he'd got his horsemen. But we'll swallow no Medici

any more, whatever else the French king wants to make us swallow."

"But I like not those French cannon they talk of," said Goro, none the

less fat for two years' additional grievances. "San Giovanni defend us!

If Messer Domeneddio means so well by us as your Frate says he does,

Ser Cioni, why shouldn't he have sent the French another way to Naples?"

"Ay, Goro," said the dyer; "that's a question worth putting. Thou art

not such a pumpkin-head as I took thee for. Why, they might have gone

to Naples by Bologna, eh, Ser Cioni? or if they'd gone to Arezzo--we

wouldn't have minded their going to Arezzo."

"Fools! It will be for the good and glory of Florence," Ser Cioni

began. But he was interrupted by the exclamation, "Look there!" which

burst from several voices at once, while the faces were all turned to a

party who were advancing along the Via de' Cerretani.

"It's Lorenzo Tornabuoni, and one of the French noblemen who are in his

house," said Ser Cioni, in some contempt at this interruption. "He

pretends to look well satisfied--that deep Tornabuoni--but he's a

Medicean in his heart: mind that."

The advancing party was rather a brilliant one, for there was not only

the distinguished presence of Lorenzo Tornabuoni, and the splendid

costume of the Frenchman with his elaborately displayed white linen and

gorgeous embroidery; there were two other Florentines of high birth in

handsome dresses donned for the coming procession, and on the left-hand

of the Frenchman was a figure that was not to be eclipsed by any amount

of intention or brocade--a figure we have often seen before. He wore

nothing but black, for he was in mourning; but the black was presently

to be covered by a red mantle, for he too was to walk in procession as

Latin Secretary to the Ten. Tito Melema had become conspicuously

serviceable in the intercourse with the French guests, from his

familiarity with Southern Italy, and his readiness in the French tongue,

which he had spoken in his early youth; and he had paid more than one

visit to the French camp at Signa. The lustre of good fortune was upon

him; he was smiling, listening, and explaining, with his usual graceful

unpretentious ease, and only a very keen eye bent on studying him could

have marked a certain amount of change in him which was not to be

accounted for by the lapse of eighteen months. It was that change which

comes from the final departure of moral youthfulness--from the distinct

self-conscious adoption of a part in life. The lines of the face were

as soft as ever, the eyes as pellucid; but something was gone--something

as indefinable as the changes in the morning twilight.

The Frenchman was gathering instructions concerning ceremonial before

riding back to Signa, and now he was going to have a final survey of the

Piazza del Duomo, where the royal procession was to pause for religious

purposes. The distinguished party attracted the notice of all eyes as

it entered the piazza, but the gaze was not entirely cordial and

admiring; there were remarks not altogether allusive and mysterious to

the Frenchman's hoof-shaped shoes--delicate flattery of royal

superfluity in toes; and there was no care that certain snarlings at

"Mediceans" should be strictly inaudible. But Lorenzo Tornabuoni

possessed that power of dissembling annoyance which is demanded in a man

who courts popularity, and Tito, besides his natural disposition to

overcome ill-will by good-humour, had the unimpassioned feeling of the

alien towards names and details that move the deepest passions of the

native.

Arrived where they could get a good oblique view of the Duomo, the party

paused. The festoons and devices placed over the central doorway

excited some demur, and Tornabuoni beckoned to Piero di Cosimo, who, as

was usual with him at this hour, was lounging in front of Nello's shop.

There was soon an animated discussion, and it became highly amusing from

the Frenchman's astonishment at Picro's odd pungency of statement, which

Tito translated literally. Even snarling onlookers became curious, and

their faces began to wear the half-smiling, half-humiliated expression

of people who are not within hearing of the joke which is producing

infectious laughter. It was a delightful moment for Tito, for he was

the only one of the party who could have made so amusing an interpreter,

and without any disposition to triumphant self-gratulation he revelled

in the sense that he was an object of liking--he basked in approving

glances. The rainbow light fell about the laughing group, and the grave

church-goers had all disappeared within the walls. It seemed as if the

piazza had been decorated for a real Florentine holiday.

Meanwhile in the grey light of the unadorned streets there were

on-comers who made no show of linen and brocade, and whose humour was

far from merry. Here, too, the French dress and hoofed shoes were

conspicuous, but they were being pressed upon by a larger and larger

number of non-admiring Florentines. In the van of the crowd were three

men in scanty clothing; each had his hands bound together by a cord, and

a rope was fastened round his neck and body, in such a way that he who

held the extremity of the rope might easily check any rebellious

movement by the threat of throttling. The men who held the ropes were

French soldiers, and by broken Italian phrases and strokes from the

knotted end of the rope, they from time to time stimulated their

prisoners to beg. Two of them were obedient, and to every Florentine

they had encountered had held out their bound hands and said in piteous

tones--

"For the love of God and the Holy Madonna, give us something towards our

ransom! We are Tuscans: we were made prisoners in Lunigiana."

But the third man remained obstinately silent under all the strokes from

the knotted cord. He was very different in aspect from his two

fellow-prisoners. They were young and hardy, and, in the scant clothing

which the avarice of their captors had left them, looked like vulgar,

sturdy mendicants. But he had passed the boundary of old age, and could

hardly be less than four or five and sixty. His beard, which had grown

long in neglect, and the hair which fell thick and straight round his

baldness, were nearly white. His thickset figure was still firm and

upright, though emaciated, and seemed to express energy in spite of

age--an expression that was partly carried out in the dark eyes and

strong dark eyebrows, which had a strangely isolated intensity of colour

in the midst of his yellow, bloodless, deep-wrinkled face with its lank

grey hairs. And yet there was something fitful in the eyes which

contradicted the occasional flash of energy: after looking round with

quick fierceness at windows and faces, they fell again with a lost and

wandering look. But his lips were motionless, and he held his hands

resolutely down. He would not beg.

This sight had been witnessed by the Florentines with growing

exasperation. Many standing at their doors or passing quietly along had

at once given money--some in half-automatic response to an appeal in the

name of God, others in that unquestioning awe of the French soldiery

which had been created by the reports of their cruel warfare, and on

which the French themselves counted as a guarantee of immunity in their

acts of insolence. But as the group had proceeded farther into the

heart of the city, that compliance had gradually disappeared, and the

soldiers found themselves escorted by a gathering troop of men and boys,

who kept up a chorus of exclamations sufficiently intelligible to

foreign ears without any interpreter. The soldiers themselves began to

dislike their position, for, with a strong inclination to use their

weapons, they were checked by the necessity for keeping a secure hold on

their prisoners, and they were now hurrying along in the hope of finding

shelter in a hostelry.

"French dogs!"

"Bullock-feet!"

"Snatch their pikes from them!"

"Cut the cords and make them run for their prisoners. They'll run as

fast as geese--don't you see they're web-footed?" These were the cries

which the soldiers vaguely understood to be jeers, and probably threats.

But every one seemed disposed to give invitations of this spirited kind

rather than to act upon them.

"Santiddio! here's a sight!" said the dyer, as soon as he had divined

the meaning of the advancing tumult, "and the fools do nothing but hoot.

Come along!" he added, snatching his axe from his belt, and running to

join the crowd, followed by the butcher and all the rest of his

companions, except Goro, who hastily retreated up a narrow passage.

The sight of the dyer, running forward with blood-red arms and axe

uplifted, and with his cluster of rough companions behind him, had a

stimulating effect on the crowd. Not that he did anything else than

pass beyond the soldiers and thrust himself well among his

fellow-citizens, flourishing his axe; but he served as a stirring symbol

of street-fighting, like the waving of a well-known gonfalon. And the

first sign that fire was ready to burst out was something as rapid as a

little leaping tongue of flame: it was an act of the conjuror's impish

lad Lollo, who was dancing and jeering in front of the ingenuous boys

that made the majority of the crowd. Lollo had no great compassion for

the prisoners, but being conscious of an excellent knife which was his

unfailing companion, it had seemed to him from the first that to jump

forward, cut a rope, and leap back again before the soldier who held it

could use his weapon, would be an amusing and dexterous piece of

mischief. And now, when the people began to hoot and jostle more

vigorously, Lollo felt that his moment was come--he was close to the

eldest prisoner: in an instant he had cut the cord.

"Run, old one!" he piped in the prisoner's ear, as soon as the cord was

in two; and himself set the example of running as if he were helped

along with wings, like a scared fowl.

The prisoner's sensations were not too slow for him to seize the

opportunity: the idea of escape had been continually present with him,

and he had gathered fresh hope from the temper of the crowd. He ran at

once; but his speed would hardly have sufficed for him if the

Florentines had not instantaneously rushed between him and his captor.

He ran on into the piazza, but he quickly heard the tramp of feet behind

him, for the other two prisoners had been released, and the soldiers

were struggling and fighting their way after them, in such tardigrade

fashion as their hoof-shaped shoes would allow--impeded, but not very

resolutely attacked, by the people. One of the two younger prisoners

turned lip the Borgo di San Lorenzo, and thus made a partial diversion

of the hubbub; but the main struggle was still towards the piazza, where

all eyes were turned on it with alarmed curiosity. The cause could not

be precisely guessed, for the French dress was screened by the impeding

crowd.

"An escape of prisoners," said Lorenzo Tornabuoni, as he and his party

turned round just against the steps of the Duomo, and saw a prisoner

rushing by them. "The people are not content with having emptied the

Bargello the other day. If there is no other authority in sight they

must fall on the sbirri and secure freedom to thieves. Ah! there is a

French soldier: that is more serious."

The soldier he saw was struggling along on the north side of the piazza,

but the object of his pursuit had taken the other direction. That

object was the eldest prisoner, who had wheeled round the Baptistery and

was running towards the Duomo, determined to take refuge in that

sanctuary rather than trust to his speed. But in mounting the steps,

his foot received a shock; he was precipitated towards the group of

signori, whose backs were turned to him, and was only able to recover

his balance as he clutched one of them by the arm.

It was Tito Melema who felt that clutch. He turned his head, and saw

the face of his adoptive father, Baldassarre Calvo, close to his own.

The two men looked at each other, silent as death: Baldassarre, with

dark fierceness and a tightening grip of the soiled worn hands on the

velvet-clad arm; Tito, with cheeks and lips all bloodless, fascinated by

terror. It seemed a long while to them--it was but a moment.

The first sound Tito heard was the short laugh of Piero di Cosimo, who

stood close by him and was the only person that could see his face.

"Ha, ha! I know what a ghost should be now."

"This is another escaped prisoner," said Lorenzo Tornabuoni. "Who is

he, I wonder?"

"\_Some madman, surely\_," said Tito.

He hardly knew how the words had come to his lips: there are moments

when our passions speak and decide for us, and we seem to stand by and

wonder. They carry in them an inspiration of crime, that in one instant

does the work of long premeditation.

The two men had not taken their eyes off each other, and it seemed to

Tito, when he had spoken, that some magical poison had darted from

Baldassarre's eyes, and that he felt it rushing through his veins. But

the next instant the grasp on his arm had relaxed, and Baldassarre had

disappeared within the church.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. "\_La vacca muglia\_" was the phrase for the sounding of the

great bell in the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio.

Note 2. The poorer artisans connected with the wool trade--

wool-beaters, carders, washers, etcetera.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE.

AFTER-THOUGHTS.

"You are easily frightened, though," said Piero, with another scornful

laugh. "My portrait is not as good as the original. But the old fellow

\_had\_ a tiger look: I must go into the Duomo and see him again."

"It is not pleasant to be laid hold of by a madman, if madman he be,"

said Lorenzo Tornabuoni, in polite excuse of Tito, "but perhaps he is

only a ruffian. We shall hear. I think we must see if we have

authority enough to stop this disturbance between our people and your

countrymen," he added, addressing the Frenchman.

They advanced toward the crowd with their swords drawn, all the quiet

spectators making an escort for them. Tito went too: it was necessary

that he should know what others knew about Baldassarre, and the first

palsy of terror was being succeeded by the rapid devices to which mortal

danger will stimulate the timid.

The rabble of men and boys, more inclined to hoot at the soldier and

torment him than to receive or inflict any serious wounds, gave way at

the approach of signori with drawn swords, and the French soldier was

interrogated. He and his companions had simply brought their prisoners

into the city that they might beg money for their ransom: two of the

prisoners were Tuscan soldiers taken in Lunigiana; the other, an elderly

man, was with a party of Genoese, with whom the French foragers had come

to blows near Fivizzano. He might be mad, but he was harmless. The

soldier knew no more, being unable to understand a word the old man

said. Tito heard so far, but he was deaf to everything else till he was

specially addressed. It was Tornabuoni who spoke.

"Will you go back with us, Melema? Or, since Messere is going off to

Signa now, will you wisely follow the fashion of the times and go to

hear the Frate, who will be like the torrent at its height this morning?

It's what we must all do, you know, if we are to save our Medicean

skins. \_I\_ should go if I had the leisure."

Tito's face had recovered its colour now, and he could make an effort to

speak with gaiety.

"Of course I am among the admirers of the inspired orator," he said,

smilingly; "but, unfortunately, I shall be occupied with the Segretario

till the time of the procession."

"\_I\_ am going into the Duomo to look at that savage old man again," said

Piero.

"Then have the charity to show him to one of the hospitals for

travellers, Piero mio," said Tornabuoni. "The monks may find out

whether he wants putting into a cage."

The party separated, and Tito took his way to the Palazzo Vecchio, where

he was to find Bartolommeo Scala. It was not a long walk, but, for

Tito, it was stretched out like the minutes of our morning dreams: the

short spaces of street and piazza held memories, and previsions, and

torturing fears, that might have made the history of months. He felt as

if a serpent had begun to coil round his limbs. Baldassarre living, and

in Florence, was a living revenge, which would no more rest than a

winding serpent would rest until it had crushed its prey. It was not in

the nature of that man to let an injury pass unavenged: his love and his

hatred were of that passionate fervour which subjugates all the rest of

the being, and makes a man sacrifice himself to his passion as if it

were a deity to be worshipped with self-destruction. Baldassarre had

relaxed his hold, and had disappeared. Tito knew well how to interpret

that: it meant that the vengeance was to be studied that it might be

sure. If he had not uttered those decisive words--"He is a madman"--if

he could have summoned up the state of mind, the courage, necessary for

avowing his recognition of Baldassarre, would not the risk have been

less? He might have declared himself to have had what he believed to be

positive evidence of Baldassarre's death; and the only persons who could

ever have had positive knowledge to contradict him, were Fra Luca, who

was dead, and the crew of the companion galley, who had brought him the

news of the encounter with the pirates. The chances were infinite

against Baldassarre's having met again with any one of that crew, and

Tito thought with bitterness that a timely, well-devised falsehood might

have saved him from any fatal consequences. But to have told that

falsehood would have required perfect self-command in the moment of a

convulsive shock: he seemed to have spoken without any preconception:

the words had leaped forth like a sudden birth that had been begotten

and nourished in the darkness.

Tito was experiencing that inexorable law of human souls, that we

prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or

evil which gradually determines character.

There was but one chance for him now; the chance of Baldassarre's

failure in finding his revenge. And--Tito grasped at a thought more

actively cruel than any he had ever encouraged before: might not his own

unpremeditated words have some truth in them? Enough truth, at least,

to bear him out in his denial of any declaration Baldassarre might make

about him? The old man looked strange and wild; with his eager heart

and brain, suffering was likely enough to have produced madness. If it

were so, the vengeance that strove to inflict disgrace might be baffled.

But there was another form of vengeance not to be baffled by ingenious

lying. Baldassarre belonged to a race to whom the thrust of the dagger

seems almost as natural an impulse as the outleap of the tiger's talons.

Tito shrank with shuddering dread from disgrace; but he had also that

physical dread which is inseparable from a soft pleasure-loving nature,

and which prevents a man from meeting wounds and death as a welcome

relief from disgrace. His thoughts flew at once to some hidden

defensive armour that might save him from a vengeance which no subtlety

could parry.

He wondered at the power of the passionate fear that possessed him. It

was as if he had been smitten with a blighting disease that had suddenly

turned the joyous sense of young life into pain.

There was still one resource open to Tito. He might have turned back,

sought Baldassarre again, confessed everything to him--to Romola--to all

the world. But he never thought of that. The repentance which cuts off

all moorings to evil, demands something more than selfish fear. He had

no sense that there was strength and safety in truth; the only strength

he trusted to lay in his ingenuity and his dissimulation. Now that the

first shock, which had called up the traitorous signs of fear, was well

past, he hoped to be prepared for all emergencies by cool deceit--and

defensive armour.

It was a characteristic fact in Tito's experience at this crisis, that

no direct measures for ridding himself of Baldassarre ever occurred to

him. All other possibilities passed through his mind, even to his own

flight from Florence; but he never thought of any scheme for removing

his enemy. His dread generated no active malignity, and he would still

have been glad not to give pain to any mortal. He had simply chosen to

make life easy to himself--to carry his human lot, if possible, in such

a way that it should pinch him nowhere; and the choice had, at various

times, landed him in unexpected positions. The question now was, not

whether he should divide the common pressure of destiny with his

suffering fellow-men; it was whether all the resources of lying would

save him from being crushed by the consequences of that habitual choice.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR.

INSIDE THE DUO.

When Baldassarre, with his hands bound together, and the rope round his

neck and body, pushed his way behind the curtain, and saw the interior

of the Duomo before him, he gave a start of astonishment, and stood

still against the doorway. He had expected to see a vast nave empty of

everything but lifeless emblems--side altars with candles unlit, dim

pictures, pale and rigid statues--with perhaps a few worshippers in the

distant choir following a monotonous chant. That was the ordinary

aspect of churches to a man who never went into them with any religious

purpose.

And he saw, instead, a vast multitude of warm, living faces, upturned in

breathless silence towards the pulpit, at the angle between the nave and

the choir. The multitude was of all ranks, from magistrates and dames

of gentle nurture to coarsely-clad artisans and country people. In the

pulpit was a Dominican friar, with strong features and dark hair,

preaching with the crucifix in his hand.

For the first few minutes Baldassarre noted nothing of his preaching.

Silent as his entrance had been, some eyes near the doorway had been

turned on him with surprise and suspicion. The rope indicated plainly

enough that he was an escaped prisoner, but in that case the church was

a sanctuary which he had a right to claim; his advanced years and look

of wild misery were fitted to excite pity rather than alarm; and as he

stood motionless, with eyes that soon wandered absently from the wide

scene before him to the pavement at his feet, those who had observed his

entrance presently ceased to regard him, and became absorbed again in

the stronger interest of listening to the sermon.

Among the eyes that had been turned towards him were Romola's: she had

entered late through one of the side doors and was so placed that she

had a full view of the main entrance. She had looked long and

attentively at Baldassarre, for grey hairs made a peculiar appeal to

her, and the stamp of some unwonted suffering in the face, confirmed by

the cord round his neck, stirred in her those sensibilities towards the

sorrows of age, which her whole life had tended to develop. She fancied

that his eyes had met hers in their first wandering gaze; but

Baldassarre had not, in reality, noted her; he had only had a startled

consciousness of the general scene, and the consciousness was a mere

flash that made no perceptible break in the fierce tumult of emotion

which the encounter with Tito had created. Images from the past kept

urging themselves upon him like delirious visions strangely blended with

thirst and anguish. No distinct thought for the future could shape

itself in the midst of that fiery passion: the nearest approach to such

thought was the bitter sense of enfeebled powers, and a vague

determination to universal distrust and suspicion. Suddenly he felt

himself vibrating to loud tones, which seemed like the thundering echo

of his own passion. A voice that penetrated his very marrow with its

accent of triumphant certitude was saying--"The day of vengeance is at

hand!"

Baldassarre quivered and looked up. He was too distant to see more than

the general aspect of the preacher standing, with his right arm

outstretched, lifting up the crucifix; but he panted for the threatening

voice again as if it had been a promise of bliss. There was a pause

before the preacher spoke again. He gradually lowered his arm. He

deposited the crucifix on the edge of the pulpit, and crossed his arms

over his breast, looking round at the multitude as if he would meet the

glance of every individual face.

"All ye in Florence are my witnesses, for I spoke not in a corner. Ye

are my witnesses, that four years ago, when there were yet no signs of

war and tribulation, I preached the coming of the scourge. I lifted up

my voice as a trumpet to the prelates and princes and people of Italy

and said, The cup of your iniquity is full. Behold, the thunder of the

Lord is gathering, and it shall fall and break the cup, and your

iniquity, which seems to you as pleasant wine, shall be poured out upon

you, and shall be as molten lead. And you, O priests, who say, Ha, ha!

there is no Presence in the sanctuary--the Shechinah is nought--the

Mercy-seat is bare: we may sin behind the veil, and who shall punish us?

To you, I said, the presence of God shall be revealed in his temple as

a consuming fire, and your sacred garments shall become a winding-sheet

of flame, and for sweet music there shall be shrieks and hissing, and

for soft couches there shall be thorns, and for the breath of wantons

shall come the pestilence. Trust not in your gold and silver, trust not

in your high fortresses; for, though the walls were of iron, and the

fortresses of adamant, the Most High shall put terror into your hearts

and weakness into your councils, so that you shall be confounded and

flee like women. He shall break in pieces mighty men without number,

and put others in their stead. For God will no longer endure the

pollution of his sanctuary; he will thoroughly purge his Church.

"And forasmuch as it is written that God will do nothing but he

revealeth it to his servants the prophets, he has chosen me, his

unworthy servant, and made his purpose present to my soul in the living

word of the Scriptures, and in the deeds of his providence; and by the

ministry of angels he has revealed it to me in visions. And his word

possesses me so that I am but as the branch of the forest when the wind

of heaven penetrates it, and it is not in me to keep silence, even

though I may be a derision to the scorner. And for four years I have

preached in obedience to the Divine will: in the face of scoffing I have

preached three things, which the Lord has delivered to me: that \_in

these times God will regenerate his Church\_, and that \_before the

regeneration must come the scourge over all Italy\_, and that \_these

things will come quickly\_.

"But hypocrites who cloak their hatred of the truth with a show of love

have said to me, `Come now, Frate, leave your prophesyings: it is enough

to teach virtue.' To these I answer: `Yes, you say in your hearts, God

lives afar off, and his word is as a parchment written by dead men, and

he deals not as in the days of old, rebuking the nations, and punishing

the oppressors, and smiting the unholy priests as he smote the sons of

Eli. But I cry again in your ears: God is near and not afar off; his

judgments change not. He is the God of armies; the strong men who go up

to battle are his ministers, even as the storm, and fire, and

pestilence. He drives them by the breath of his angels, and they come

upon the chosen land which has forsaken the covenant. And thou, O

Italy, art the chosen land; has not God placed his sanctuary within

thee, and thou hast polluted it? Behold, the ministers of his wrath are

upon thee--they are at thy very doors!'"

Savonarola's voice had been rising in impassioned force up to this

point, when he became suddenly silent, let his hands fall and clasped

them quietly before him. His silence, instead of being the signal for

small movements amongst his audience, seemed to be as strong a spell to

them as his voice. Through the vast area of the cathedral men and women

sat with faces upturned, like breathing statues, till the voice was

heard again in clear low tones.

"Yet there is a pause--even as in the days when Jerusalem was destroyed

there was a pause that the children of God might flee from it. There is

a stillness before the storm: lo, there is blackness above, but not a

leaf quakes: the winds are stayed, that the voice of God's warning may

be heard. Hear it now, O Florence, chosen city in the chosen land!

Repent and forsake evil: do justice: love mercy: put away all

uncleanness from among you, that the spirit of truth and holiness may

fill your souls and breathe through all your streets and habitations,

and then the pestilence shall not enter, and the sword shall pass over

you and leave you unhurt.

"For the sword is hanging from the sky; it is quivering; it is about to

fall! \_The sword of God upon the earth, swift and sudden\_! Did I not

tell you, years ago, that I had beheld the vision and heard the voice?

And behold, it is fulfilled! Is there not a king with his army at your

gates? Does not the earth shake with the tread of horses and the wheels

of swift cannon? Is there not a fierce multitude that can lay bare the

land as with a sharp razor? I tell you the French king with his army is

the minister of God: God shall guide him as the hand guides a sharp

sickle, and the joints of the wicked shall melt before him, and they

shall be mown down as stubble: he that fleeth of them shall not flee

away, and he that escapeth of them shall not be delivered. And the

tyrants who have made to themselves a throne out of the vices of the

multitude, and the unbelieving priests who traffic in the souls of men

and fill the very sanctuary with fornication, shall be hurled from their

soft couches into burning hell; and the pagans and they who sinned under

the old covenant shall stand aloof and say: `Lo, these men have brought

the stench of a new wickedness into the everlasting fire.'

"But thou, O Florence, take the offered mercy. See! the Cross is held

out to you: come and be healed. Which among the nations of Italy has

had a token like unto yours? The tyrant is driven out from among you:

the men who held a bribe in their left-hand and a rod in the right are

gone forth, and no blood has been spilled. And now put away every other

abomination from among you, and you shall be strong in the strength of

the living God. Wash yourselves from the black pitch of your vices,

which have made you even as the heathens: put away the envy and hatred

that have made your city as a nest of wolves. And there shall no harm

happen to you: and the passage of armies shall be to you as a flight of

birds, and rebellious Pisa shall be given to you again, and famine and

pestilence shall be far from your gates, and you shall be as a beacon

among the nations. But, mark! while you suffer the accursed thing to

lie in the camp you shall be afflicted and tormented, even though a

remnant among you may be saved."

These admonitions and promises had been spoken in an incisive tone of

authority; but in the next sentence the preacher's voice melted into a

strain of entreaty.

"Listen, O people, over whom my heart yearns, as the heart of a mother

over the children she has travailed for! God is my witness that but for

your sakes I would willingly live as a turtle in the depths of the

forest, singing low to my Beloved, who is mine and I am his. For you I

toil, for you I languish, for you my nights are spent in watching, and

my soul melteth away for very heaviness. O Lord, thou knowest I am

willing--I am ready. Take me, stretch me on thy cross: let the wicked

who delight in blood, and rob the poor, and defile the temple of their

bodies, and harden themselves against thy mercy--let them wag their

heads and shoot out the lip at me: let the thorns press upon my brow,

and let my sweat be anguish--I desire to be made like thee in thy great

love. But let me see the fruit of my travail--let this people be saved!

Let me see them clothed in purity: let me hear their voices rise in

concord as the voices of the angels: let them see no wisdom but in thy

eternal law, no beauty but in holiness. Then they shall lead the way

before the nations, and the people from the four winds shall follow

them, and be gathered into the fold of the blessed. For it is thy will,

O God, that the earth shall be converted unto thy law: it is thy will

that wickedness shall cease and love shall reign. Come, O blessed

promise; and behold, I am willing--lay me on the altar: let my blood

flow and the fire consume me; but let my witness be remembered among

men, that iniquity shall not prosper for ever." [See note at the end.]

During the last appeal, Savonarola had stretched out his arms and lifted

up his eyes to heaven; his strong voice had alternately trembled with

emotion and risen again in renewed energy; but the passion with which he

offered himself as a victim became at last too strong to allow of

further speech, and he ended in a sob. Every changing tone, vibrating

through the audience, shook them into answering emotion. There were

plenty among them who had very moderate faith in the Frate's prophetic

mission, and who in their cooler moments loved him little; nevertheless,

they too were carried along by the great wave of feeling which gathered

its force from sympathies that lay deeper than all theory. A loud

responding sob rose at once from the wide multitude, while Savonarola

had fallen on his knees and buried his face in his mantle. He felt in

that moment the rapture and glory of martyrdom without its agony.

In that great sob of the multitude Baldassarre's had mingled. Among all

the human beings present, there was perhaps not one whose frame vibrated

more strongly than his to the tones and words of the preacher; but it

had vibrated like a harp of which all the strings had been wrenched away

except one. That threat of a fiery inexorable vengeance--of a future

into which the hated sinner might be pursued and held by the avenger in

an eternal grapple, had come to him like the promise of an unquenchable

fountain to unquenchable thirst. The doctrines of the sages, the old

contempt for priestly Superstitions, had fallen away from his soul like

a forgotten language: if he could have remembered them, what answer

could they have given to his great need like the answer given by this

voice of energetic conviction? The thunder of denunciation fell on his

passion-wrought nerves with all the force of self-evidence: his thought

never went beyond it into questions--he was possessed by it as the

war-horse is possessed by the clash of sounds. No word that was not a

threat touched his consciousness; he had no fibre to be thrilled by it.

But the fierce exultant delight to which he was moved by the idea of

perpetual vengeance found at once a climax and a relieving outburst in

the preacher's words of self-sacrifice. To Baldassarre those words only

brought the vague triumphant sense that he too was devoting himself--

signing with his own blood the deed by which he gave himself over to an

unending fire, that would seem but coolness to his burning hatred.

"I rescued him--I cherished him--if I might clutch his heart-strings for

ever! Come, O blessed promise! Let my blood flow; let the fire consume

me!"

The one cord vibrated to its utmost. Baldassarre clutched his own

palms, driving his long nails into them, and burst into a sob with the

rest.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE.

OUTSIDE THE DUOMO.

While Baldassarre was possessed by the voice of Savonarola, he had not

noticed that another man had entered through the doorway behind him, and

stood not far off observing him. It was Piero di Cosimo, who took no

heed of the preaching, having come solely to look at the escaped

prisoner. During the pause, in which the preacher and his audience had

given themselves up to inarticulate emotion, the new-comer advanced and

touched Baldassarre on the arm. He looked round with the tears still

slowly rolling down his face, but with a vigorous sigh, as if he had

done with that outburst. The painter spoke to him in a low tone--

"Shall I cut your cords for you? I have heard how you were made

prisoner."

Baldassarre did not reply immediately; he glanced suspiciously at the

officious stranger. At last he said, "If you will."

"Better come outside," said Piero.

Baldassarre again looked at him suspiciously; and Piero, partly guessing

his thought, smiled, took out a knife, and cut the cords. He began to

think that the idea of the prisoner's madness was not improbable, there

was something so peculiar in the expression of his face. "Well," he

thought, "if he does any mischief, he'll soon get tied up again. The

poor devil shall have a chance, at least."

"You are afraid of me," he said again, in an undertone; "you don't want

to tell me anything about yourself."

Baldassarre was folding his arms in enjoyment of the long-absent

muscular sensation. He answered Piero with a less suspicious look and a

tone which had some quiet decision in it.

"No, I have nothing to tell."

"As you please," said Piero, "but perhaps you want shelter, and may not

know how hospitable we Florentines are to visitors with torn doublets

and empty stomachs. There's an hospital for poor travellers outside all

our gates, and, if you liked, I could put you in the way to one.

There's no danger from your French soldier. He has been sent off."

Baldassarre nodded, and turned in silent acceptance of the offer, and he

and Piero left the church together.

"You wouldn't like to sit to me for your portrait, should you?" said

Piero, as they went along the Via dell' Oriuolo, on the way to the gate

of Santa Croce. "I am a painter: I would give you money to get your

portrait."

The suspicion returned into Baldassarre's glance, as he looked at Piero,

and said decidedly, "No."

"Ah!" said the painter, curtly. "Well, go straight on, and you'll find

the Porta Santa Croce, and outside it there's an hospital for

travellers. So you'll not accept any service from me?"

"I give you thanks for what you have done already. I need no more."

"It is well," said Piero, with a shrug, and they turned away from each

other.

"A mysterious old tiger!" thought the artist, "well worth painting.

Ugly--with deep lines--looking as if the plough and the harrow had gone

over his heart. A fine contrast to my bland and smiling Messer Greco--

my \_Bacco trionfante\_, who has married the fair Antigone in

contradiction to all history and fitness. Aha! his scholar's blood

curdled uncomfortably at the old fellow's clutch!" When Piero

re-entered the Piazza del Duomo the multitude who had been listening to

Fra Girolamo were pouring out from all the doors, and the haste they

made to go on their several ways was a proof how important they held the

preaching which had detained them from the other occupations of the day.

The artist leaned against an angle of the Baptistery and watched the

departing crowd, delighting in the variety of the garb and of the keen

characteristic faces--faces such as Masaccio had painted more than fifty

years before: such as Domenico Ghirlandajo had not yet quite left off

painting.

This morning was a peculiar occasion, and the Frate's audience, always

multifarious, had represented even more completely than usual the

various classes and political parties of Florence. There were men of

high birth, accustomed to public charges at home and abroad, who had

become newly conspicuous not only as enemies of the Medici and friends

of popular government, but as thorough Piagnoni, espousing to the utmost

the doctrines and practical teaching of the Frate, and frequenting San

Marco as the seat of another Samuel: some of them men of authoritative

and handsome presence, like Francesco Valori, and perhaps also of a hot

and arrogant temper, very much gratified by an immediate divine

authority for bringing about freedom in their own way; others, like

Soderini, with less of the ardent Piagnone, and more of the wise

politician. There were men, also of family, like Piero Capponi, simply

brave undoctrinal lovers of a sober republican liberty, who preferred

fighting to arguing, and had no particular reasons for thinking any

ideas false that kept out the Medici and made room for public spirit.

At their elbows were doctors of law whose studies of Accursius and his

brethren had not so entirely consumed their ardour as to prevent them

from becoming enthusiastic Piagnoni: Messer Luca Corsini himself, for

example, who on a memorable occasion yet to come was to raise his

learned arms in street stone-throwing for the cause of religion,

freedom, and the Frate. And among the dignities who carried their black

lucco or furred mantle with an air of habitual authority, there was an

abundant sprinkling of men with more contemplative and sensitive faces:

scholars inheriting such high names as Strozzi and Acciajoli, who were

already minded to take the cowl and join the community of San Marco;

artists, wrought to a new and higher ambition by the teaching of

Savonarola, like that young painter who had lately surpassed himself in

his fresco of the divine child on the wall of the Frate's bare cell--

unconscious yet that he would one day himself wear the tonsure and the

cowl, and be called Fra Bartolommeo. There was the mystic poet Girolamo

Benevieni hastening, perhaps, to carry tidings of the beloved Frate's

speedy coming to his friend Pico della Mirandola, who was never to see

the light of another morning. There were well-born women attired with

such scrupulous plainness that their more refined grace was the chief

distinction between them and their less aristocratic sisters. There was

a predominant proportion of the genuine \_popolani\_ or middle class,

belonging both to the Major and Minor Arts, conscious of purses

threatened by war-taxes. And more striking and various, perhaps, than

all the other classes of the Frate's disciples, there was the long

stream of poorer tradesmen and artisans, whose faith and hope in his

Divine message varied from the rude and undiscriminating trust in him as

the friend of the poor and the enemy of the luxurious oppressive rich,

to that eager tasting of all the subtleties of biblical interpretation

which takes a peculiarly strong hold on the sedentary artisan,

illuminating the long dim spaces beyond the board where he stitches,

with a pale flame that seems to him the light of Divine science.

But among these various disciples of the Frate were scattered many who

were not in the least his disciples. Some were Mediceans who had

already, from motives of fear and policy, begun to show the presiding

spirit of the popular party a feigned deference. Others were sincere

advocates of a free government, but regarded Savonarola simply as an

ambitious monk--half sagacious, half fanatical--who had made himself a

powerful instrument with the people, and must be accepted as an

important social fact. There were even some of his bitter enemies:

members of the old aristocratic anti-Medicean party--determined to try

and get the reins once more tight in the hands of certain chief

families; or else licentious young men, who detested him as the killjoy

of Florence. For the sermons in the Duomo had already become political

incidents, attracting the ears of curiosity and malice, as well as of

faith. The men of ideas, like young Niccolo Macchiavelli, went to

observe and write reports to friends away in country villas; the men of

appetites, like Dolfo Spini, bent on hunting down the Frate, as a public

nuisance who made game scarce, went to feed their hatred and lie in wait

for grounds of accusation.

Perhaps, while no preacher ever had a more massive influence than

Savonarola, no preacher ever had more heterogeneous materials to work

upon. And one secret of the massive influence lay in the highly mixed

character of his preaching. Baldassarre, wrought into an ecstasy of

self-martyring revenge, was only an extreme case among the partial and

narrow sympathies of that audience. In Savonarola's preaching there

were strains that appealed to the very finest susceptibilities of men's

natures, and there were elements that gratified low egoism, tickled

gossiping curiosity, and fascinated timorous superstition. His need of

personal predominance, his labyrinthine allegorical interpretations of

the Scriptures, his enigmatic visions, and his false certitude about the

Divine intentions, never ceased, in his own large soul, to be ennobled

by that fervid piety, that passionate sense of the infinite, that active

sympathy, that clear-sighted demand for the subjection of selfish

interests to the general good, which he had in common with the greatest

of mankind. But for the mass of his audience all the pregnancy of his

preaching lay in his strong assertion of supernatural claims, in his

denunciatory visions, in the false certitude which gave his sermons the

interest of a political bulletin; and having once held that audience in

his mastery, it was necessary to his nature--it was necessary for their

welfare--that he should \_keep\_ the mastery. The effect was inevitable.

No man ever struggled to retain power over a mixed multitude without

suffering vitiation; his standard must be their lower needs and not his

own best insight.

The mysteries of human character have seldom been presented in a way

more fitted to check the judgments of facile knowingness than in

Girolamo Savonarola; but we can give him a reverence that needs no

shutting of the eyes to fact, if we regard his life as a drama in which

there were great inward modifications accompanying the outward changes.

And up to this period, when his more direct action on political affairs

had only just begun, it is probable that his imperious need of

ascendancy had burned undiscernibly in the strong flame of his zeal for

God and man.

It was the fashion of old, when an ox was led out for sacrifice to

Jupiter, to chalk the dark spots, and give the offering a false show of

unblemished whiteness. Let us fling away the chalk, and boldly say,--

the victim is spotted, but it is not therefore in vain that his mighty

heart is laid on the altar of men's highest hopes.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX.

THE GARMENT OF FEAR.

At six o'clock that evening most people in Florence were glad the

entrance of the new Charlemagne was fairly over. Doubtless when the

roll of drums, the blast of trumpets, and the tramp of horses along the

Pisan road began to mingle with the pealing of the excited bells, it was

a grand moment for those who were stationed on turreted roofs, and could

see the long-winding terrible pomp on the background of the green hills

and valley. There was no sunshine to light up the splendour of banners,

and spears, and plumes, and silken surcoats, but there was no thick

cloud of dust to hide it, and as the picked troops advanced into close

view, they could be seen all the more distinctly for the absence of

dancing glitter. Tall and tough Scotch archers, Swiss halberdiers

fierce and ponderous, nimble Gascons ready to wheel and climb, cavalry

in which each man looked like a knight-errant with his indomitable spear

and charger--it was satisfactory to be assured that they would injure

nobody but the enemies of God! With that confidence at heart it was a

less dubious pleasure to look at the array of strength and splendour in

nobles and knights, and youthful pages of choice lineage--at the bossed

and jewelled sword-hilts, at the satin scarfs embroidered with strange

symbolical devices of pious or gallant meaning, at the gold chains and

jewelled aigrettes, at the gorgeous horse-trappings and brocaded

mantles, and at the transcendent canopy carried by select youths above

the head of the Most Christian King. To sum up with an old diarist,

whose spelling and diction halted a little behind the wonders of this

royal visit,--"\_fu gran magnificenza\_."

But for the Signoria, who had been waiting on their platform against the

gates, and had to march out at the right moment, with their orator in

front of them, to meet the mighty guest, the grandeur of the scene had

been somewhat screened by unpleasant sensations. If Messer Luca Corsini

could have had a brief Latin welcome depending from his mouth in legible

characters, it would have been less confusing when the rain came on, and

created an impatience in men and horses that broke off the delivery of

his well-studied periods, and reduced the representatives of the

scholarly city to offer a makeshift welcome in impromptu French. But

that sudden confusion had created a great opportunity for Tito. As one

of the secretaries he was among the officials who were stationed behind

the Signoria, and with whom these highest dignities were promiscuously

thrown when pressed upon by the horses.

"Somebody step forward and say a few words in French," said Soderini.

But no one of high importance chose to risk a second failure. "You,

Francesco Gaddi--you can speak." But Gaddi, distrusting his own

promptness, hung back, and pushing Tito, said, "You, Melema."

Tito stepped forward in an instant, and, with the air of profound

deference that came as naturally to him as walking, said the few needful

words in the name of the Signoria; then gave way gracefully, and let the

king pass on. His presence of mind, which had failed him in the

terrible crisis of the morning, had been a ready instrument this time.

It was an excellent livery servant that never forsook him when danger

was not visible. But when he was complimented on his opportune service,

he laughed it off as a thing of no moment, and to those who had not

witnessed it, let Gaddi have the credit of the improvised welcome. No

wonder Tito was popular: the touchstone by which men try us is most

often their own vanity.

Other things besides the oratorical welcome had turned out rather worse

than had been expected. If everything had happened according to

ingenious preconceptions, the Florentine procession of clergy and laity

would not have found their way choked up and been obliged to take a

makeshift course through the back streets, so as to meet the king at the

Cathedral only. Also, if the young monarch under the canopy, seated on

his charger with his lance upon his thigh, had looked more like a

Charlemagne and less like a hastily modelled grotesque, the imagination

of his admirers would have been much assisted. It might have been

wished that the scourge of Italian wickedness and "Champion of the

honour of women" had had a less miserable leg, and only the normal sum

of toes; that his mouth had been of a less reptilian width of slit, his

nose and head of a less exorbitant outline. But the thin leg rested on

cloth of gold and pearls, and the face was only an interruption of a few

square inches in the midst of black velvet and gold, and the blaze of

rubies, and the brilliant tints of the embroidered and bepearled

canopy,--"\_fu gran magnificenza\_."

And the people had cried \_Francia, Francia\_! with an enthusiasm

proportioned to the splendour of the canopy which they had torn to

pieces as their spoil, according to immemorial custom; royal lips had

duly kissed the altar; and after all mischances the royal person and

retinue were lodged in the Palace of the Via Larga, the rest of the

nobles and gentry were dispersed among the great houses of Florence, and

the terrible soldiery were encamped in the Prato and other open

quarters. The business of the day was ended.

But the streets still presented a surprising aspect, such as Florentines

had not seen before under the November stars. Instead of a gloom

unbroken except by a lamp burning feebly here and there before a saintly

image at the street-corners, or by a stream of redder light from an open

doorway, there were lamps suspended at the windows of all houses, so

that men could walk along no less securely and commodiously than by

day,--\_fu gran magnificenza\_.

Along those illuminated streets Tito Melema was walking at about eight

o'clock in the evening, on his way homeward. He had been exerting

himself throughout the day under the pressure of hidden anxieties, and

had at last made his escape unnoticed from the midst of after-supper

gaiety. Once at leisure thoroughly to face and consider his

circumstances, he hoped that he could so adjust himself to them and to

all probabilities as to get rid of his childish fear. If he had only

not been wanting in the presence of mind necessary to recognise

Baldassarre under that surprise!--it would have been happier for him on

all accounts; for he still winced under the sense that he was

deliberately inflicting suffering on his father: he would very much have

preferred that Baldassarre should be prosperous and happy. But he had

left himself no second path now: there could be no conflict any longer:

the only thing he had to do was to take care of himself.

While these thoughts were in his mind he was advancing from the Piazza

di Santa Croce along the Via dei Benci, and as he neared the angle

turning into the Borgo Santa Croce his ear was struck by a music which

was not that of evening revelry, but of vigorous labour--the music of

the anvil. Tito gave a slight start and quickened his pace, for the

sounds had suggested a welcome thought. He knew that they came from the

workshop of Niccolo Caparra, famous resort of all Florentines who cared

for curious and beautiful iron-work.

"What makes the giant at work so late?" thought Tito. "But so much the

better for me. I can do that little bit of business to-night instead of

to-morrow morning."

Preoccupied as he was, he could not help pausing a moment in admiration

as he came in front of the workshop. The wide doorway, standing at the

truncated angle of a great block or "isle" of houses, was surmounted by

a loggia roofed with fluted tiles, and supported by stone columns with

roughly carved capitals. Against the red light framed in by the outline

of the fluted tiles and columns stood in black relief the grand figure

of Niccolo, with his huge arms in rhythmic rise and fall, first hiding

and then disclosing the profile of his firm mouth and powerful brow.

Two slighter ebony figures, one at the anvil, the other at the bellows,

served to set off his superior massiveness.

Tito darkened the doorway with a very different outline, standing in

silence, since it was useless to speak until Niccolo should deign to

pause and notice him. That was not until the smith had beaten the head

of an axe to the due sharpness of edge and dismissed it from his anvil.

But in the meantime Tito had satisfied himself by a glance round the

shop that the object of which he was in search had not disappeared.

Niccolo gave an unceremonious but good-humoured nod as he turned from

the anvil and rested his hammer on his hip.

"What is it, Messer Tito? Business?"

"Assuredly, Niccolo; else I should not have ventured to interrupt you

when you are working out of hours, since I take that as a sign that your

work is pressing."

"I've been at the same work all day--making axes and spear-heads. And

every fool that has passed my shop has put his pumpkin-head in to say,

`Niccolo, wilt thou not come and see the King of France and his

soldiers?' and I've answered, `No: I don't want to see their faces--I

want to see their backs.'"

"Are you making arms for the citizens, then, Niccolo, that they may have

something better than rusty scythes and spits in case of an uproar?"

"We shall see. Arms are good, and Florence is likely to want them. The

Frate tells us we shall get Pisa again, and I hold with the Frate; but I

should be glad to know how the promise is to be fulfilled, if we don't

get plenty of good weapons forged? The Frate sees a long way before

him; that I believe. But he doesn't see birds caught with winking at

them, as some of our people try to make out. He sees sense, and not

nonsense. But you're a bit of a Medicean, Messer Tito Melema. Ebbene!

so I've been myself in my time, before the cask began to run sour.

What's your business?"

"Simply to know the price of that fine coat of mail I saw hanging up

here the other day. I want to buy it for a certain personage who needs

a protection of that sort under his doublet."

"Let him come and buy it himself, then," said Niccolo, bluntly. "I'm

rather nice about what I sell, and whom I sell to. I like to know who's

my customer."

"I know your scruples, Niccolo. But that is only defensive armour: it

can hurt nobody."

"True: but it may make the man who wears it feel himself all the safer

if he should want to hurt somebody. No, no; it's not my own work; but

it's fine work of Maso of Brescia; I should be loth for it to cover the

heart of a scoundrel. I must know who is to wear it."

"Well, then, to be plain with you, Niccolo mio, I want it myself," said

Tito, knowing it was useless to try persuasion. "The fact is, I am

likely to have a journey to take--and you know what journeying is in

these times. You don't suspect \_me\_ of treason against the Republic?"

"No, I know no harm of you," said Niccolo, in his blunt way again. "But

have you the money to pay for the coat? For you've passed my shop often

enough to know my sign: you've seen the burning account-books. I trust

nobody. The price is twenty florins, and that's because it's

second-hand. You're not likely to have so much money with you. Let it

be till to-morrow."

"I happen to have the money," said Tito, who had been winning at play

the day before, and had not emptied his purse. "I'll carry the armour

home with me."

Niccolo reached down the finely-wrought coat, which fell together into

little more than two handfuls.

"There, then," he said, when the florins had been told down on his palm.

"Take the coat. It's made to cheat sword, or poniard, or arrow. But,

for my part, I would never put such a thing on. It's like carrying fear

about with one."

Niccolo's words had an unpleasant intensity of meaning for Tito. But he

smiled and said--

"Ah, Niccolo, we scholars are all cowards. Handling the pen doesn't

thicken the arm as your hammer-wielding does. Addio!"

He folded the armour under his mantle, and hastened across the Ponte

Rubaconte.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN.

THE YOUNG WIFE.

While Tito was hastening across the bridge with the new-bought armour

under his mantle, Romola was pacing up and down the old library,

thinking of him and longing for his return.

It was but a few fair faces that had not looked forth from windows that

day to see the entrance of the French king and his nobles. One of the

few was Romola's. She had been present at no festivities since her

father had died--died quite suddenly in his chair, three months before.

"Is not Tito coming to write?" he had said, when the bell had long ago

sounded the usual hour in the evening. He had not asked before, from

dread of a negative; but Romola had seen by his listening face and

restless movements that nothing else was in his mind.

"No, father, he had to go to a supper at the cardinal's: you know he is

wanted so much by every one," she answered, in a tone of gentle excuse.

"Ah! then perhaps he will bring some positive word about the library;

the cardinal promised last week," said Bardo, apparently pacified by

this hope.

He was silent a little while; then, suddenly flushing, he said--

"I must go on without him, Romola. Get the pen. He has brought me no

new text to comment on; but I must say what I want to say about the New

Platonists. I shall die and nothing will have been done. Make haste,

my Romola."

"I am ready, father," she said, the next minute, holding the pen in her

hand.

But there was silence. Romola took no note of this for a little while,

accustomed to pauses in dictation; and when at last she looked round

inquiringly, there was no change of attitude.

"I am quite ready, father!"

Still Bardo was silent, and his silence was never again broken.

Romola looked back on that hour with some indignation against herself,

because even with the first outburst of her sorrow there had mingled the

irrepressible thought, "Perhaps my life with Tito will be more perfect

now."

For the dream of a triple life with an undivided sum of happiness had

not been quite fulfilled. The rainbow-tinted shower of sweets, to have

been perfectly typical, should have had some invisible seeds of

bitterness mingled with them; the crowned Ariadne, under the snowing

roses, had felt more and more the presence of unexpected thorns. It was

not Tito's fault, Romola had continually assured herself. He was still

all gentleness to her, and to her father also. But it was in the nature

of things--she saw it clearly now--it was in the nature of things that

no one but herself could go on month after month, and year after year,

fulfilling patiently all her father's monotonous exacting demands. Even

she, whose sympathy with her father had made all the passion and

religion of her young years, had not always been patient, had been

inwardly very rebellious. It was true that before their marriage, and

even for some time after, Tito had seemed more unwearying than herself;

but then, of course, the effort had the ease of novelty. We assume a

load with confident readiness, and up to a certain point the growing

irksomeness of pressure is tolerable; but at last the desire for relief

can no longer be resisted. Romola said to herself that she had been

very foolish and ignorant in her girlish time: she was wiser now, and

would make no unfair demands on the man to whom she had given her best

woman's love and worship. The breath of sadness that still cleaved to

her lot while she saw her father month after month sink from elation

into new disappointment as Tito gave him less and less of his time, and

made bland excuses for not continuing his own share of the joint work--

that sadness was no fault of Tito's, she said, but rather of their

inevitable destiny. If he stayed less and less with her, why, that was

because they could hardly ever be alone. His caresses were no less

tender: if she pleaded timidly on any one evening that he should stay

with her father instead of going to another engagement which was not

peremptory, he excused himself with such charming gaiety, he seemed to

linger about her with such fond playfulness before he could quit her,

that she could only feel a little heartache in the midst of her love,

and then go to her father and try to soften his vexation and

disappointment. But all the while inwardly her imagination was busy

trying to see how Tito could be as good as she had thought he was, and

yet find it impossible to sacrifice those pleasures of society which

were necessarily more vivid to a bright creature like him than to the

common run of men. She herself would have liked more gaiety, more

admiration: it was true, she gave it up willingly for her father's

sake--she would have given up much more than that for the sake even of a

slight wish on Tito's part. It was clear that their natures differed

widely; but perhaps it was no more than the inherent difference between

man and woman, that made her affections more absorbing. If there were

any other difference she tried to persuade herself that the inferiority

was on her side. Tito was really kinder than she was, better tempered,

less proud and resentful; he had no angry retorts, he met all complaints

with perfect sweetness; he only escaped as quietly as he could from

things that were unpleasant.

It belongs to every large nature, when it is not under the immediate

power of some strong unquestioning emotion, to suspect itself, and doubt

the truth of its own impressions, conscious of possibilities beyond its

own horizon. And Romola was urged to doubt herself the more by the

necessity of interpreting her disappointment in her life with Tito so as

to satisfy at once her love and her pride. Disappointment? Yes, there

was no other milder word that would tell the truth. Perhaps all women

had to suffer the disappointment of ignorant hopes, if she only knew

their experience. Still, there had been something peculiar in her lot:

her relation to her father had claimed unusual sacrifices from her

husband. Tito had once thought that his love would make those

sacrifices easy; his love had not been great enough for that. She was

not justified in resenting a self-delusion. No! resentment must not

rise: all endurance seemed easy to Romola rather than a state of mind in

which she would admit to herself that Tito acted unworthily. If she had

felt a new heartache in the solitary hours with her father through the

last months of his life, it had been by no inexcusable fault of her

husband's; and now--it was a hope that would make its presence felt even

in the first moments when her father's place was empty--there was no

longer any importunate claim to divide her from Tito; their young lives

would flow in one current, and their true marriage would begin.

But the sense of something like guilt towards her father in a hope that

grew out of his death, gave all the more force to the anxiety with which

she dwelt on the means of fulfilling his supreme wish. That piety

towards his memory was all the atonement she could make now for a

thought that seemed akin to joy at his loss. The laborious simple life,

pure from vulgar corrupting ambitions, embittered by the frustration of

the dearest hopes, imprisoned at last in total darkness--a long

seed-time without a harvest--was at an end now, and all that remained of

it besides the tablet in Sante Croce and the unfinished commentary on

Tito's text, was the collection of manuscripts and antiquities, the

fruit of half a century's toil and frugality. The fulfilment of her

father's lifelong ambition about this library was a sacramental

obligation for Romola.

The precious relic was safe from creditors, for when the deficit towards

their payment had been ascertained, Bernardo del Nero, though he was far

from being among the wealthiest Florentines, had advanced the necessary

sum of about a thousand florins--a large sum in those days--accepting a

lien on the collection as a security.

"The State will repay me," he had said to Romola, making light of the

service, which had really cost him some inconvenience. "If the cardinal

finds a building, as he seems to say he will, our Signoria may consent

to do the rest. I have no children, I can afford the risk."

But within the last ten days all hopes in the Medici had come to an end:

and the famous Medicean collections in the Via Larga were themselves in

danger of dispersion. French agents had already begun to see that such

very fine antique gems as Lorenzo had collected belonged by right to the

first nation in Europe; and the Florentine State, which had got

possession of the Medicean library, was likely to be glad of a customer

for it. With a war to recover Pisa hanging over it, and with the

certainty of having to pay large subsidies to the French king, the State

was likely to prefer money to manuscripts.

To Romola these grave political changes had gathered their chief

interest from their bearing on the fulfilment of her father's wish. She

had been brought up in learned seclusion from the interests of actual

life, and had been accustomed to think of heroic deeds and great

principles as something antithetic to the vulgar present, of the Pnyx

and the Forum as something more worthy of attention than the councils of

living Florentine men. And now the expulsion of the Medici meant little

more for her than the extinction of her best hope about her father's

library. The times, she knew, were unpleasant for friends of the

Medici, like her godfather and Tito: superstitious shopkeepers and the

stupid rabble were full of suspicions; but her new keen interest in

public events, in the outbreak of war, in the issue of the French king's

visit, in the changes that were likely to happen in the State, was

kindled solely by the sense of love and duty to her father's memory.

All Romola's ardour had been concentrated in her affections. Her share

in her father's learned pursuits had been for her little more than a

toil which was borne for his sake; and Tito's airy brilliant faculty had

no attraction for her that was not merged in the deeper sympathies that

belong to young love and trust. Romola had had contact with no mind

that could stir the larger possibilities of her nature; they lay folded

and crushed like embryonic wings, making no element in her consciousness

beyond an occasional vague uneasiness.

But this new personal interest of hers in public affairs had made her

care at last to understand precisely what influence Fra Girolamo's

preaching was likely to have on the turn of events. Changes in the form

of the State were talked of, and all she could learn from Tito, whose

secretaryship and serviceable talents carried him into the heart of

public business, made her only the more eager to fill out her lonely day

by going to hear for herself what it was that was just now leading all

Florence by the ears. This morning, for the first time, she had been to

hear one of the Advent sermons in the Duomo. When Tito had left her,

she had formed a sudden resolution, and after visiting the spot where

her father was buried in Santa Croce, had walked on to the Duomo. The

memory of that last scene with Dino was still vivid within her whenever

she recalled it, but it had receded behind the experience and anxieties

of her married life. The new sensibilities and questions which it had

half awakened in her were quieted again by that subjection to her

husband's mind which is felt by every wife who loves her husband with

passionate devotedness and full reliance. She remembered the effect of

Fra Girolamo's voice and presence on her as a ground for expecting that

his sermon might move her in spite of his being a narrow-minded monk.

But the sermon did no more than slightly deepen her previous impression,

that this fanatical preacher of tribulations was after all a man towards

whom it might be possible for her to feel personal regard and reverence.

The denunciations and exhortations simply arrested her attention. She

felt no terror, no pangs of conscience: it was the roll of distant

thunder, that seemed grand, but could not shake her. But when she heard

Savonarola invoke martyrdom, she sobbed with the rest: she felt herself

penetrated with a new sensation--a strange sympathy with something apart

from all the definable interests of her life. It was not altogether

unlike the thrill which had accompanied certain rare heroic touches in

history and poetry; but the resemblance was as that between the memory

of music, and the sense of being possessed by actual vibrating

harmonies.

But that transient emotion, strong as it was, seemed to lie quite

outside the inner chamber and sanctuary of her life. She was not

thinking of Fra Girolamo now; she was listening anxiously for the step

of her husband. During these three months of their double solitude she

had thought of each day as an epoch in which their union might begin to

be more perfect. She was conscious of being sometimes a little too sad

or too urgent about what concerned her father's memory--a little too

critical or coldly silent when Tito narrated the things that were said

and done in the world he frequented--a little too hasty in suggesting

that by living quite simply as her father had done, they might become

rich enough to pay Bernardo del Nero, and reduce the difficulties about

the library. It was not possible that Tito could feel so strongly on

this last point as she did, and it was asking a great deal from him to

give up luxuries for which he really laboured. The next time Tito came

home she would be careful to suppress all those promptings that seemed

to isolate her from him. Romola was labouring, as a loving woman must,

to subdue her nature to her husband's. The great need of her heart

compelled her to strangle, with desperate resolution, every rising

impulse of suspicion, pride, and resentment; she felt equal to any

self-infliction that would save her from ceasing to love. That would

have been like the hideous nightmare in which the world had seemed to

break away all round her, and leave her feet overhanging the darkness.

Romola had never distinctly imagined such a future for herself; she was

only beginning to feel the presence of effort in that clinging trust

which had once been mere repose.

She waited and listened long, for Tito had not come straight home after

leaving Niccolo Caparra, and it was more than two hours after the time

when he was crossing the Ponte Rubaconte that Romola heard the great

door of the court turning on its hinges, and hastened to the head of the

stone steps. There was a lamp hanging over the stairs, and they could

see each other distinctly as he ascended. The eighteen months had

produced a more definable change in Romola's face than in Tito's; the

expression was more subdued, less cold, and more beseeching, and, as the

pink flush overspread her face now, in her joy that the long waiting was

at an end, she was much lovelier than on the day when Tito had first

seen her. On that day, any on-looker would have said that Romola's

nature was made to command, and Tito's to bend; yet now Romola's mouth

was quivering a little, and there was some timidity in her glance.

He made an effort to smile, as she said--

"My Tito, you are tired; it has been a fatiguing day: is it not true?"

Maso was there, and no more was said until they had crossed the

ante-chamber and closed the door of the library behind them. The wood

was burning brightly on the great dogs; that was one welcome for Tito,

late as he was, and Romola's gentle voice was another.

He just turned and kissed her when she took off his mantle; then he went

towards a high-backed chair placed for him near the fire, threw himself

into it, and flung away his cap, saying, not peevishly, but in a

fatigued tone of remonstrance, as he gave a slight shudder--

"Romola, I wish you would give up sitting in this library. Surely our

own rooms are pleasanter in this chill weather."

Romola felt hurt. She had never seen Tito so indifferent in his manner;

he was usually full of lively solicitous attention. And she had thought

so much of his return to her after the long day's absence! He must be

very weary.

"I wonder you have forgotten, Tito," she answered, looking at him

anxiously, as if she wanted to read an excuse for him in the signs of

bodily fatigue. "You know I am making the catalogue on the new plan

that my father wished for; you have not time to help me, so I must work

at it closely."

Tito, instead of meeting Romola's glance, closed his eyes and rubbed his

hands over his face and hair. He felt he was behaving unlike himself,

but he would make amends to-morrow. The terrible resurrection of secret

fears, which, if Romola had known them, would have alienated her from

him for ever, caused him to feel an alienation already begun between

them--caused him to feel a certain repulsion towards a woman from whose

mind he was in danger. The feeling had taken hold of him unawares, and

he was vexed with himself for behaving in this new cold way to her. He

could not suddenly command any affectionate looks or words; he could

only exert himself to say what might serve as an excuse.

"I am not well, Romola; you must not be surprised if I am peevish."

"Ah, you have had so much to tire you to-day," said Romola, kneeling

down close to him, and laying her arm on his chest while she put his

hair back caressingly.

Suddenly she drew her arm away with a start, and a gaze of alarmed

inquiry.

"What have you got under your tunic, Tito? Something as hard as iron."

"It \_is\_ iron--it is chain-armour," he said at once. He was prepared

for the surprise and the question, and he spoke quietly, as of something

that he was not hurried to explain.

"There was some unexpected danger to-day, then?" said Romola, in a tone

of conjecture. "You had it lent to you for the procession?"

"No; it is my own. I shall be obliged to wear it constantly, for some

time."

"What is it that threatens you, my Tito?" said Romola, looking

terrified, and clinging to him again.

"Every one is threatened in these times, who is not a rabid enemy of the

Medici. Don't look distressed, my Romola--this armour will make me safe

against covert attacks."

Tito put his hand on her neck and smiled. This little dialogue about

the armour had broken through the new crust, and made a channel for the

sweet habit of kindness.

"But my godfather, then," said Romola; "is not he, too, in danger? And

he takes no precautions--ought he not? since he must surely be in more

danger than you, who have so little influence compared with him."

"It is just because I am less important that I am in more danger," said

Tito, readily. "I am suspected constantly of being an envoy. And men

like Messer Bernardo are protected by their position and their extensive

family connections, which spread among all parties, while I am a Greek

that nobody would avenge."

"But, Tito, is it a fear of some particular person, or only a vague

sense of danger, that has made you think of wearing this?" Romola was

unable to repel the idea of a degrading fear in Tito, which mingled

itself with her anxiety.

"I have had special threats," said Tito, "but I must beg you to be

silent on the subject, my Romola. I shall consider that you have broken

my confidence, if you mention it to your godfather."

"Assuredly I will not mention it," said Romola, blushing, "if you wish

it to be a secret. But, dearest Tito," she added, after a moment's

pause, in a tone of loving anxiety, "it will make you very wretched."

"What will make me wretched?" he said, with a scarcely perceptible

movement across his face, as from some darting sensation.

"This fear--this heavy armour. I can't help shuddering as I feel it

under my arm. I could fancy it a story of enchantment--that some

malignant fiend had changed your sensitive human skin into a hard shell.

It seems so unlike my bright, light-hearted Tito!"

"Then you would rather have your husband exposed to danger, when he

leaves you?" said Tito, smiling. "If you don't mind my being poniarded

or shot, why need I mind? I will give up the armour--shall I?"

"No, Tito, no. I am fanciful. Do not heed what I have said. But such

crimes are surely not common in Florence? I have always heard my father

and godfather say so. Have they become frequent lately?"

"It is not unlikely they will become frequent, with the bitter hatreds

that are being bred continually."

Romola was silent a few moments. She shrank from insisting further on

the subject of the armour. She tried to shake it off.

"Tell me what has happened to-day," she said, in a cheerful tone. "Has

all gone off well?"

"Excellently well. First of all, the rain came and put an end to Luca

Corsini's oration, which nobody wanted to hear, and a ready-tongued

personage--some say it was Gaddi, some say it was Melema, but really it

was done so quickly no one knows who it was--had the honour of giving

the Cristianissimo the briefest possible welcome in bad French."

"Tito, it was you, I know," said Romola, smiling brightly, and kissing

him. "How is it you never care about claiming anything? And after

that?"

"Oh! after that, there was a shower of armour and jewels, and trappings,

such as you saw at the last Florentine \_giostra\_, only a great deal more

of them. There was strutting, and prancing, and confusion, and

scrambling, and the people shouted, and the Cristianissimo smiled from

ear to ear. And after that there was a great deal of flattery, and

eating, and play. I was at Tornabuoni's. I will tell you about it

to-morrow."

"Yes, dearest, never mind now. But is there any more hope that things

will end peaceably for Florence, that the Republic will not get into

fresh troubles?"

Tito gave a shrug. "Florence will have no peace but what it pays well

for; that is clear."

Romola's face saddened, but she checked herself, and said, cheerfully,

"You would not guess where I went to-day, Tito. I went to the Duomo, to

hear Fra Girolamo."

Tito looked startled; he had immediately thought of Baldassarre's

entrance into the Duomo; but Romola gave his look another meaning.

"You are surprised, are you not? It was a sudden thought. I want to

know all about the public affairs now, and I determined to hear for

myself what the Frate promised the people about this French invasion."

"Well, and what did you think of the prophet?"

"He certainly has a very mysterious power, that man. A great deal of

his sermon was what I expected; but once I was strangely moved--I sobbed

with the rest."

"Take care, Romola," said Tito, playfully, feeling relieved that she had

said nothing about Baldassarre; "you have a touch of fanaticism in you.

I shall have you seeing visions, like your brother."

"No; it was the same with every one else. He carried them all with him;

unless it were that gross Dolfo Spini, whom I saw there making grimaces.

There was even a wretched-looking man, with a rope round his neck--an

escaped prisoner, I should think, who had run in for shelter--a very

wild-eyed old man: I saw him with great tears rolling down his cheeks,

as he looked and listened quite eagerly."

There was a slight pause before Tito spoke.

"I saw the man," he said,--"the prisoner. I was outside the Duomo with

Lorenzo Tornabuoni when he ran in. He had escaped from a French

soldier. Did you see him when you came out?"

"No, he went out with our good old Piero di Cosimo. I saw Piero come in

and cut off his rope, and take him out of the church. But you want

rest, Tito? You feel ill?"

"Yes," said Tito, rising. The horrible sense that he must live in

continual dread of what Baldassarre had said or done pressed upon him

like a cold weight.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT.

THE PAINTED RECORD.

Four days later, Romola was on her way to the house of Piero di Cosimo,

in the Via Gualfonda. Some of the streets through which she had to pass

were lined with Frenchmen who were gazing at Florence, and with

Florentines who were gazing at the French, and the gaze was not on

either side entirely friendly and admiring. The first nation in Europe,

of necessity finding itself, when out of its own country, in the

presence of general inferiority, naturally assumed an air of conscious

pre-eminence; and the Florentines, who had taken such pains to play the

host amiably, were getting into the worst humour with their too superior

guests.

For after the first smiling compliments and festivities were over--after

wondrous Mysteries with unrivalled machinery of floating clouds and

angels had been presented in churches--after the royal guest had

honoured Florentine dames with much of his Most Christian ogling at

balls and suppers, and business had begun to be talked of--it appeared

that the new Charlemagne regarded Florence as a conquered city, inasmuch

as he had entered it with his lance in rest, talked of leaving his

viceroy behind him, and had thoughts of bringing back the Medici.

Singular logic this appeared to be on the part of an elect instrument of

God! since the policy of Piero de' Medici, disowned by the people, had

been the only offence of Florence against the majesty of France. And

Florence was determined not to submit. The determination was being

expressed very strongly in consultations of citizens inside the Old

Palace, and it was beginning to show itself on the broad flags of the

streets and piazza wherever there was an opportunity of flouting an

insolent Frenchman. Under these circumstances the streets were not

altogether a pleasant promenade for well-born women; but Romola,

shrouded in her black veil and mantle, and with old Maso by her side,

felt secure enough from impertinent observation.

And she was impatient to visit Piero di Cosimo. A copy of her father's

portrait as Oedipus, which he had long ago undertaken to make for her,

was not yet finished; and Piero was so uncertain in his work--sometimes,

when the demand was not peremptory, laying aside a picture for months;

sometimes thrusting it into a corner or coffer, where it was likely to

be utterly forgotten--that she felt it necessary to watch over his

progress. She was a favourite with the painter, and he was inclined to

fulfil any wish of hers, but no general inclination could be trusted as

a safeguard against his sudden whims. He had told her the week before

that the picture would perhaps be finished by this time; and Romola was

nervously anxious to have in her possession a copy of the only portrait

existing of her father in the days of his blindness, lest his image

should grow dim in her mind. The sense of defect in her devotedness to

him made her cling with all the force of compunction as well as

affection to the duties of memory. Love does not aim simply at the

conscious good of the beloved object: it is not satisfied without

perfect loyalty of heart; it aims at its own completeness.

Romola, by special favour, was allowed to intrude upon the painter

without previous notice. She lifted the iron slide and called Piero in

a flute-like tone, as the little maiden with the eggs had done in Tito's

presence. Piero was quick in answering, but when he opened the door he

accounted for his quickness in a manner that was not complimentary.

"Ah, Madonna Romola, is it you? I thought my eggs were come; I wanted

them."

"I have brought you something better than hard eggs, Piero. Maso has

got a little basket full of cakes and \_confetti\_ for you," said Romola,

smiling, as she put back her veil. She took the basket from Maso, and

stepping into the house, said--

"I know you like these things when you can have them without trouble.

Confess you do."

"Yes, when they come to me as easily as the light does," said Piero,

folding his arms and looking down at the sweetmeats as Romola uncovered

them and glanced at him archly. "And they are come along with the light

now," he added, lifting his eyes to her face and hair with a painter's

admiration, as her hood, dragged by the weight of her veil, fell

backward.

"But I know what the sweetmeats are for," he went on; "they are to stop

my mouth while you scold me. Well, go on into the next room, and you

will see I've done something to the picture since you saw it, though

it's not finished yet. But I didn't promise, you know: I take care not

to promise:--

"`Chi promette e non mantiene

L'anima sua non va mai bene.'"

The door opening on the wild garden was closed now, and the painter was

at work. Not at Romola's picture, however. That was standing on the

floor, propped against the wall, and Piero stooped to lift it, that he

might carry it into the proper light. But in lifting away this picture,

he had disclosed another--the oil-sketch of Tito, to which he had made

an important addition within the last few days. It was so much smaller

than the other picture, that it stood far within it, and Piero, apt to

forget where he had placed anything, was not aware of what he had

revealed as, peering at some detail in the painting which he held in his

hands, he went to place it on an easel. But Romola exclaimed, flushing

with astonishment--

"That is Tito!"

Piero looked round, and gave a silent shrug. He was vexed at his own

forgetfulness.

She was still looking at the sketch in astonishment; but presently she

turned towards the painter, and said with puzzled alarm--

"What a strange picture! When did you paint it? What does it mean?"

"A mere fancy of mine," said Piero, lifting off his skull-cap,

scratching his head, and making the usual grimace by which he avoided

the betrayal of any feeling. "I wanted a handsome young face for it,

and your husband's was just the thing."

He went forward, stooped down to the picture, and lifting it away with

its back to Romola, pretended to be giving it a passing examination,

before putting it aside as a thing not good enough to show.

But Romola, who had the fact of the armour in her mind, and was

penetrated by this strange coincidence of things which associated Tito

with the idea of fear, went to his elbow and said--

"Don't put it away; let me look again. That man with the rope round his

neck--I saw him--I saw you come to him in the Duomo. What was it that

made you put him into a picture with Tito?"

Piero saw no better resource than to tell part of the truth.

"It was a mere accident. The man was running away--running up the

steps, and caught hold of your husband: I suppose he had stumbled. I

happened to be there, and saw it, and I thought the savage-looking old

fellow was a good subject. But it's worth nothing--it's only a freakish

daub, of mine." Piero ended contemptuously, moving the sketch away with

an air of decision, and putting it on a high shelf. "Come and look at

the Oedipus."

He had shown a little too much anxiety in putting the sketch out of her

sight, and had produced the very impression he had sought to prevent--

that there was really something unpleasant, something disadvantageous to

Tito, in the circumstances out of which the picture arose. But this

impression silenced her: her pride and delicacy shrank from questioning

further, where questions might seem to imply that she could entertain

even a slight suspicion against her husband. She merely said, in as

quiet a tone as she could--

"He was a strange piteous-looking man, that prisoner. Do you know

anything more of him?"

"No more: I showed him the way to the hospital, that's all. See, now,

the face of Oedipus is pretty nearly finished; tell me what you think of

it."

Romola now gave her whole attention to her father's portrait, standing

in long silence before it.

"Ah," she said at last, "you have done what I wanted. You have given it

more of the listening look. My good Piero,"--she turned towards him

with bright moist eyes--"I am very grateful to you."

"Now that's what I can't bear in you women," said Piero, turning

impatiently, and kicking aside the objects that littered the floor--"you

are always pouring out feelings where there's no call for them. Why

should you be grateful to me for a picture you pay me for, especially

when I make you wait for it? And if I paint a picture, I suppose it's

for my own pleasure and credit to paint it well, eh? Are you to thank a

man for not being a rogue or a noodle? It's enough if he himself thanks

Messer Domeneddio, who has made him neither the one nor the other. But

women think walls are held together with honey."

"You crusty Piero! I forgot how snappish you are. Here, put this nice

sweetmeat in your mouth," said Romola, smiling through her tears, and

taking something very crisp and sweet from the little basket.

Piero accepted it very much as that proverbial bear that dreams of pears

might accept an exceedingly mellow "swan-egg"--really liking the gift,

but accustomed to have his pleasures and pains concealed under a shaggy

coat.

"It's good, Madonna Antigone," said Piero, putting his fingers in the

basket for another. He had eaten nothing but hard eggs for a fortnight.

Romola stood opposite him, feeling her new anxiety suspended for a

little while by the sight of this \_naive\_ enjoyment.

"Good--bye, Piero," she said, presently, setting down the basket. "I

promise not to thank you if you finish the portrait soon and well I will

tell you, you were bound to do it for your own credit."

"Good," said Piero, curtly, helping her with much deftness to fold her

mantle and veil round her.

"I'm glad she asked no more questions about that sketch," he thought,

when he had closed the door behind her. "I should be sorry for her to

guess that I thought her fine husband a good model for a coward. But I

made light of it; she'll not think of it again."

Piero was too sanguine, as open-hearted men are apt to be when they

attempt a little clever simulation. The thought of the picture pressed

more and more on Romola as she walked homeward. She could not help

putting together the two facts of the chain-armour and the encounter

mentioned by Piero between her husband and the prisoner, which had

happened on the morning of the day when the armour was adopted. That

look of terror which the painter had given Tito, had he seen it? What

could it all mean?

"It means nothing," she tried to assure herself. "It was a mere

coincidence. Shall I ask Tito about it?" Her mind said at last, "No: I

will not question him about anything he did not tell me spontaneously.

It is an offence against the trust I owe him." Her heart said, "I dare

not ask him."

There was a terrible flaw in the trust: she was afraid of any hasty

movement, as men are who hold something precious and want to believe

that it is not broken.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE.

A MOMENT OF TRIUMPH.

"The old fellow has vanished; went on towards Arezzo the next morning;

not liking the smell of the French, I suppose, after being their

prisoner. I went to the hospital to inquire after him; I wanted to know

if those broth-making monks had found out whether he was in his right

mind or not. However, they said he showed no signs of madness--only

took no notice of questions, and seemed to be planting a vine twenty

miles off. He was a mysterious old tiger. I should have liked to know

something more about him."

It was in Nello's shop that Piero di Cosimo was speaking, on the

twenty-fourth of November, just a week after the entrance of the French.

There was a party of six or seven assembled at the rather unusual hour

of three in the afternoon; for it was a day on which all Florence was

excited by the prospect of some decisive political event. Every

lounging-place was full, and every shopkeeper who had no wife or deputy

to leave in charge, stood at his door with his thumbs in his belt; while

the streets were constantly sprinkled with artisans pausing or passing

lazily like floating splinters, ready to rush forward impetuously if any

object attracted them.

Nello had been thrumming the lute as he half sat on the board against

the shop-window, and kept an outlook towards the piazza.

"Ah," he said, laying down the lute, with emphasis, "I would not for a

gold florin have missed that sight of the French soldiers waddling in

their broad shoes after their runaway prisoners! That comes of leaving

my shop to shave magnificent chins. It is always so: if ever I quit

this navel of the earth something takes the opportunity of happening in

my piazza."

"Yes, you ought to have been there," said Piero, in his biting way,

"just to see your favourite Greek look as frightened as if Satanasso had

laid hold of him. I like to see your ready-smiling Messeri caught in a

sudden wind and obliged to show their lining in spite of themselves.

What colour do you think a man's liver is, who looks like a bleached

deer as soon as a chance stranger lays hold of him suddenly?"

"Piero, keep that vinegar of thine as sauce to thine own eggs! What is

it against my \_bel erudito\_ that he looked startled when he felt a pair

of claws upon him and saw an unchained madman at his elbow? Your

scholar is not like those beastly Swiss and Germans, whose heads are

only fit for battering-rams, and who have such large appetites that they

think nothing of taking a cannon-ball before breakfast. We Florentines

count some other qualities in a man besides that vulgar stuff called

bravery, which is to be got by hiring dunderheads at so much per dozen.

I tell you, as soon as men found out that they had more brains than

oxen, they set the oxen to draw for them; and when we Florentines found

out that we had more brains than other men we set them to fight for us."

"Treason, Nello!" a voice called out from the inner sanctum; "that is

not the doctrine of the State. Florence is grinding its weapons; and

the last well-authenticated vision announced by the Frate was Mars

standing on the Palazzo Vecchio with his arm on the shoulder of San

Giovanni Battista, who was offering him a piece of honeycomb."

"It is well, Francesco," said Nello. "Florence has a few thicker skulls

that may do to bombard Pisa with; there will still be the finer spirits

left at home to do the thinking and the shaving. And as for our Piero

here, if he makes such a point of valour, let him carry his biggest

brush for a weapon and his palette for a shield, and challenge the

widest-mouthed Swiss he can see in the Prato to a single combat."

"\_Va\_, Nello," growled Piero, "thy tongue runs on as usual, like a mill

when the Arno's full--whether there's grist or not."

"Excellent grist, I tell thee. For it would be as reasonable to expect

a grizzled painter like thee to be fond of getting a javelin inside thee

as to expect a man whose wits have been sharpened on the classics to

like having his handsome face clawed by a wild beast."

"There you go, supposing you'll get people to put their legs into a sack

because you call it a pair of hosen," said Piero. "Who said anything

about a wild beast, or about an unarmed man rushing on battle? Fighting

is a trade, and it's not my trade. I should be a fool to run after

danger, but I could face it if it came to me."

"How is it you're so afraid of the thunder, then, my Piero?" said Nello,

determined to chase down the accuser. "You ought to be able to

understand why one man is shaken by a thing that seems a trifle to

others--you who hide yourself with the rats as soon as a storm comes

on."

"That is because I have a particular sensibility to loud sounds; it has

nothing to do with my courage or my conscience."

"Well, and Tito Melema may have a peculiar sensibility to being laid

hold of unexpectedly by prisoners who have run away from French

soldiers. Men are born with antipathies; I myself can't abide the smell

of mint. Tito was born with an antipathy to old prisoners who stumble

and clutch. Ecco!"

There was a general laugh at Nello's defence, and it was clear that

Piero's disinclination towards Tito was not shared by the company. The

painter, with his undecipherable grimace, took the tow from his

scarsella and stuffed his ears in indignant contempt, while Nello went

on triumphantly--

"No, my Piero, I can't afford to have my \_bel erudito\_ decried; and

Florence can't afford it either, with her scholars moulting off her at

the early age of forty. Our Phoenix Pico just gone straight to

Paradise, as the Frate has informed us; and the incomparable Poliziano,

not two months since, gone to--well, well, let us hope he is not gone to

the eminent scholars in the Malebolge."

"By the way," said Francesco Cei, "have you heard that Camilla Rucellai

has outdone the Frate in her prophecies? She prophesied two years ago

that Pico would die in the time of lilies. He has died in November.

`Not at all the time of lilies,' said the scorners. `Go to!' says

Camilla; `it is the lilies of France I meant, and it seems to me they

are close enough under your nostrils.' I say, `Euge, Camilla!' If the

Frate can prove that any one of his visions has been as well fulfilled,

I'll declare myself a Piagnone to-morrow."

"You are something too flippant about the Frate, Francesco," said Pietro

Cennini, the scholarly. "We are all indebted to him in these weeks for

preaching peace and quietness, and the laying aside of party quarrels.

They are men of small discernment who would be glad to see the people

slipping the Frate's leash just now. And if the Most Christian King is

obstinate about the treaty to-day, and will not sign what is fair and

honourable to Florence, Fra Girolamo is the man we must trust in to

bring him to reason."

"You speak truth, Messer Pietro," said Nello; "the Frate is one of the

firmest nails Florence has to hang on--at least, that is the opinion of

the most respectable chins I have the honour of shaving. But young

Messer Niccolo was saying here the other morning--and doubtless

Francesco means the same thing--there is as wonderful a power of

stretching in the meaning of visions as in Dido's bull's hide. It seems

to me a dream may mean whatever comes after it. As our Franco Sacchetti

says, a woman dreams over-night of a serpent biting her, breaks a

drinking-cup the next day, and cries out, `Look you, I thought something

would happen--it's plain now what the serpent meant.'"

"But the Frate's visions are not of that sort," said Cronaca. "He not

only says what will happen--that the Church will be scourged and

renovated, and the heathens converted--he says it shall happen quickly.

He is no slippery pretender who provides loopholes for himself, he is--"

"What is this? what is this?" exclaimed Nello, jumping off the board,

and putting his head out at the door. "Here are people streaming into

the piazza, and shouting. Something must have happened in the Via

Larga. Aha!" he burst forth with delighted astonishment, stepping out

laughing and waving his cap.

All the rest of the company hastened to the door. News from the Via

Larga was just what they had been waiting for. But if the news had come

into the piazza, they were not a little surprised at the form of its

advent. Carried above the shoulders of the people, on a bench

apparently snatched up in the street, sat Tito Melema, in smiling

amusement at the compulsion he was under. His cap had slipped off his

head, and hung by the becchetto which was wound loosely round his neck;

and as he saw the group at Nello's door he lifted up his fingers in

beckoning recognition. The next minute he had leaped from the bench on

to a cart filled with bales, that stood in the broad space between the

Baptistery and the steps of the Duomo, while the people swarmed round

him with the noisy eagerness of poultry expecting to be fed. But there

was silence when he began to speak in his clear mellow voice--

"Citizens of Florence! I have no warrant to tell the news except your

will. But the news is good, and will harm no man in the telling. The

Most Christian King is signing a treaty that is honourable to Florence.

But you owe it to one of your citizens, who spoke a word worthy of the

ancient Romans--you owe it to Piero Capponi!"

Immediately there was a roar of voices. "Capponi! Capponi! What said

our Piero?" "Ah! he wouldn't stand being sent from Herod to Pilate!"

"We knew Piero!" "\_Orsu\_! Tell us, what did he say?"

When the roar of insistance had subsided a little, Tito began again--

"The Most Christian King demanded a little too much--was obstinate--said

at last, `I shall order my trumpets to sound.' Then, Florentine

citizens! your Piero Capponi, speaking with the voice of a free city,

said, `If you sound your trumpets, we will ring our bells!' He snatched

the copy of the dishonouring conditions from the hands of the secretary,

tore it in pieces, and turned to leave the royal presence."

Again there were loud shouts--and again impatient demands for more.

"Then, Florentines, the high majesty of France felt, perhaps for the

first time, all the majesty of a free city. And the Most Christian King

himself hastened from his place to call Piero Capponi back. The great

spirit of your Florentine city did its work by a great word, without

need of the great actions that lay ready behind it. And the King has

consented to sign the treaty, which preserves the honour, as well as the

safety, of Florence. The banner of France will float over every

Florentine galley in sign of amity and common privilege, but above that

banner will be written the word `Liberty!'

"That is all the news I have to tell; is it not enough?--since it is for

the glory of every one of you, citizens of Florence, that you have a

fellow-citizen who knows how to speak your will."

As the shouts rose again, Tito looked round with inward amusement at the

various crowd, each of whom was elated with the notion that Piero

Capponi had somehow represented him--that he was the mind of which

Capponi was the mouthpiece. He enjoyed the humour of the incident,

which had suddenly transformed him, an alien, and a friend of the

Medici, into an orator who tickled the ears of the people blatant for

some unknown good which they called liberty. He felt quite glad that he

had been laid hold of and hurried along by the crowd as he was coming

out of the palace in the Via Larga with a commission to the Signoria.

It was very easy, very pleasant, this exercise of speaking to the

general satisfaction: a man who knew how to persuade need never be in

danger from any party; he could convince each that he was feigning with

all the others. The gestures and faces of weavers and dyers were

certainly amusing when looked at from above in this way.

Tito was beginning to get easier in his armour, and at this moment was

quite unconscious of it. He stood with one hand holding his recovered

cap, and with the other at his belt, the light of a complacent smile in

his long lustrous eyes, as he made a parting reverence to his audience,

before springing down from the bales--when suddenly his glance met that

of a man who had not at all the amusing aspect of the exulting weavers,

dyers, and woolcarders. The face of this man was clean-shaven, his hair

close-clipped, and he wore a decent felt hat. A single glance would

hardly have sufficed to assure any one but Tito that this was the face

of the escaped prisoner who had laid hold of him on the steps. But to

Tito it came not simply as the face of the escaped prisoner, but as a

face with which he had been familiar long years before.

It seemed all compressed into a second--the sight of Baldassarre looking

at him, the sensation shooting through him like a fiery arrow, and the

act of leaping from the cart. He would have leaped down in the same

instant, whether he had seen Baldassarre or not, for he was in a hurry

to be gone to the Palazzo Vecchio: this time he had not betrayed himself

by look or movement, and he said inwardly that he should not be taken by

surprise again; he should be prepared to see this face rise up

continually like the intermittent blotch that comes in diseased vision.

But this reappearance of Baldassarre so much more in his own likeness

tightened the pressure of dread the idea of his madness lost its

likelihood now he was shaven and clad like a decent though poor citizen.

Certainly, there was a great change in his face; but how could it be

otherwise? And yet, if he were perfectly sane--in possession of all his

powers and all his learning, why was he lingering in this way before

making known his identity? It must be for the sake of making his scheme

of vengeance more complete. But he did linger: that at least gave an

opportunity for flight. And Tito began to think that flight was his

only resource.

But while he, with his back turned on the Piazza del Duomo, had lost the

recollection of the new part he had been playing, and was no longer

thinking of the many things which a ready brain and tongue made easy,

but of a few things which destiny had somehow made very difficult, the

enthusiasm which he had fed contemptuously was creating a scene in that

piazza in grand contrast with the inward drama of self-centred fear

which he had carried away from it.

The crowd, on Tito's disappearance, had begun to turn their faces

towards the outlets of the piazza in the direction of the Via Larga,

when the sight of \_mazzieri\_, or mace-bearers, entering from the Via de'

Martelli, announced the approach of dignitaries. They must be the

syndics, or commissioners charged with the effecting of the treaty; the

treaty must be already signed, and they had come away from the royal

presence. Piero Capponi was coming--the brave heart that had known how

to speak for Florence. The effect on the crowd was remarkable; they

parted with softening, dropping voices, subsiding into silence,--and the

silence became so perfect that the tread of the syndics on the broad

pavement, and the rustle of their black silk garments, could be heard,

like rain in the night. There were four of them; but it was not the two

learned doctors of law, Messer Guidantonio Vespucci and Messer Domenico

Bonsi, that the crowd waited for; it was not Francesco Valori, popular

as he had become in these late days. The moment belonged to another

man, of firm presence, as little inclined to humour the people as to

humour any other unreasonable claimants--loving order, like one who by

force of fortune had been made a merchant, and by force of nature had

become a soldier. It was not till he was seen at the entrance of the

piazza that the silence was broken, and then one loud shout of "Capponi,

Capponi! Well done, Capponi!" rang through the piazza.

The simple, resolute man looked round him with grave joy. His

fellow-citizens gave him a great funeral two years later, when he had

died in fight; there were torches carried by all the magistracy, and

torches again, and trains of banners. But it is not known that he felt

any joy in the oration that was delivered in his praise, as the banners

waved over his bier. Let us be glad that he got some thanks and praise

while he lived.

CHAPTER THIRTY.

THE AVENGER'S SECRET.

It was the first time that Baldassarre had been in the Piazza del Duomo

since his escape. He had a strong desire to hear the remarkable monk

preach again, but he had shrunk from reappearing in the same spot where

he had been seen half naked, with neglected hair, with a rope round his

neck--in the same spot where he had been called a madman. The feeling,

in its freshness, was too strong to be overcome by any trust he had in

the change he had made in his appearance; for when the words "\_some

madman, surely\_," had fallen from Tito's lips, it was not their baseness

and cruelty only that had made their viper sting--it was Baldassarre's

instantaneous bitter consciousness that he might be unable to prove the

words false. Along with the passionate desire for vengeance which

possessed him had arisen the keen sense that his power of achieving the

vengeance was doubtful. It was as if Tito had been helped by some

diabolical prompter, who had whispered Baldassarre's saddest secret in

the traitor's ear. He was not mad; for he carried within him that

piteous stamp of sanity, the clear consciousness of shattered faculties;

he measured his own feebleness. With the first movement of vindictive

rage awoke a vague caution, like that of a wild beast that is fierce but

feeble--or like that of an insect whose little fragment of earth has

given way, and made it pause in a palsy of distrust. It was this

distrust, this determination to take no step which might betray anything

concerning himself, that had made Baldassarre reject Piero di Cosimo's

friendly advances.

He had been equally cautious at the hospital, only telling, in answer to

the questions of the brethren there, that he had been made a prisoner by

the French on his way from Genoa. But his age, and the indications in

his speech and manner that he was of a different class from the ordinary

mendicants and poor travellers who were entertained in the hospital, had

induced the monks to offer him extra charity: a coarse woollen tunic to

protect him from the cold, a pair of peasant's shoes, and a few

\_danari\_, smallest of Florentine coins, to help him on his way. He had

gone on the road to Arezzo early in the morning; but he had paused at

the first little town, and had used a couple of his \_danari\_ to get

himself shaved, and to have his circle of hair clipped short, in his

former fashion. The barber there had a little hand-mirror of bright

steel: it was a long while, it was years, since Baldassarre had looked

at himself, and now, as his eyes fell on that hand-mirror, a new thought

shot through his mind. "Was he so changed that Tito really did not know

him?" The thought was such a sudden arrest of impetuous currents, that

it was a painful shock to him; his hand shook like a leaf, as he put

away the barber's arm and asked for the mirror. He wished to see

himself before he was shaved. The barber, noticing his tremulousness,

held the mirror for him.

No, he was not so changed as that. He himself had known the wrinkles as

they had been three years ago; they were only deeper now: there was the

same rough, clumsy skin, making little superficial bosses on the brow,

like so many cipher-marks; the skin was only yellower, only looked more

like a lifeless rind. That shaggy white beard--it was no disguise to

eyes that had looked closely at him for sixteen years--to eyes that

ought to have searched for him with the expectation of finding him

changed, as men search for the beloved among the bodies cast up by the

waters. There was something different in his glance, but it was a

difference that should only have made the recognition of him the more

startling; for is not a known voice all the more thrilling when it is

heard as a cry? But the doubt was folly: he had felt that Tito knew

him. He put out his hand and pushed the mirror away. The strong

currents were rushing on again, and the energies of hatred and vengeance

were active once more.

He went back on the way towards Florence again, but he did not wish to

enter the city till dusk; so he turned aside from the highroad, and sat

down by a little pool shadowed on one side by alder-bushes still

sprinkled with yellow leaves. It was a calm November day, and he no

sooner saw the pool than he thought its still surface might be a mirror

for him. He wanted to contemplate himself slowly, as he had not dared

to do in the presence of the barber. He sat down on the edge of the

pool, and bent forward to look earnestly at the image of himself.

Was there something wandering and imbecile in his face--something like

what he felt in his mind?

Not now; not when he was examining himself with a look of eager inquiry:

on the contrary, there was an intense purpose in his eyes. But at other

times? Yes, it must be so: in the long hours when he had the vague

aching of an unremembered past within him--when he seemed to sit in dark

loneliness, visited by whispers which died out mockingly as he strained

his ear after them, and by forms that seemed to approach him and float

away as he thrust out his hand to grasp them--in those hours, doubtless,

there must be continual frustration and amazement in his glance. And

more horrible still, when the thick cloud parted for a moment, and, as

he sprang forward with hope, rolled together again, and left him

helpless as before; doubtless, there was then a blank confusion in his

face, as of a man suddenly smitten with blindness.

Could he prove anything? Could he even begin to allege anything, with

the confidence that the links of thought would not break away? Would

any believe that he had ever had a mind filled with rare knowledge, busy

with close thoughts, ready with various speech? It had all slipped away

from him--that laboriously-gathered store. Was it utterly and for ever

gone from him, like the waters from an urn lost in the wide ocean? Or,

was it still within him, imprisoned by some obstruction that might one

day break asunder?

It might be so; he tried to keep his grasp on that hope. For, since the

day when he had first walked feebly from his couch of straw, and had

felt a new darkness within him under the sunlight, his mind had

undergone changes, partly gradual and persistent, partly sudden and

fleeting. As he had recovered his strength of body, he had recovered

his self-command and the energy of his will; he had recovered the memory

of all that part of his life which was closely enwrought with his

emotions; and he had felt more and more constantly and painfully the

uneasy sense of lost knowledge. But more than that--once or twice, when

he had been strongly excited, he had seemed momentarily to be in entire

possession of his past self, as old men doze for an instant and get back

the consciousness of their youth: he seemed again to see Greek pages and

understand them, again to feel his mind moving unbenumbed among familiar

ideas. It had been but a flash, and the darkness closing in again

seemed the more horrible; but might not the same thing happen again for

longer periods? If it would only come and stay long enough for him to

achieve a revenge--devise an exquisite suffering, such as a mere right

arm could never inflict!

He raised himself from his stooping attitude, and, folding his arms,

attempted to concentrate all his mental force on the plan he must

immediately pursue. He had to wait for knowledge and opportunity, and

while he waited he must have the means of living without beggary. What

he dreaded of all things now was, that any one should think him a

foolish, helpless old man. No one must know that half his memory was

gone: the lost strength might come again; and if it were only for a

little while, \_that\_ might be enough.

He knew how to begin to get the information he wanted about Tito. He

had repeated the words "Bratti Ferravecchi" so constantly after they had

been uttered to him, that they never slipped from him for long together.

A man at Genoa, on whose finger he had seen Tito's ring, had told him

that he bought that ring at Florence, of a young Greek, well-dressed,

and with a handsome dark face, in the shop of a \_rigattiere\_ called

Bratti Ferravecchi, in the street also called Ferravecchi. This

discovery had caused a violent agitation in Baldassarre. Until then he

had clung with all the tenacity of his fervent nature to his faith in

Tito, and had not for a moment believed himself to be wilfully forsaken.

At first he had said, "My bit of parchment has never reached him; that

is why I am still toiling at Antioch, But he is searching; he knows

where I was lost: he will trace me out, and find me at last." Then,

when he was taken to Corinth, he induced his owners, by the assurance

that he should be sought out and ransomed, to provide securely against

the failure of any inquiries that might be made about him at Antioch;

and at Corinth he thought joyfully, "Here, at last, he must find me.

Here he is sure to touch, whichever way he goes." But before another

year had passed, the illness had come from which he had risen with body

and mind so shattered that he was worse than worthless to his owners,

except for the sake of the ransom that did not come. Then, as he sat

helpless in the morning sunlight, he began to think, "Tito has been

drowned, or they have made \_him\_ a prisoner too. I shall see him no

more. He set out after me, but misfortune overtook him. I shall see

his face no more." Sitting in his new feebleness and despair,

supporting his head between his hands, with blank eyes and lips that

moved uncertainly, he looked so much like a hopelessly imbecile old man,

that his owners were contented to be rid of him, and allowed a Genoese

merchant, who had compassion on him as an Italian, to take him on board

his galley. In a voyage of many months in the Archipelago and along the

seaboard of Asia Minor, Baldassarre had recovered his bodily strength,

but on landing at Genoa he had so weary a sense of his desolateness that

he almost wished he had died of that illness at Corinth. There was just

one possibility that hindered the wish from being decided: it was that

Tito might not be dead, but living in a state of imprisonment or

destitution; and if he lived, there was still a hope for Baldassarre--

faint, perhaps, and likely to be long deferred, but still a hope, that

he might find his child, his cherished son again; might yet again clasp

hands and meet face to face with the one being who remembered him as he

had been before his mind was broken. In this state of feeling he had

chanced to meet the stranger who wore Tito's onyx ring, and though

Baldassarre would have been unable to describe the ring beforehand, the

sight of it stirred the dormant fibres, and he recognised it. That Tito

nearly a year after his father had been parted from him should have been

living in apparent prosperity at Florence, selling the gem which he

ought not to have sold till the last extremity, was a fact that

Baldassarre shrank from trying to account for: he was glad to be stunned

and bewildered by it, rather than to have any distinct thought; he tried

to feel nothing but joy that he should behold Tito again. Perhaps Tito

had thought that his father was dead; somehow the mystery would be

explained. "But at least I shall meet eyes that will remember me. I am

not alone in the world."

And now again Baldassarre said, "I am not alone in the world; I shall

never be alone, for my revenge is with me."

It was as the instrument of that revenge, as something merely external

and subservient to his true life, that he bent down again to examine

himself with hard curiosity--not, he thought, because he had any care

for a withered, forsaken old man, whom nobody loved, whose soul was like

a deserted home, where the ashes were cold upon the hearth, and the

walls were bare of all but the marks of what had been. It is in the

nature of all human passion, the lowest as well as the highest, that

there is a point where it ceases to be properly egoistic, and is like a

fire kindled within our being to which everything else in us is mere

fuel.

He looked at the pale black-browed image in the water till he identified

it with that self from which his revenge seemed to be a thing apart; and

he felt as if the image too heard the silent language of his thought.

"I was a loving fool--I worshipped a woman once, and believed she could

care for me; and then I took a helpless child and fostered him; and I

watched him as he grew, to see if he would care for me only a little--

care for \_me\_ over and above the good he got from me. I would have torn

open my breast to warm him with my life-blood if I could only have seen

him care a little for the pain of my wound. I have laboured, I have

strained to crush out of this hard life one drop of unselfish love.

Fool! men love their own delights; there is no delight to be had in me.

And yet I watched till I believed I saw what I watched for. When he was

a child he lifted soft eyes towards me, and held my hand willingly: I

thought, this boy will surely love me a little: because I give my life

to him and strive that he shall know no sorrow, he will care a little

when I am thirsty--the drop he lays on my parched lips will be a joy to

him... Curses on him! I wish I may see him lie with those red lips

white and dry as ashes, and when he looks for pity I wish he may see my

face rejoicing in his pain. It is all a lie--this world is a lie--there

is no goodness but in hate. Fool! not one drop of love came with all

your striving: life has not given you one drop. But there are deep

draughts in this world for hatred and revenge. I have memory left for

that, and there is strength in my arm--there is strength in my will--and

if I can do nothing but kill him--"

But Baldassarre's mind rejected the thought of that brief punishment.

His whole soul had been thrilled into immediate unreasoning belief in

that eternity of vengeance where he, an undying hate, might clutch for

ever an undying traitor, and hear that fair smiling hardness cry and

moan with anguish. But the primary need and hope was to see a slow

revenge under the same sky and on the same earth where he himself had

been forsaken and had fainted with despair. And as soon as he tried to

concentrate his mind on the means of attaining his end, the sense of his

weakness pressed upon him like a frosty ache. This despised body, which

was to be the instrument of a sublime vengeance, must be nourished and

decently clad. If he had to wait he must labour, and his labour must be

of a humble sort, for he had no skill. He wondered whether the sight of

written characters would so stimulate his faculties that he might

venture to try and find work as a copyist: \_that\_ might win him some

credence for his past scholarship. But no! he dared trust neither hand

nor brain. He must be content to do the work that was most like that of

a beast of burden: in this mercantile city many porters must be wanted,

and he could at least carry weights. Thanks to the justice that

struggled in this confused world in behalf of vengeance, his limbs had

got back some of their old sturdiness. He was stripped of all else that

men would give coin for.

But the new urgency of this habitual thought brought a new suggestion.

There was something hanging by a cord round his bare neck; something

apparently so paltry that the piety of Turks and Frenchmen had spared

it--a tiny parchment bag blackened with age. It had hung round his neck

as a precious charm when he was a boy, and he had kept it carefully on

his breast, not believing that it contained anything but a tiny scroll

of parchment rolled up hard. He might long ago have thrown it away as a

relic of his dead mother's superstition; but he had thought of it as a

relic of her love, and had kept it. It was part of the piety associated

with such \_brevi\_, that they should never be opened, and at any previous

moment in his life Baldassarre would have said that no sort of thirst

would prevail upon him to open this little bag for the chance of finding

that it contained, not parchment, but an engraved amulet which would be

worth money. But now a thirst had come like that which makes men open

their own veins to satisfy it, and the thought of the possible amulet no

sooner crossed Baldassarre's mind than with nervous fingers he snatched

the \_breve\_ from his neck. It all rushed through his mind--the long

years he had worn it, the far-off sunny balcony at Naples looking

towards the blue waters, where he had leaned against his mother's knee;

but it made no moment of hesitation: all piety now was transmuted into a

just revenge. He bit and tore till the doubles of parchment were laid

open, and then--it was a sight that made him pant--there \_was\_ an

amulet. It was very small, but it was as blue as those far-off waters;

it was an engraved sapphire, which must be worth some gold ducats.

Baldassarre no sooner saw those possible ducats than he saw some of them

exchanged for a poniard. He did not want to use the poniard yet, but he

longed to possess it. If he could grasp its handle and try its edge,

that blank in his mind--that past which fell away continually--would not

make him feel so cruelly helpless: the sharp steel that despised talents

and eluded strength would be at his side, as the unfailing friend of

feeble justice. There was a sparkling triumph under Baldassarre's black

eyebrows as he replaced the little sapphire inside the bits of parchment

and wound the string tightly round them.

It was nearly dusk now, and he rose to walk back towards Florence. With

his \_danari\_ to buy him some bread, he felt rich: he could lie out in

the open air, as he found plenty more doing in all corners of Florence.

And in the next few days he had sold his sapphire, had added to his

clothing, had bought a bright dagger, and had still a pair of gold

florins left. But he meant to hoard that treasure carefully: his

lodging was an outhouse with a heap of straw in it, in a thinly

inhabited part of Oltrarno, and he thought of looking about for work as

a porter.

He had bought his dagger at Bratti's. Paying his meditated visit there

one evening at dusk, he had found that singular rag-merchant just

returned from one of his rounds, emptying out his basketful of broken

glass and old iron amongst his handsome show of miscellaneous

second-hand goods. As Baldassarre entered the shop, and looked towards

the smart pieces of apparel, the musical instruments, and weapons, which

were displayed in the broadest light of the window, his eye at once

singled out a dagger hanging up high against a red scarf. By buying the

dagger he could not only satisfy a strong desire, he could open his

original errand in a more indirect manner than by speaking of the onyx

ring. In the course of bargaining for the weapon, he let drop, with

cautious carelessness, that he came from Genoa, and had been directed to

Bratti's shop by an acquaintance in that city who had bought a very

valuable ring here. Had the respectable trader any more such rings?

Whereupon Bratti had much to say as to the unlikelihood of such rings

being within reach of many people, with much vaunting of his own rare

connections, due to his known wisdom, and honesty. It might be true

that he was a pedlar--he chose to be a pedlar; though he was rich enough

to kick his heels in his shop all day. But those who thought they had

said all there was to be said about Bratti when they had called him a

pedlar, were a good deal further off the truth than the other side of

Pisa. How was it that he could put that ring in a stranger's way? It

was, because he had a very particular knowledge of a handsome young

signor, who did not look quite so fine a feathered bird when Bratti

first set eyes on him as he did at the present time. And by a question

or two Baldassarre extracted, without any trouble, such a rough and

rambling account of Tito's life as the pedlar could give, since the time

when he had found him sleeping under the Loggia de' Cerchi. It never

occurred to Bratti that the decent man (who was rather deaf, apparently,

asking him to say many things twice over) had any curiosity about Tito;

the curiosity was doubtless about himself, as a truly remarkable pedlar.

And Baldassarre left Bratti's shop, not only with the dagger at his

side, but also with a general knowledge of Tito's conduct and position--

of his early sale of the jewels, his immediate quiet settlement of

himself at Florence, his marriage, and his great prosperity.

"What story had he told about his previous life--about his father?"

It would be difficult for Baldassarre to discover the answer to that

question. Meanwhile, he wanted to learn all he could about Florence.

But he found, to his acute distress, that of the new details he learned

he could only retain a few, and those only by continual repetition; and

he began to be afraid of listening to any new discourse, lest it should

obliterate what he was already striving to remember.

The day he was discerned by Tito in the Piazza del Duomo, he had the

fresh anguish of this consciousness in his mind, and Tito's ready speech

fell upon him like the mockery of a glib, defying demon.

As he went home to his heap of straw, and passed by the booksellers'

shops in the Via del Garbo, he paused to look at the volumes spread

open. Could he by long gazing at one of those books lay hold of the

slippery threads of memory? Could he, by striving, get a firm grasp

somewhere, and lift himself above these waters that flowed over him?

He was tempted, and bought the cheapest Greek book he could see. He

carried it home and sat on his heap of straw, looking at the characters

by the light of the small window; but no inward light arose on them.

Soon the evening darkness came; but it made little difference to

Baldassarre. His strained eyes seemed still to see the white pages with

the unintelligible black marks upon them.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE.

FRUIT IS SEED.

"My Romola," said Tito, the second morning after he had made his speech

in the Piazza del Duomo, "I am to receive grand visitors to-day; the

Milanese Count is coming again, and the Seneschal de Beaucaire, the

great favourite of the Cristianissimo. I know you don't care to go

through smiling ceremonies with these rustling magnates, whom we are not

likely to see again; and as they will want to look at the antiquities

and the library, perhaps you had better give up your work to-day, and go

to see your cousin Brigida."

Romola discerned a wish in this intimation, and immediately assented.

But presently, coming back in her hood and mantle, she said, "Oh, what a

long breath Florence will take when the gates are flung open, and the

last Frenchman is walking out of them! Even you are getting tired, with

all your patience, my Tito; confess it. Ah, your head is hot."

He was leaning over his desk, writing, and she had laid her hand on his

head, meaning to give a parting caress. The attitude had been a

frequent one, and Tito was accustomed, when he felt her hand there, to

raise his head, throw himself a little backward, and look up at her.

But he felt now as unable to raise his head as if her hand had been a

leaden cowl. He spoke instead, in a light tone, as his pen still ran

along.

"The French are as ready to go from Florence as the wasps to leave a

ripe pear when they have just fastened on it."

Romola, keenly sensitive to the absence of the usual response, took away

her hand and said, "I am going, Tito."

"Farewell, my sweet one. I must wait at home. Take Maso with you."

Still Tito did not look up, and Romola went out without saying any more.

Very slight things make Epochs in married life, and this morning for

the first time she admitted to herself not only that Tito had changed,

but that he had changed towards her. Did the reason lie in herself?

She might perhaps have thought so, if there had not been the facts of

the armour and the picture to suggest some external event which was an

entire mystery to her.

But Tito no sooner believed that Romola was out of the house than he

laid down his pen and looked up, in delightful security from seeing

anything else than parchment and broken marble. He was rather disgusted

with himself that he had not been able to look up at Romola and behave

to her just as usual. He would have chosen, if he could, to be even

more than usually kind; but he could not, on a sudden, master an

involuntary shrinking from her, which, by a subtle relation, depended on

those very characteristics in him that made him desire not to fail in

his marks of affection. He was about to take a step which he knew would

arouse her deep indignation; he would have to encounter much that was

unpleasant before he could win her forgiveness. And Tito could never

find it easy to face displeasure and anger; his nature was one of those

most remote from defiance or impudence, and all his inclinations leaned

towards preserving Romola's tenderness. He was not tormented by

sentimental scruples which, as he had demonstrated to himself by a very

rapid course of argument, had no relation to solid utility; but his

freedom from scruples did not release him from the dread of what was

disagreeable. Unscrupulousness gets rid of much, but not of toothache,

or wounded vanity, or the sense of loneliness, against which, as the

world at present stands, there is no security but a thoroughly healthy

jaw, and a just, loving soul. And Tito was feeling intensely at this

moment that no devices could save him from pain in the impending

collision with Romola; no persuasive blandness could cushion him against

the shock towards which he was being driven like a timid animal urged to

a desperate leap by the terror of the tooth and the claw that are close

behind it.

The secret feeling he had previously had that the tenacious adherence to

Bardo's wishes about the library had become under existing difficulties

a piece of sentimental folly, which deprived himself and Romola of

substantial advantages, might perhaps never have wrought itself into

action but for the events of the past week, which had brought at once

the pressure of a new motive and the outlet of a rare opportunity. Nay,

it was not till his dread had been aggravated by the sight of

Baldassarre looking more like his sane self, not until he had begun to

feel that he might be compelled to flee from Florence, that he had

brought himself to resolve on using his legal right to sell the library

before the great opportunity offered by French and Milanese bidders

slipped through his fingers. For if he had to leave Florence he did not

want to leave it as a destitute wanderer. He had been used to an

agreeable existence, and he wished to carry with him all the means at

hand for retaining the same agreeable conditions. He wished among other

things to carry Romola with him, and \_not\_, if possible, to carry any

infamy. Success had given him a growing appetite for all the pleasures

that depend on an advantageous social position, and at no moment could

it look like a temptation to him, but only like a hideous alternative,

to decamp under dishonour, even with a bag of diamonds, and incur the

life of an adventurer. It was not possible for him to make himself

independent even of those Florentines who only greeted him with regard;

still less was it possible for him to make himself independent of

Romola. She was the wife of his first love--he loved her still; she

belonged to that furniture of life which he shrank from parting with.

He winced under her judgment, he felt uncertain how far the revulsion of

her feeling towards him might go; and all that sense of power over a

wife which makes a husband risk betrayals that a lover never ventures

on, would not suffice to counteract Tito's uneasiness. This was the

leaden weight which had been too strong for his will, and kept him from

raising his head to meet her eyes. Their pure light brought too near

him the prospect of a coming struggle. But it was not to be helped; if

they had to leave Florence, they must have money; indeed, Tito could not

arrange life at all to his mind without a considerable sum of money.

And that problem of arranging life to his mind had been the source of

all his misdoing. He would have been equal to any sacrifice that was

not unpleasant.

The rustling magnates came and went, the bargains had been concluded,

and Romola returned home; but nothing grave was said that night. Tito

was only gay and chatty, pouring forth to her, as he had not done

before, stories and descriptions of what he had witnessed during the

French visit. Romola thought she discerned an effort in his liveliness,

and attributing it to the consciousness in him that she had been wounded

in the morning, accepted the effort as an act of penitence, inwardly

aching a little at that sign of growing distance between them--that

there was an offence about which neither of them dared to speak.

The next day Tito remained away from home until late at night. It was a

marked day to Romola, for Piero di Cosimo, stimulated to greater

industry on her behalf by the fear that he might have been the cause of

pain to her in the past week, had sent home her father's portrait. She

had propped it against the back of his old chair, and had been looking

at it for some time, when the door opened behind her, and Bernardo del

Nero came in.

"It is you, godfather! How I wish you had come sooner! it is getting a

little dusk," said Romola, going towards him.

"I have just looked in to tell you the good news, for I know Tito has

not come yet," said Bernardo. "The French king moves off to-morrow: not

before it is high time. There has been another tussle between our

people and his soldiers this morning. But there's a chance now of the

city getting into order once more and trade going on."

"That is joyful," said Romola. "But it is sudden, is it not? Tito

seemed to think yesterday that there was little prospect of the king's

going soon."

"He has been well barked at, that's the reason," said Bernardo, smiling.

"His own generals opened their throats pretty well, and at last our

Signoria sent the mastiff of the city, Fra Girolamo. The Cristianissimo

was frightened at that thunder, and has given the order to move. I'm

afraid there'll be small agreement among us when he's gone, but, at any

rate, all parties are agreed in being glad not to have Florence stifled

with soldiery any longer, and the Frate has barked this time to some

purpose. Ah, what is this?" he added, as Romola, clasping him by the

arm, led him in front of the picture. "Let us see."

He began to unwind his long scarf while she placed a seat for him.

"Don't you want your spectacles, godfather?" said Romola, in anxiety

that he should see just what she saw.

"No, child, no," said Bernardo, uncovering his grey head, as he seated

himself with firm erectness. "For seeing at this distance, my old eyes

are perhaps better than your young ones. Old men's eyes are like old

men's memories; they are strongest for things a long way off."

"It is better than having no portrait," said Romola, apologetically,

after Bernardo had been silent a little while. "It is less like him now

than the image I have in my mind, but then that might fade with the

years." She rested her arm on the old man's shoulder as she spoke,

drawn towards him strongly by their common interest in the dead.

"I don't know," said Bernardo. "I almost think I see Bardo as he was

when he was young, better than that picture shows him to me as he was

when he was old. Your father had a great deal of fire in his eyes when

he was young. It was what I could never understand, that he, with his

fiery spirit, which seemed much more impatient than mine, could hang

over the books and live with shadows all his life. However, he had put

his heart into that."

Bernardo gave a slight shrug as he spoke the last words, but Romola

discerned in his voice a feeling that accorded with her own.

"And he was disappointed to the last," she said, involuntarily. But

immediately fearing lest her words should be taken to imply an

accusation against Tito, she went on almost hurriedly, "If we could only

see his longest, dearest wish fulfilled just to his mind!"

"Well, so we may," said Bernardo, kindly, rising and putting on his cap.

"The times are cloudy now, but fish are caught by waiting. Who knows?

When the wheel has turned often enough, I may be Gonfaloniere yet before

I die; and no creditor can touch these things." He looked round as he

spoke. Then, turning to her, and patting her cheek, said, "And you need

not be afraid of my dying; my ghost will claim nothing. I've taken care

of that in my will."

Romola seized the hand that was against her cheek, and put it to her

lips in silence.

"Haven't you been scolding your husband for keeping away from home so

much lately? I see him everywhere but here," said Bernardo, willing to

change the subject.

She felt the flush spread over her neck and face as she said, "He has

been very much wanted; you know he speaks so well. I am glad to know

that his value is understood."

"You are contented then, Madonna Orgogliosa?" said Bernardo, smiling, as

he moved to the door.

"Assuredly."

Poor Romola! There was one thing that would have made the pang of

disappointment in her husband harder to bear; it was, that any one

should know he gave her cause for disappointment. This might be a

woman's weakness, but it is closely allied to a woman's nobleness. She

who willingly lifts up the veil of her married life has profaned it from

a sanctuary into a vulgar place.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO.

A REVELATION.

The next day Romola, like every other Florentine, was excited about the

departure of the French. Besides her other reasons for gladness, she

had a dim hope, which she was conscious was half superstitious, that

those new anxieties about Tito, having come with the burdensome guests,

might perhaps vanish with them. The French had been in Florence hardly

eleven days, but in that space she had felt more acute unhappiness than

she had known in her life before. Tito had adopted the hateful armour

on the day of their arrival, and though she could frame no distinct

notion why their departure should remove the cause of his fear--though,

when she thought of that cause, the image of the prisoner grasping him,

as she had seen it in Piero's sketch, urged itself before her and

excluded every other--still, when the French were gone, she would be rid

of something that was strongly associated with her pain.

Wrapped in her mantle she waited under the loggia at the top of the

house, and watched for the glimpses of the troops and the royal retinue

passing the bridges on their way to the Porta San Piero, that looks

towards Siena and Rome. She even returned to her station when the gates

had been closed, that she might feel herself vibrating with the great

peal of the bells. It was dusk then, and when at last she descended

into the library, she lit her lamp with the resolution that she would

overcome the agitation which had made her idle all day, and sit down to

work at her copying of the catalogue. Tito had left home early in the

morning, and she did not expect him yet. Before he came she intended to

leave the library, and sit in the pretty saloon, with the dancing nymphs

and the birds. She had done so every evening since he had objected to

the library as chill and gloomy.

To her great surprise, she had not been at work long before Tito

entered. Her first thought was, how cheerless he would feel in the wide

darkness of this great room, with one little oil-lamp burning at the

further end, and the fire nearly out. She almost ran towards him.

"Tito, dearest, I did not know you would come so soon," she said,

nervously, putting up her white arms to unwind his becchetto.

"I am not welcome then?" he said, with one of his brightest smiles,

clasping her, but playfully holding his head back from her.

"Tito!" She uttered the word in a tone of pretty, loving reproach, and

then he kissed her fondly, stroked her hair, as his manner was, and

seemed not to mind about taking off his mantle yet. Romola quivered

with delight. All the emotions of the day had been preparing in her a

keener sensitiveness to the return of this habitual manner. "It will

come back," she was saying to herself, "the old happiness will perhaps

come back. He is like himself again."

Tito was taking great pains to be like himself; his heart was

palpitating with anxiety.

"If I had expected you so soon," said Romola, as she at last helped him

to take off his wrappings, "I would have had a little festival prepared

to this joyful ringing of the bells. I did not mean to be here in the

library when you came home."

"Never mind, sweet," he said, carelessly. "Do not think about the fire.

Come--come and sit down."

There was a low stool against Tito's chair, and that was Romola's

habitual seat when they were talking together. She rested her arm on

his knee, as she used to do on her father's, and looked up at him while

he spoke. He had never yet noticed the presence of the portrait, and

she had not mentioned it--thinking of it all the more.

"I have been enjoying the clang of the bells for the first time, Tito,"

she began. "I liked being shaken and deafened by them: I fancied I was

something like a Bacchante possessed by a divine rage. Are not the

people looking very joyful to-night?"

"Joyful after a sour and pious fashion," said Tito, with a shrug. "But,

in truth, those who are left behind in Florence have little cause to be

joyful: it seems to me, the most reasonable ground of gladness would be

to have got out of Florence."

Tito had sounded the desired key-note without any trouble, or appearance

of premeditation. He spoke with no emphasis, but he looked grave enough

to make Romola ask rather anxiously--

"Why, Tito? Are there fresh troubles?"

"No need of fresh ones, my Romola. There are three strong parties in

the city, all ready to fly at each other's throats. And if the Frate's

party is strong enough to frighten the other two into silence, as seems

most likely, life will be as pleasant and amusing as a funeral. They

have the plan of a Great Council simmering already; and if they get it,

the man who sings sacred Lauds the loudest will be the most eligible for

office. And besides that, the city will be so drained by the payment of

this great subsidy to the French king, and by the war to get back Pisa,

that the prospect would be dismal enough without the rule of fanatics.

On the whole, Florence will be a delightful place for those worthies who

entertain themselves in the evening by going into crypts and lashing

themselves; but for everything else, the exiles have the best of it.

For my own part, I have been thinking seriously that we should be wise

to quit Florence, my Romola."

She started. "Tito, how could we leave Florence? Surely you do not

think I could leave it--at least, not yet--not for a long while." She

had turned cold and trembling, and did not find it quite easy to speak.

Tito must know the reasons she had in her mind.

"That is all a fabric of your own imagination, my sweet one. Your

secluded life has made you lay such false stress on a few things. You

know I used to tell you, before we were married, that I wished we were

somewhere else than in Florence. If you had seen more places and more

people, you would know what I mean when I say that there is something in

the Florentines that reminds me of their cutting spring winds. I like

people who take life less eagerly; and it would be good for my Romola,

too, to see a new life. I should like to dip her a little in the soft

waters of forgetfulness."

He leaned forward and kissed her brow, and laid his hand on her fair

hair again; but she felt his caress no more than if he had kissed a

mask. She was too much agitated by the sense of the distance between

their minds to be conscious that his lips touched her.

"Tito, it is not because I suppose Florence is the pleasantest place in

the world that I desire not to quit it. It is because I--because we

have to see my father's wish fulfilled. My godfather is old; he is

seventy-one; we could not leave it to him."

"It is precisely those superstitions which hang about your mind like

bedimming clouds, my Romola, that make one great reason why I could wish

we were two hundred leagues from Florence. I am obliged to take care of

you in opposition to your own will: if those dear eyes, that look so

tender, see falsely, I must see for them, and save my wife from wasting

her life in disappointing herself by impracticable dreams."

Romola sat silent and motionless: she could not blind herself to the

direction in which Tito's words pointed: he wanted to persuade her that

they might get the library deposited in some monastery, or take some

other ready means to rid themselves of a task, and of a tie to Florence;

and she was determined never to submit her mind to his judgment on this

question of duty to her father; she was inwardly prepared to encounter

any sort of pain in resistance. But the determination was kept latent

in these first moments by the heart-crushing sense that now at last she

and Tito must be confessedly divided in their wishes. He was glad of

her silence; for, much as he had feared the strength of her feeling, it

was impossible for him, shut up in the narrowness that hedges in all

merely clever, unimpassioned men, not to over-estimate the

persuasiveness of his own arguments. His conduct did not look ugly to

himself, and his imagination did not suffice to show him exactly how it

would look to Romola. He went on in the same gentle, remonstrating

tone.

"You know, dearest--your own clear judgment always showed you--that the

notion of isolating a collection of books and antiquities, and attaching

a single name to them for ever, was one that had no valid, substantial

good for its object: and yet more, one that was liable to be defeated in

a thousand ways. See what has become of the Medici collections! And,

for my part, I consider it even blameworthy to entertain those petty

views of appropriation: why should any one be reasonably glad that

Florence should possess the benefits of learned research and taste more

than any other city? I understand your feeling about the wishes of the

dead; but wisdom puts a limit to these sentiments, else lives might be

continually wasted in that sort of futile devotion--like praising deaf

gods for ever. You gave your life to your father while he lived; why

should you demand more of yourself?"

"Because it was a trust," said Romola, in a low but distinct voice. "He

trusted me, he trusted you, Tito. I did not expect you to feel anything

else about it--to feel as I do--but I did expect you to feel that."

"Yes, dearest, of course I should feel it on a point where your father's

real welfare or happiness was concerned; but there is no question of

that now. If we believed in purgatory, I should be as anxious as you to

have masses said; and if I believed it could now pain your father to see

his library preserved and used in a rather different way from what he

had set his mind on, I should share the strictness of your views. But a

little philosophy should teach us to rid ourselves of those air-woven

fetters that mortals hang round themselves, spending their lives in

misery under the mere imagination of weight. Your mind, which seizes

ideas so readily, my Romola, is able to discriminate between substantial

good and these brain-wrought fantasies. Ask yourself, dearest, what

possible good can these books and antiquities do, stowed together under

your father's name in Florence, more than they would do if they were

divided or carried elsewhere? Nay, is not the very dispersion of such

things in hands that know how to value them, one means of extending

their usefulness? This rivalry of Italian cities is very petty and

illiberal. The loss of Constantinople was the gain of the whole

civilised world."

Romola was still too thoroughly under the painful pressure of the new

revelation Tito was making of himself, for her resistance to find any

strong vent. As that fluent talk fell on her ears there was a rising

contempt within her, which only made her more conscious of her bruised,

despairing love, her love for the Tito she had married and believed in.

Her nature, possessed with the energies of strong emotion, recoiled from

this hopelessly shallow readiness which professed to appropriate the

widest sympathies and had no pulse for the nearest. She still spoke

like one who was restrained from showing all she felt. She had only

drawn away her arm from his knee, and sat with her hands clasped before

her, cold and motionless as locked waters.

"You talk of substantial good, Tito! Are faithfulness, and love, and

sweet grateful memories, no good? Is it no good that we should keep our

silent promises on which others build because they believe in our love

and truth? Is it no good that a just life should be justly honoured?

Or, is it good that we should harden our hearts against all the wants

and hopes of those who have depended on us? What good can belong to men

who have such souls? To talk cleverly, perhaps, and find soft couches

for themselves, and live and die with their base selves as their best

companions."

Her voice had gradually risen till there was a ring of scorn in the last

words; she made a slight pause, but he saw there were other words

quivering on her lips, and he chose to let them come.

"I know of no good for cities or the world if they are to be made up of

such beings. But I am not thinking of other Italian cities and the

whole civilised world--I am thinking of my father, and of my love and

sorrow for him, and of his just claims on us. I would give up anything

else, Tito,--I would leave Florence,--what else did I live for but for

him and you? But I will not give up that duty. What have I to do with

your arguments? It was a yearning of \_his\_ heart, and therefore it is a

yearning of mine."

Her voice, from having been tremulous, had become full and firm. She

felt that she had been urged on to say all that it was needful for her

to say. She thought, poor thing, there was nothing harder to come than

this struggle against Tito's suggestions as against the meaner part of

herself.

He had begun to see clearly that he could not persuade her into assent:

he must take another course, and show her that the time for resistance

was past. That, at least, would put an end to further struggle; and if

the disclosure were not made by himself to-night, to-morrow it must be

made in another way. This necessity nerved his courage; and his

experience of her affectionateness and unexpected submissiveness, ever

since their marriage until now, encouraged him to hope that, at last,

she would accommodate herself to what had been his will.

"I am sorry to hear you speak in that spirit of blind persistence, my

Romola," he said, quietly, "because it obliges me to give you pain. But

I partly foresaw your opposition, and as a prompt decision was

necessary, I avoided that obstacle, and decided without consulting you.

The very care of a husband for his wife's interest compels him to that

separate action sometimes--even when he has such a wife as you, my

Romola."

She turned her eyes on him in breathless inquiry.

"I mean," he said, answering her look, "that I have arranged for the

transfer, both of the books and of the antiquities, where they will find

the highest use and value. The books have been bought for the Duke of

Milan, the marbles and bronzes and the rest are going to France: and

both will be protected by the stability of a great Power, instead of

remaining in a city which is exposed to ruin."

Before he had finished speaking, Romola had started from her seat, and

stood up looking down at him, with tightened hands falling before her,

and, for the first time in her life, with a flash of fierceness in her

scorn and anger.

"You have \_sold\_ them?" she asked, as if she distrusted her ears.

"I have," said Tito, quailing a little. The scene was unpleasant--the

descending scorn already scorched him.

"You are a treacherous man!" she said, with something grating in her

voice, as she looked down at him.

She was silent for a minute, and he sat still, feeling that ingenuity

was powerless just now. Suddenly she turned away, and said in an

agitated tone, "It may be hindered--I am going to my godfather."

In an instant Tito started up, went to the door, locked it, and took out

the key. It was time for all the masculine predominance that was latent

in him to show itself. But he was not angry; he only felt that the

moment was eminently unpleasant, and that when this scene was at an end

he should be glad to keep away from Romola for a little while. But it

was absolutely necessary first that she should be reduced to

passiveness.

"Try to calm yourself a little, Romola," he said, leaning in the easiest

attitude possible against a pedestal under the bust of a grim old Roman.

Not that he was inwardly easy: his heart palpitated with a moral dread,

against which no chain-armour could be found. He had locked-in his

wife's anger and scorn, but he had been obliged to lock himself in with

it; and his blood did not rise with contest--his olive cheek was

perceptibly paled.

Romola had paused and turned her eyes on him as she saw him take his

stand and lodge the key in his scarsella. Her eyes were flashing, and

her whole frame seemed to be possessed by impetuous force that wanted to

leap out in some deed. All the crushing pain of disappointment in her

husband, which had made the strongest part of her consciousness a few

minutes before, was annihilated by the vehemence of her indignation.

She could not care in this moment that the man she was despising as he

leaned there in his loathsome beauty--she could not care that he was her

husband; she could only feel that she despised him. The pride and

fierceness of the old Bardo blood had been thoroughly awaked in her for

the first time.

"Try at least to understand the fact," said Tito, "and do not seek to

take futile steps which may be fatal. It is of no use for you to go to

your godfather. Messer Bernardo cannot reverse what I have done. Only

sit down. You would hardly wish, if you were quite yourself, to make

known to any third person what passes between us in private."

Tito knew that he had touched the right fibre there. But she did not

sit down; she was too unconscious of her body voluntarily to change her

attitude.

"Why can it not be reversed?" she said, after a pause. "Nothing is

moved yet."

"Simply because the sale has been concluded by written agreement; the

purchasers have left Florence, and I hold the bonds for the

purchase-money."

"If my father had suspected you of being a faithless man," said Romola,

in a tone of bitter scorn, which insisted on darting out before she

could say anything else, "he would have placed the library safely out of

your power. But death overtook him too soon, and when you were sure his

ear was deaf, and his hand stiff, you robbed him." She paused an

instant, and then said, with gathered passion, "Have you robbed somebody

else, who is \_not\_ dead? Is that the reason you wear armour?"

Romola had been driven to utter the words as men are driven to use the

lash of the horsewhip. At first, Tito felt horribly cowed; it seemed to

him that the disgrace he had been dreading would be worse than he had

imagined it. But soon there was a reaction: such power of dislike and

resistance as there was within him was beginning to rise against a wife

whose voice seemed like the herald of a retributive fate. Her, at

least, his quick mind told him that he might master.

"It is useless," he said, coolly, "to answer the words of madness,

Romola. Your peculiar feeling about your father has made you mad at

this moment. Any rational person looking at the case from a due

distance will see that I have taken the wisest course. Apart from the

influence of your exaggerated feelings on him, I am convinced that

Messer Bernardo would be of that opinion."

"He would not!" said Romola. "He lives in the hope of seeing my

father's wish exactly fulfilled. We spoke of it together only

yesterday. He will help me yet. Who are these men to whom you have

sold my father's property?"

"There is no reason why you should not be told, except that it signifies

little. The Count di San Severino and the Seneschal de Beaucaire are

now on their way with the king to Siena."

"They may be overtaken and persuaded to give up their purchase," said

Romola, eagerly, her anger beginning to be surmounted by anxious

thought.

"No, they may not," said Tito, with cool decision.

"Why?"

"Because I do not choose that they should."

"But if you were paid the money?--we will pay you the money," said

Romola.

No words could have disclosed more fully her sense of alienation from

Tito; but they were spoken with less of bitterness than of anxious

pleading. And he felt stronger, for he saw that the first impulse of

fury was past.

"No, my Romola. Understand that such thoughts as these are

impracticable. You would not, in a reasonable moment, ask your

godfather to bury three thousand florins in addition to what he has

already paid on the library. I think your pride and delicacy would

shrink from that."

She began to tremble and turn cold again with discouragement, and sank

down on the carved chest near which she was standing. He went on in a

clear voice, under which she shuddered, as if it had been a narrow cold

stream coursing over a hot cheek.

"Moreover, it is not my will that Messer Bernardo should advance the

money, even if the project were not an utterly wild one. And I beg you

to consider, before you take any step or utter any word on the subject,

what will be the consequences of your placing yourself in opposition to

me, and trying to exhibit your husband in the odious light which your

own distempered feelings cast over him. What object will you serve by

injuring me with Messer Bernardo? The event is irrevocable, the library

is sold, and you are my wife."

Every word was spoken for the sake of a calculated effect, for his

intellect was urged into the utmost activity by the danger of the

crisis. He knew that Romola's mind would take in rapidly enough all the

wide meaning of his speech. He waited and watched her in silence.

She had turned her eyes from him, and was looking on the ground, and in

that way she sat for several minutes. When she spoke, her voice was

quite altered,--it was quiet and cold.

"I have one thing to ask."

"Ask anything that I can do without injuring us both, Romola."

"That you will give me that portion of the money which belongs to my

godfather, and let me pay him."

"I must have some assurance from you, first, of the attitude you intend

to take towards me."

"Do you believe in assurances, Tito?" she said, with a tinge of

returning bitterness.

"From you, I do."

"I will do you no harm. I shall disclose nothing. I will say nothing

to pain him or you. You say truly, the event is irrevocable."

"Then I will do what you desire to-morrow morning."

"To-night, if possible," said Romola, "that we may not speak of it

again."

"It is possible," he said, moving towards the lamp, while she sat still,

looking away from him with absent eyes.

Presently he came and bent down over her, to put a piece of paper into

her hand. "You will receive something in return, you are aware, my

Romola?" he said, gently, not minding so much what had passed, now he

was secure; and feeling able to try and propitiate her.

"Yes," she said, taking the paper, without looking at him, "I

understand."

"And you will forgive me, my Romola, when you have had time to reflect."

He just touched her brow with his lips, but she took no notice, and

seemed really unconscious of the act. She was aware that he unlocked

the door and went out. She moved her head and listened. The great door

of the court opened and shut again. She started up as if some sudden

freedom had come, and going to her father's chair where his picture was

propped, fell on her knees before it, and burst into sobs.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note. Savonarola's Sermon, page 350. The sermon here given is not a

translation, but a free representation of Fra Girolamo's preaching in

its more impassioned moments.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE.

BALDASSARRE MAKES AN ACQUAINTANCE.

When Baldassarre was wandering about Florence in search of a spare

outhouse where he might have the cheapest of sheltered beds, his steps

had been attracted towards that sole portion of ground within the walls

of the city which is not perfectly level, and where the spectator,

lifted above the roofs of the houses, can see beyond the city to the

protecting hills and far-stretching valley, otherwise shut out from his

view except along the welcome opening made by the course of the Arno.

Part of that ground has been already seen by us as the hill of Bogoli,

at that time a great stone-quarry; but the side towards which

Baldassarre directed his steps was the one that sloped down behind the

Via de' Bardi, and was most commonly called the hill of San Giorgio.

Bratti had told him that Tito's dwelling was in the Via de' Bardi; and,

after surveying that street, he turned up the slope of the hill which he

had observed as he was crossing the bridge. If he could find a

sheltering outhouse on that hill, he would be glad: he had now for some

years been accustomed to live with a broad sky about him; and, moreover,

the narrow passes of the streets, with their strip of sky above, and the

unknown labyrinth around them, seemed to intensify his sense of

loneliness and feeble memory.

The hill was sparsely inhabited, and covered chiefly by gardens; but in

one spot was a piece of rough ground jagged with great stones, which had

never been cultivated since a landslip had ruined some houses there

towards the end of the thirteenth century. Just above the edge of this

broken ground stood a queer little square building, looking like a

truncated tower roofed in with fluted tiles, and close by was a small

outhouse, apparently built up against a piece of ruined stone wall.

Under a large half-dead mulberry-tree that was now sending its last

fluttering leaves in at the open doorways, a shrivelled, hardy old woman

was untying a goat with two kids, and Baldassarre could see that part of

the outbuilding was occupied by live stock; but the door of the other

part was open, and it was empty of everything but some tools and straw.

It was just the sort of place he wanted. He spoke to the old woman; but

it was not till he got close to her and shouted in her ear, that he

succeeded in making her understand his want of a lodging, and his

readiness to pay for it. At first he could get no answer beyond shakes

of the head and the words, "No--no lodging," uttered in the muffled tone

of the deaf. But, by dint of persistence, he made clear to her that he

was a poor stranger from a long way over seas, and could not afford to

go to hostelries; that he only wanted to lie on the straw in the

outhouse, and would pay her a quattrino or two a week for that shelter.

She still looked at him dubiously, shaking her head and talking low to

herself; but presently, as if a new thought occurred to her, she fetched

a hatchet from the house, and, showing him a chump that lay half covered

with litter in a corner, asked him if he would chop that up for her: if

he would, he might lie in the outhouse for one night. He agreed, and

Monna Lisa stood with her arms akimbo to watch him, with a smile of

gratified cunning, saying low to herself--

"It's lain there ever since my old man died. What then? I might as

well have put a stone on the fire. He chops very well, though he does

speak with a foreign tongue, and looks odd. I couldn't have got it done

cheaper. And if he only wants a bit of straw to lie on, I might make

him do an errand or two up and down the hill. Who need know? And sin

that's hidden's half forgiven. [`Peccato celato e mezzo perdonato.']

He's a stranger: he'll take no notice of \_her\_. And I'll tell her to

keep her tongue still."

The antecedent to these feminine pronouns had a pair of blue eyes, which

at that moment were applied to a large round hole in the shutter of the

upper window. The shutter was closed, not for any penal reasons, but

because only the opposite window had the luxury of glass in it: the

weather was not warm, and a round hole four inches in diameter served

all the purposes of observation. The hole was, unfortunately, a little

too high, and obliged the small observer to stand on a low stool of a

rickety character; but Tessa would have stood a long while in a much

more inconvenient position for the sake of seeing a little variety in

her life. She had been drawn to the opening at the first loud tones of

the strange voice speaking to Monna Lisa; and darting gently across her

room every now and then to peep at something, she continued to stand

there until the wood had been chopped, and she saw Baldassarre enter the

outhouse, as the dusk was gathering, and seat himself on the straw.

A great temptation had laid hold of Tessa's mind; she would go and take

that old man part of her supper, and talk to him a little. He was not

deaf like Monna Lisa, and besides she could say a great many things to

him that it was no use to shout at Monna Lisa, who knew them already.

And he was a stranger--strangers came from a long way off and went away

again, and lived nowhere in particular. It was naughty, she knew, for

obedience made the largest part in Tessa's idea of duty; but it would be

something to confess to the Padre next Pasqua, and there was nothing

else to confess except going to sleep sometimes over her beads, and

being a little cross with Monna Lisa because she was so deaf; for she

had as much idleness as she liked now, and was never frightened into

telling white lies. She turned away from her shutter with rather an

excited expression in her childish face, which was as pretty and pouting

as ever. Her garb was still that of a simple contadina, but of a

contadina prepared for a festa: her gown of dark-green serge, with its

red girdle, was very clean and neat; she had the string of red glass

beads round her neck; and her brown hair, rough from curliness, was duly

knotted up, and fastened with the silver pin. She had but one new

ornament, and she was very proud of it, for it was a fine gold ring.

Tessa sat on the low stool, nursing her knees, for a minute or two, with

her little soul poised in fluttering excitement on the edge of this

pleasant transgression. It was quite irresistible. She had been

commanded to make no acquaintances, and warned that if she did, all her

new happy lot would vanish away, and be like a hidden treasure that

turned to lead as soon as it was brought to the daylight; and she had

been so obedient that when she had to go to church she had kept her face

shaded by her hood and had pursed up her lips quite tightly. It was

true her obedience had been a little helped by her own dread lest the

alarming stepfather Nofri should turn up even in this quarter, so far

from the Por' del Prato, and beat her at least, if he did not drag her

back to work for him. But this old man was not an acquaintance; he was

a poor stranger going to sleep in the outhouse, and he probably knew

nothing of stepfather Nofri; and, besides, if she took him some supper,

he would like her, and not want to tell anything about her. Monna Lisa

would say she must not go and talk to him, therefore Monna Lisa must not

be consulted. It did not signify what she found out after it had been

done.

Supper was being prepared, she knew--a mountain of macaroni flavoured

with cheese, fragrant enough to tame any stranger. So she tripped

down-stairs with a mind full of deep designs, and first asking with an

innocent look what that noise of talking had been, without waiting for

an answer, knit her brow with a peremptory air, something like a kitten

trying to be formidable, and sent the old woman upstairs; saying, she

chose to eat her supper down below. In three minutes Tessa with her

lantern in one hand and a wooden bowl of macaroni in the other, was

kicking gently at the door of the outhouse; and Baldassarre, roused from

sad reverie, doubted in the first moment whether he were awake as he

opened the door and saw this surprising little handmaid, with delight in

her wide eyes, breaking in on his dismal loneliness.

"I've brought you some supper," she said, lifting her mouth towards his

ear and shouting, as if he had been deaf like Monna Lisa. "Sit down and

eat it, while I stay with you."

Surprise and distrust surmounted every other feeling in Baldassarre, but

though he had no smile or word of gratitude ready, there could not be

any impulse to push away this visitant, and he sank down passively on

his straw again, while Tessa placed herself close to him, put the wooden

bowl on his lap, and set down the lantern in front of them, crossing her

hands before her, and nodding at the bowl with a significant smile, as

much as to say, "Yes, you may really eat it." For, in the excitement of

carrying out her deed, she had forgotten her previous thought that the

stranger would not be deaf, and had fallen into her habitual alternative

of dumb show and shouting.

The invitation was not a disagreeable one, for he had been gnawing a

remnant of dry bread, which had left plenty of appetite for anything

warm and relishing. Tessa watched the disappearance of two or three

mouthfuls without speaking, for she had thought his eyes rather fierce

at first; but now she ventured to put her mouth to his ear again and

cry--

"I like my supper, don't you?"

It was not a smile, but rather the milder look of a dog touched by

kindness, but unable to smile, that Baldassarre turned on this round

blue-eyed thing that was caring about him.

"Yes," he said; "but I can hear well--I'm not deaf."

"It is true; I forgot," said Tessa, lifting her hands and clasping them.

"But Monna Lisa is deaf, and I live with her. She's a kind old woman,

and I'm not frightened at her. And we live very well: we have plenty of

nice things. I can have nuts if I like. And I'm not obliged to work

now. I used to have to work, and I didn't like it; but I liked feeding

the mules, and I should like to see poor Giannetta, the little mule,

again. We've only got a goat and two kids, and I used to talk to the

goat a good deal, because there was nobody else but Monna Lisa. But now

I've got something else--can you guess what it is?"

She drew her head back, and looked with a challenging smile at

Baldassarre, as if she had proposed a difficult riddle to him.

"No," said he, putting aside his bowl, and looking at her dreamily. It

seemed as if this young prattling thing were some memory come back out

of his own youth.

"You like me to talk to you, don't you?" said Tessa, "but you must not

tell anybody. Shall I fetch you a bit of cold sausage?"

He shook his head, but he looked so mild now that Tessa felt quite at

her ease.

"Well, then, I've got a little baby. Such a pretty bambinetto, with

little fingers and nails! Not old yet; it was born at the Nativita,

Monna Lisa says. I was married one Nativita, a long, long while ago,

and nobody knew. O Santa Madonna! I didn't mean to tell you that!"

Tessa set up her shoulders and bit her lip, looking at Baldassarre as if

this betrayal of secrets must have an exciting effect on him too. But

he seemed not to care much; and perhaps that was in the nature of

strangers.

"Yes," she said, carrying on her thought aloud, "you are a stranger; you

don't live anywhere or know anybody, do you?"

"No," said Baldassarre, also thinking aloud, rather than consciously

answering, "I only know one man."

"His name is not Nofri, is it?" said Tessa, anxiously.

"No," said Baldassarre, noticing her look of fear. "Is that your

husband's name?"

That mistaken supposition was very amusing to Tessa. She laughed and

clapped her hands as she said--

"No, indeed! But I must not tell you anything about my husband. You

would never think what he is--not at all like Nofri!"

She laughed again at the delightful incongruity between the name of

Nofri--which was not separable from the idea of the cross-grained

stepfather--and the idea of her husband.

"But I don't see him very often," she went on, more gravely. "And

sometimes I pray to the Holy Madonna to send him oftener, and once she

did. But I must go back to my bimbo now. I'll bring it to show you

to-morrow. You would like to see it. Sometimes it cries and makes a

face, but only when it's hungry, Monna Lisa says. You wouldn't think

it, but Monna Lisa had babies once, and they are all dead old men. My

husband says she will never die now, because she's so well dried. I'm

glad of that, for I'm fond of her. You would like to stay here

to-morrow, shouldn't you?"

"I should like to have this place to come and rest in, that's all," said

Baldassarre. "I would pay for it, and harm nobody."

"No, indeed; I think you are not a bad old man. But you look sorry

about something. Tell me, is there anything you shall cry about when I

leave you by yourself? \_I\_ used to cry once."

"No, child; I think I shall cry no more."

"That's right; and I'll bring you some breakfast, and show you the

bimbo. Good-night."

Tessa took up her bowl and lantern, and closed the door behind her. The

pretty loving apparition had been no more to Baldassarre than a faint

rainbow on the blackness to the man who is wrestling in deep waters. He

hardly thought of her again till his dreamy waking passed into the more

vivid images of disturbed sleep.

But Tessa thought much of him. She had no sooner entered the house than

she told Monna Lisa what she had done, and insisted that the stranger

should be allowed to come and rest in the outhouse when he liked. The

old woman, who had had her notions of making him a useful tenant, made a

great show of reluctance, shook her head, and urged that Messer Naldo

would be angry if she let any one come about the house. Tessa did not

believe that. Naldo had said nothing against strangers who lived

nowhere; and this old man knew nobody except one person, who was not

Nofri.

"Well," conceded Monna Lisa, at last, "if I let him stay for a while and

carry things up the hill for me, thou must keep thy counsel and tell

nobody."

"No," said Tessa, "I'll only tell the bimbo."

"And then," Monna Lisa went on, in her thick undertone, "God may love us

well enough not to let Messer Naldo find out anything about it. For he

never comes here but at dark; and as he was here two days ago, it's

likely he'll never come at all till the old man's gone away again."

"Oh me! Monna," said Tessa, clasping her hands, "I wish Naldo had not

to go such a long, long way sometimes before he comes back again."

"Ah, child! the world's big, they say. There are places behind the

mountains, and if people go night and day, night and day, they get to

Rome, and see the Holy Father."

Tessa looked submissive in the presence of this mystery, and began to

rock her baby, and sing syllables of vague loving meaning, in tones that

imitated a triple chime.

The next morning she was unusually industrious in the prospect of more

dialogue, and of the pleasure she should give the poor old stranger by

showing him her baby. But before she could get ready to take

Baldassarre his breakfast, she found that Monna Lisa had been employing

him as a drawer of water. She deferred her paternosters, and hurried

down to insist that Baldassarre should sit on his straw, so that she

might come and sit by him again while he ate his breakfast. That

attitude made the new companionship all the more delightful to Tessa,

for she had been used to sitting on straw in old days along with her

goats and mules.

"I will not let Monna Lisa give you too much work to do," she said,

bringing him some steaming broth and soft bread. "I don't like much

work, and I daresay you don't. I like sitting in the sunshine and

feeding things. Monna Lisa says, work is good, but she does it all

herself, so I don't mind. She's not a cross old woman; you needn't be

afraid of her being cross. And now, you eat that, and I'll go and fetch

my baby and show it you."

Presently she came back with the small mummy-case in her arms. The

mummy looked very lively, having unusually large dark eyes, though no

more than the usual indication of a future nose.

"This is my baby," said Tessa, seating herself close to Baldassarre.

"You didn't think it was so pretty, did you? It is like the little

Gesu, and I should think the Santa Madonna would be kinder to me now, is

it not true? But I have not much to ask for, because I have everything

now--only that I should see my husband oftener. You may hold the

bambino a little if you like, but I think you must not kiss him, because

you might hurt him."

She spoke this prohibition in a tone of soothing excuse, and Baldassarre

could not refuse to hold the small package. "Poor thing! poor thing!"

he said, in a deep voice which had something strangely threatening in

its apparent pity. It did not seem to him as if this guileless loving

little woman could reconcile him to the world at all, but rather that

she was with him against the world, that she was a creature who would

need to be avenged.

"Oh, don't you be sorry for me," she said; "for though I don't see him

often, he is more beautiful and good than anybody else in the world. I

say prayers to him when he's away. You couldn't think what he is!"

She looked at Baldassarre with a wide glance of mysterious meaning,

taking the baby from him again, and almost wishing he would question her

as if he wanted very much to know more.

"Yes, I could," said Baldassarre, rather bitterly.

"No, I'm sure you never could," said Tessa, earnestly. "You thought he

might be Nofri," she added, with a triumphant air of conclusiveness.

"But never mind; you couldn't know. What is your name?"

He rubbed his hand over his knitted brow, then looked at her blankly and

said, "Ah, child, what is it?"

It was not that he did not often remember his name well enough; and if

he had had presence of mind now to remember it, he would have chosen not

to tell it. But a sudden question appealing to his memory, had a

paralysing effect, and in that moment he was conscious of nothing but

helplessness.

Ignorant as Tessa was, the pity stirred in her by his blank look taught

her to say--

"\_Never\_ mind: you are a stranger, it is no matter about your having a

name. Good-bye now, because I want my breakfast. You will come here

and rest when you like; Monna Lisa says you may. And don't you be

unhappy, for we'll be good to you."

"Poor thing!" said Baldassarre again.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR.

NO PLACE FOR REPENTANCE.

Messer Naldo came again sooner than was expected: he came on the evening

of the twenty-eighth of November, only eleven days after his previous

visit, proving that he had not gone far beyond the mountains; and a

scene which we have witnessed as it took place that evening in the Via

de' Bardi may help to explain the impulse which turned his steps towards

the hill of San Giorgio.

When Tito had first found this home for Tessa, on his return from Rome,

more than a year and a half ago, he had acted, he persuaded himself,

simply under the constraint imposed on him by his own kindliness after

the unlucky incident which had made foolish little Tessa imagine him to

be her husband. It was true that the kindness was manifested towards a

pretty trusting thing whom it was impossible to be near without feeling

inclined to caress and pet her; but it was not less true that Tito had

movements of kindness towards her apart from any contemplated gain to

himself. Otherwise, charming as her prettiness and prattle were in a

lazy moment, he might have preferred to be free from her; for he was not

in love with Tessa--he was in love for the first time in his life with

an entirely different woman, whom he was not simply inclined to shower

caresses on, but whose presence possessed him so that the simple sweep

of her long tresses across his cheek seemed to vibrato through the

hours. All the young ideal passion he had in him had been stirred by

Romola, and his fibre was too fine, his intellect too bright, for him to

be tempted into the habits of a gross pleasure-seeker. But he had spun

a web about himself and Tessa, which he felt incapable of breaking: in

the first moments after the mimic marriage he had been prompted to leave

her under an illusion by a distinct calculation of his own possible

need, but since that critical moment it seemed to him that the web had

gone on spinning itself in spite of him, like a growth over which he had

no power. The elements of kindness and self-indulgence are hard to

distinguish in a soft nature like Tito's; and the annoyance he had felt

under Tessa's pursuit of him on the day of his betrothal, the thorough

intention of revealing the truth to her with which he set out to fulfil

his promise of seeing her again, were a sufficiently strong argument to

him that in ultimately leaving Tessa under her illusion and providing a

home for her, he had been overcome by his own kindness. And in these

days of his first devotion to Romola he needed a self-justifying

argument. He had learned to be glad that she was deceived about some

things. But every strong feeling makes to itself a conscience of its

own--has its own piety; just as much as the feeling of the son towards

the mother, which will sometimes survive amid the worst fumes of

depravation; and Tito could not yet be easy in committing a secret

offence against his wedded love.

But he was all the more careful in taking precautions to preserve the

secrecy of the offence. Monna Lisa, who, like many of her class, never

left her habitation except to go to one or two particular shops, and to

confession once a year, knew nothing of his real name and whereabout:

she only know that he paid her so as to make her very comfortable, and

minded little about the rest, save that she got fond of Tessa, and found

pleasure in the cares for which she was paid. There was some mystery

behind, clearly, since Tessa was a contadina, and Messer Naldo was a

signor; but, for aught Monna Lisa knew, he might be a real husband. For

Tito had thoroughly frightened Tessa into silence about the

circumstances of their marriage, by telling her that if she broke that

silence she would never see him again; and Monna Lisa's deafness, which

made it impossible to say anything to her without some premeditation,

had saved Tessa from any incautious revelation to her, such as had run

off her tongue in talking with Baldassarre. For a long while Tito's

visits were so rare, that it seemed likely enough he took journeys

between them. They were prompted chiefly by the desire to see that all

things were going on well with Tessa; and though he always found his

visit pleasanter than the prospect of it--always felt anew the charm of

that pretty ignorant lovingness and trust--he had not yet any real need

of it. But he was determined, if possible, to preserve the simplicity

on which the charm depended; to keep Tessa a genuine contadina, and not

place the small field-flower among conditions that would rob it of its

grace. He would have been shocked to see her in the dress of any other

rank than her own; the piquancy of her talk would be all gone, if things

began to have new relations for her, if her world became wider, her

pleasures less childish; and the squirrel-like enjoyment of nuts at

discretion marked the standard of the luxuries he had provided for her.

By this means, Tito saved Tessa's charm from being sullied; and he also,

by a convenient coincidence, saved himself from aggravating expenses

that were already rather importunate to a man whose money was all

required for his avowed habits of life.

This, in brief, had been the history of Tito's relation to Tessa up to a

very recent date. It is true that once or twice before Bardo's death,

the sense that there was Tessa up the hill, with whom it was possible to

pass an hour agreeably, had been an inducement to him to escape from a

little weariness of the old man, when, for lack of any positive

engagement, he might otherwise have borne the weariness patiently and

shared Romola's burden. But the moment when he had first felt a real

hunger for Tessa's ignorant lovingness and belief in \_him\_ had not come

till quite lately, and it was distinctly marked out by circumstances as

little to be forgotten as the oncoming of a malady that has permanently

vitiated the sight and hearing. It was the day when he had first seen

Baldassarre, and had bought the armour. Returning across the bridge

that night, with the coat of mail in his hands, he had felt an

unconquerable shrinking from an immediate encounter with Romola. She,

too, knew little of the actual world; she, too, trusted him; but he had

an uneasy consciousness that behind her frank eyes there was a nature

that could judge him, and that any ill-founded trust of hers sprang not

from pretty brute-like incapacity, but from a nobleness which might

prove an alarming touchstone. He wanted a little ease, a little repose

from self-control, after the agitation and exertions of the day; he

wanted to be where he could adjust his mind to the morrow, without

caring how he behaved at the present moment. And there was a sweet

adoring creature within reach whose presence was as safe and

unconstraining as that of her own kids,--who would believe any fable,

and remain quite unimpressed by public opinion. And so on that evening,

when Romola was waiting and listening for him, he turned his steps up

the hill.

No wonder, then, that the steps took the same course on this evening,

eleven days later, when he had had to recoil under Romola's first

outburst of scorn. He could not wish Tessa in his wife's place, or

refrain from wishing that his wife should be thoroughly reconciled to

him; for it was Romola, and not Tessa, that belonged to the world where

all the larger desires of a man who had ambition and effective faculties

must necessarily lie. But he wanted a refuge from a standard

disagreeably rigorous, of which he could not make himself independent

simply by thinking it folly; and Tessa's little soul was that inviting

refuge.

It was not much more than eight o'clock when he went up the stone steps

to the door of Tessa's room. Usually she heard his entrance into the

house, and ran to meet him, but not to-night; and when he opened the

door he saw the reason. A single dim light was burning above the dying

fire, and showed Tessa in a kneeling attitude by the head of the bed

where the baby lay. Her head had fallen aside on the pillow, and her

brown rosary, which usually hung above the pillow over the picture of

the Madonna and the golden palm-branches, lay in the loose grasp of her

right-hand. She had gone fast asleep over her beads. Tito stepped

lightly across the little room, and sat down close to her. She had

probably heard the opening of the door as part of her dream, for he had

not been looking at her two moments before she opened her eyes. She

opened them without any start, and remained quite motionless looking at

him, as if the sense that he was there smiling at her shut out any

impulse which could disturb that happy passiveness. But when he put his

hand under her chin, and stooped to kiss her, she said--

"I dreamed it, and then I said it was dreaming--and then I awoke, and it

was true."

"Little sinner!" said Tito, pinching her chin, "you have not said half

your prayers. I will punish you by not looking at your baby; it is

ugly."

Tessa did not like those words, even though Tito was smiling. She had

some pouting distress in her face, as she said, bending anxiously over

the baby--

"Ah, it is not true! He is prettier than anything. You do not think he

is ugly. You will look at him. He is even prettier than when you saw

him before--only he's asleep, and you can't see his eyes or his tongue,

and I can't show you his hair--and it grows--isn't that wonderful? Look

at him! It's true his face is very much all alike when he's asleep,

there is not so much to see as when he's awake. If you kiss him very

gently, he won't wake: you want to kiss him, is it not true?"

He satisfied her by giving the small mummy a butterfly kiss, and then

putting his hand on her shoulder and turning her face towards him, said,

"You like looking at the baby better than looking at your husband, you

false one!"

She was still kneeling, and now rested her hands on his knee, looking up

at him like one of Fra Lippo Lippi's round-cheeked adoring angels.

"No," she said, shaking her head; "I love you always best, only I want

you to look at the bambino and love him; I used only to want you to love

me."

"And did you expect me to come again so soon?" said Tito, inclined to

make her prattle. He still felt the effects of the agitation he had

undergone--still felt like a man who has been violently jarred; and this

was the easiest relief from silence and solitude.

"Ah, no," said Tessa, "I have counted the days--to-day I began at my

right thumb again--since you put on the beautiful chain-coat, that

Messer San Michele gave you to take care of you on your journey. And

you have got it on now," she said, peeping through the opening in the

breast of his tunic. "Perhaps it made you come back sooner."

"Perhaps it did, Tessa," he said. "But don't mind the coat now. Tell

me what has happened since I was here. Did you see the tents in the

Prato, and the soldiers and horsemen when they passed the bridges--did

you hear the drums and trumpets?"

"Yes, and I was rather frightened, because I thought the soldiers might

come up here. And Monna Lisa was a little afraid too, for she said they

might carry our kids off; she said it was their business to do mischief.

But the Holy Madonna took care of us, for we never saw one of them up

here. But something has happened, only I hardly dare tell you, and that

is what I was saying more Aves for."

"What do you mean, Tessa?" said Tito, rather anxiously. "Make haste and

toll me."

"Yes, but will you let me sit on your knee? because then I think I shall

not be so frightened."

He took her on his knee, and put his arm round her, but looked grave: it

seemed that something unpleasant must pursue him even here.

"At first I didn't mean to tell you," said Tessa, speaking almost in a

whisper, as if that would mitigate the offence; "because we thought the

old man would be gone away before you came again, and it would be as if

it had not been. But now he is there, and you are come, and I never did

anything you told me not to do before. And I want to tell you, and then

you will perhaps forgive me, for it is a long while before I go to

confession."

"Yes, tell me everything, my Tessa." He began to hope it was after all

a trivial matter.

"Oh, you will be sorry for him: I'm afraid he cries about something when

I don't see him. But that was not the reason I went to him first; it

was because I wanted to talk to him and show him my baby, and he was a

stranger that lived nowhere, and I thought you wouldn't care so much

about my talking to him. And I think he is not a bad old man, and he

wanted to come and sleep on the straw next to the goats, and I made

Monna Lisa say, `Yes, he might,' and he's away all the day almost, but

when he comes back I talk to him, and take him something to eat."

"Some beggar, I suppose. It was naughty of you, Tessa, and I am angry

with Monna Lisa. I must have him sent away."

"No, I think he is not a beggar, for he wanted to pay Monna Lisa, only

she asked him to do work for her instead. And he gets himself shaved,

and his clothes are tidy: Monna Lisa says he is a decent man. But

sometimes I think he is not in his right mind: Lupo, at Peretola, was

not in his right mind, and he looks a little like Lupo sometimes, as if

he didn't know where he was."

"What sort of face has he?" said Tito, his heart beginning to beat

strangely. He was so haunted by the thought of Baldassarre, that it was

already he whom he saw in imagination sitting on the straw not many

yards from him. "Fetch your stool, my Tessa, and sit on it."

"Shall you not forgive me?" she said, timidly, moving from his knee.

"Yes, I will not be angry--only sit down, and tell me what sort of old

man this is."

"I can't think how to tell you: he is not like my stepfather Nofri, or

anybody. His face is yellow, and he has deep marks in it; and his hair

is white, but there is none on the top of his head: and his eyebrows are

black, and he looks from under them at me, and says, `Poor thing!' to

me, as if he thought I was beaten as I used to be; and that seems as if

he couldn't be in his right mind, doesn't it? And I asked him his name

once, but he couldn't tell it me: yet everybody has a name--is it not

true? And he has a book now, and keeps looking at it ever so long, as

if he were a Padre. But I think he is not saying prayers, for his lips

never move;--ah, you are angry with me, or is it because you are sorry

for the old man?"

Tito's eyes were still fixed on Tessa; but he had ceased to see her, and

was only seeing the objects her words suggested. It was this absent

glance which frightened her, and she could not help going to kneel at

his side again. But he did not heed her, and she dared not touch him,

or speak to him: she knelt, trembling and wondering; and this state of

mind suggesting her beads to her, she took them from the floor, and

began to tell them again, her pretty lips moving silently, and her blue

eyes wide with anxiety and struggling tears.

Tito was quite unconscious of her movements--unconscious of his own

attitude: he was in that wrapt state in which a man will grasp painful

roughness, and press and press it closer, and never feel it. A new

possibility had risen before him, which might dissolve at once the

wretched conditions of fear and suppression that were marring his life.

Destiny had brought within his reach an opportunity of retrieving that

moment on the steps of the Duomo, when the Past had grasped him with

living quivering hands, and he had disowned it. A few steps, and he

might be face to face with his father, with no witness by; he might seek

forgiveness and reconciliation; and there was money now, from the sale

of the library, to enable them to leave Florence without disclosure, and

go into Southern Italy, where under the probable French rule, he had

already laid a foundation for patronage. Romola need never know the

whole truth, for she could have no certain means of identifying that

prisoner in the Duomo with Baldassarre, or of learning what had taken

place on the steps, except from Baldassarre himself; and if his father

forgave, he would also consent to bury, that offence.

But with this possibility of relief, by an easy spring, from present

evil, there rose the other possibility, that the fierce-hearted man

might refuse to be propitiated. Well--and if he did, things would only

be as they had been before; for there would be \_no witness by\_. It was

not repentance with a white sheet round it and taper in hand, confessing

its hated sin in the eyes of men, that Tito was preparing for: it was a

repentance that would make all things pleasant again, and keep all past

unpleasant things secret. And Tito's soft-heartedness, his

indisposition to feel himself in harsh relations with any creature, was

in strong activity towards his father, now his father was brought near

to him. It would be a state of ease that his nature could not but

desire, if the poisonous hatred in Baldassarre's glance could be

replaced by something of the old affection and complacency.

Tito longed to have his world once again completely cushioned with

goodwill, and longed for it the more eagerly because of what he had just

suffered from the collision with Romola. It was not difficult to him to

smile pleadingly on those whom he had injured, and offer to do them much

kindness: and no quickness of intellect could tell him exactly the taste

of that honey on the lips of the injured. The opportunity was there,

and it raised an inclination which hemmed in the calculating activity of

his thought. He started up, and stepped towards the door; but Tessa's

cry, as she dropped her beads, roused him from his absorption. He

turned and said--

"My Tessa, get me a lantern; and don't cry, little pigeon, I am not

angry."

They went down the stairs, and Tessa was going to shout the need of the

lantern in Monna Lisa's ear, when Tito, who had opened the door, said,

"Stay, Tessa--no, I want no lantern: go upstairs again, and keep quiet,

and say nothing to Monna Lisa."

In half a minute he stood before the closed door of the outhouse, where

the moon was shining white on the old paintless wood.

In this last decisive moment, Tito felt a tremor upon him--a sudden

instinctive shrinking from a possible tiger-glance, a possible

tiger-leap. Yet why should he, a young man, be afraid of an old one? a

young man with armour on, of an old man without a weapon? It was but a

moment's hesitation, and Tito laid his hand on the door. Was his father

asleep? Was there nothing else but the door that screened him from the

voice and the glance which no magic could turn into ease?

Baldassarre was not asleep. There was a square opening high in the wall

of the hovel, through which the moonbeams sent in a stream of pale

light; and if Tito could have looked through the opening, he would have

seen his father seated on the straw, with something that shone like a

white star in his hand. Baldassarre was feeling the edge of his

poniard, taking refuge in that sensation from a hopeless blank of

thought that seemed to lie like a great gulf between his passion and its

aim.

He was in one of his most wretched moments of conscious helplessness: he

had been poring, while it was light, over the book that lay open beside

him; then he had been trying to recall the names of his jewels, and the

symbols engraved on them; and though at certain other times he had

recovered some of those names and symbols, to-night they were all gone

into darkness. And this effort at inward seeing had seemed to end in

utter paralysis of memory. He was reduced to a sort of mad

consciousness that he was a solitary pulse of just rage in a world

filled with defiant baseness. He had clutched and unsheathed his

dagger, and for a long while had been feeling its edge, his mind

narrowed to one image, and the dream of one sensation--the sensation of

plunging that dagger into a base heart, which he was unable to pierce in

any other way.

Tito had his hand on the door and was pulling it: it dragged against the

ground as such old doors often do, and Baldassarre, startled out of his

dreamlike state, rose from his sitting posture in vague amazement, not

knowing where he was. He had not yet risen to his feet, and was still

kneeling on one knee, when the door came wide open and he saw, dark

against the moonlight, with the rays falling on one bright mass of curls

and one rounded olive cheek, the image of his reverie--not shadowy--

close and real like water at the lips after the thirsty dream of it. No

thought could come athwart that eager thirst. In one moment, before

Tito could start back, the old man, with the preternatural force of rage

in his limbs, had sprung forward, and the dagger had flashed out. In

the next moment the dagger had snapped in two, and Baldassarre, under

the parrying force of Tito's arm, had fallen back on the straw,

clutching the hilt with its bit of broken blade. The pointed end lay

shining against Tito's feet.

Tito had felt one great heart-leap of terror as he had staggered under

the weight of the thrust: he felt now the triumph of deliverance and

safety. His armour had been proved, and vengeance lay helpless before

him. But the triumph raised no devilish impulse; on the contrary, the

sight of his father close to him and unable to injure him, made the

effort at reconciliation easier. He was free from fear, but he had only

the more unmixed and direct want to be free from the sense that he was

hated. After they had looked at each other a little while, Baldassarre

lying motionless in despairing rage, Tito said in his soft tones, just

as they had sounded before the last parting on the shores of Greece--

"\_Padre mio\_!" There was a pause after those words, but no movement or

sound till he said--

"I came to ask your forgiveness!"

Again he paused, that the healing balm of those words might have time to

work. But there was no sign of change in Baldassarre: he lay as he had

fallen, leaning on one arm: he was trembling, but it was from the shock

that had thrown him down.

"I was taken by surprise that morning. I wish now to be a son to you

again. I wish to make the rest of your life happy, that you may forget

what you have suffered."

He paused again. He had used the clearest and strongest words he could

think of. It was useless to say more, until he had some sign that

Baldassarre understood him. Perhaps his mind was too distempered or too

imbecile even for that: perhaps the shock of his fall and his

disappointed rage might have quite suspended the use of his faculties.

Presently Baldassarre began to move. He threw away the broken dagger,

and slowly and gradually, still trembling, began to raise himself from

the ground. Tito put out his hand to help him, and so strangely quick

are men's souls that in this moment, when he began to feel his atonement

was accepted, he had a darting thought of the irksome efforts it

entailed. Baldassarre clutched the hand that was held out, raised

himself and clutched it still, going close up to Tito till their faces

were not a foot off each other. Then he began to speak, in a deep

trembling voice--

"I saved you--I nurtured you--I loved you. You forsook me--you robbed

me--you denied me. What can you give me? You have made the world

bitterness to me; but there is one draught of sweetness left--\_that you

shall know agony\_."

He let fall Tito's hand, and going backwards a little, first rested his

arm on a projecting stone in the wall, and then sank again in a sitting

posture on the straw. The outleap of fury in the dagger-thrust had

evidently exhausted him.

Tito stood silent. If it had been a deep yearning-emotion which had

brought him to ask his father's forgiveness, the denial of it might have

caused him a pang which would have excluded the rushing train of thought

that followed those decisive words. As it was, though the sentence of

unchangeable hatred grated on him and jarred him terribly, his mind

glanced round with a self-preserving instinct to see how far those words

could have the force of a substantial threat. When he had come down to

speak to Baldassarre, he had said to himself that if his effort at

reconciliation failed, things would only be as they had been before.

The first glance of his mind was backward to that thought again, but the

future possibilities of danger that were conjured up along with it

brought the perception that things were \_not\_ as they had been before,

and the perception came as a triumphant relief. There was not only the

broken dagger, there was the certainty, from what Tessa had told him,

that Baldassarre's mind was broken too, and had no edge that could reach

him. Tito felt he had no choice now: he must defy Baldassarre as a mad,

imbecile old man; and the chances were so strongly on his side that

there was hardly room for fear. No; except the fear of having to do

many unpleasant things in order to save himself from what was yet more

unpleasant. And one of those unpleasant things must be done

immediately: it was very difficult.

"Do you mean to stay here?" he said.

"No," said Baldassarre, bitterly, "you mean to turn me out."

"Not so," said Tito; "I only ask."

"I tell you, you have turned me out. If it is your straw, you turned me

off it three years ago."

"Then you mean to leave this place?" said Tito, more anxious about this

certainty than the ground of it.

"I have spoken," said Baldassarre.

Tito turned and re-entered the house. Monna Lisa was nodding; he went

up to Tessa, and found her crying by the side of her baby.

"Tessa," he said, sitting down and taking her head between his hands;

"leave off crying, little goose, and listen to me."

He lifted her chin upward, that she might look at him, while he spoke

very distinctly and emphatically.

"You must never speak to that old man again. He is a mad old man, and

he wants to kill me. Never speak to him or listen to him again."

Tessa's tears had ceased, and her lips were pale with fright.

"Is he gone away?" she whispered.

"He will go away. Remember what I have said to you."

"Yes; I will never speak to a stranger any more," said Tessa, with a

sense of guilt.

He told her, to comfort her, that he would come again to-morrow; and

then went down to Monna Lisa to rebuke her severely for letting a

dangerous man come about the house.

Tito felt that these were odious tasks; they were very evil-tasted

morsels, but they were forced upon him. He heard Monna Lisa fasten the

door behind him, and turned away, without looking towards the open door

of the hovel. He felt secure that Baldassarre would go, and he could

not wait to see him go. Even \_his\_ young frame and elastic spirit were

shattered by the agitations that had been crowded into this single

evening.

Baldassarre was still sitting on the straw when the shadow of Tito

passed by. Before him lay the fragments of the broken dagger; beside

him lay the open book, over which he had pored in vain. They looked

like mocking symbols of his utter helplessness; and his body was still

too trembling for him to rise and walk away.

But the next morning, very early, when Tessa peeped anxiously through

the hole in her shutter, the door of the hovel was open, and the strange

old man was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE.

WHAT FLORENCE WAS THINKING OF.

For several days Tito saw little of Romola. He told her gently, the

next morning, that it would be better for her to remove any small

articles of her own from the library, as there would be agents coming to

pack up the antiquities. Then, leaning to kiss her on the brow, he

suggested that she should keep in her own room where the little painted

tabernacle was, and where she was then sitting, so that she might be

away from the noise of strange footsteps, Romola assented quietly,

making no sign of emotion: the night had been one long waking to her,

and, in spite of her healthy frame, sensation had become a dull

continuous pain, as if she had been stunned and bruised. Tito divined

that she felt ill, but he dared say no more; he only dared, perceiving

that her hand and brow were stone cold, to fetch a furred mantle and

throw it lightly round her. And in every brief interval that he

returned to her, the scene was nearly the same: he tried to propitiate

her by some unobtrusive act or word of tenderness, and she seemed to

have lost the power of speaking to him, or of looking at him.

"Patience!" he said to himself. "She will recover it, and forgive at

last. The tie to me must still remain the strongest." When the

stricken person is slow to recover and look as if nothing had happened,

the striker easily glides into the position of the aggrieved party; he

feels no bruise himself, and is strongly conscious of his own amiable

behaviour since he inflicted the blow. But Tito was not naturally

disposed to feel himself aggrieved; the constant bent of his mind was

towards propitiation, and he would have submitted to much for the sake

of feeling Romola's hand resting on his head again, as it did that

morning when he first shrank from looking at her.

But he found it the less difficult to wait patiently for the return of

his home happiness, because his life out of doors was more and more

interesting to him. A course of action which is in strictness a

slowly-prepared outgrowth of the entire character, is yet almost always

traceable to a single impression as its point of apparent origin; and

since that moment in the Piazza del Duomo, when Tito, mounted on the

bales, had tasted a keen pleasure in the consciousness of his ability to

tickle the ears of men with any phrases that pleased them, his

imagination had glanced continually towards a sort of political activity

which the troubled public life of Florence was likely enough to find

occasion for. But the fresh dread of Baldassarre, waked in the same

moment, had lain like an immovable rocky obstruction across that path,

and had urged him into the sale of the library, as a preparation for the

possible necessity of leaving Florence, at the very time when he was

beginning to feel that it had a new attraction for him. That dread was

nearly removed \_now\_: he must wear his armour still, he must prepare

himself for possible demands on his coolness and ingenuity, but he did

not feel obliged to take the inconvenient step of leaving Florence and

seeking new fortunes. His father had refused the offered atonement--had

forced him into defiance; and an old man in a strange place, with his

memory gone, was weak enough to be defied.

Tito's implicit desires were working themselves out now in very explicit

thoughts. As the freshness of young passion faded, life was taking more

and more decidedly for him the aspect of a game in which there was an

agreeable mingling of skill and chance.

And the game that might be played in Florence promised to be rapid and

exciting; it was a game of revolutionary and party struggle, sure to

include plenty of that unavowed action in which brilliant ingenuity,

able to get rid of all inconvenient beliefs except that "ginger is hot

in the mouth," is apt to see the path of superior wisdom.

No sooner were the French guests gone than Florence was as agitated as a

colony of ants when an alarming shadow has been removed, and the camp

has to be repaired. "How are we to raise the money for the French king?

How are we to manage the war with those obstinate Pisan rebels? Above

all, how are we to mend our plan of government, so as to hit on the best

way of getting our magistrates chosen and our laws voted?" Till those

questions were well answered trade was in danger of standing still, and

that large body of the working men who were not counted as citizens and

had not so much as a vote to serve as an anodyne to their stomachs were

likely to get impatient. Something must be done.

And first the great bell was sounded, to call the citizens to a

parliament in the Piazza de' Signori; and when the crowd was wedged

close, and hemmed in by armed men at all the outlets, the Signoria (or

Gonfaloniere and eight Priors for the time being) came out and stood by

the stone lion on the platform in front of the Old Palace, and proposed

that twenty chief men of the city should have dictatorial authority

given them, by force of which they should for one year choose all

magistrates, and set the frame of government in order. And the people

shouted their assent, and felt themselves the electors of the Twenty.

This kind of "parliament" was a very old Florentine fashion, by which

the will of the few was made to seem the choice of the many.

The shouting in the Piazza was soon at an end, but not so the debating

inside the palace: was Florence to have a Great Council after the

Venetian mode, where all the officers of government might be elected,

and all laws voted by a wide number of citizens of a certain age and of

ascertained qualifications, without question of rank or party? or, was

it to be governed on a narrower and less popular scheme, in which the

hereditary influence of good families would be less adulterated with the

votes of shopkeepers. Doctors of law disputed day after day, and far on

into the night. Messer Pagolantonio Soderini alleged excellent reasons

on the side of the popular scheme; Messer Guidantonio Vespucci alleged

reasons equally excellent on the side, of a more aristocratic form. It

was a question of boiled or roast, which had been prejudged by the

palates of the disputants, and the excellent arguing might have been

protracted a long while without any other result than that of deferring

the cooking. The majority of the men inside the \_palace\_, having power

already in their hands, agreed with Vespucci, and thought change should

be moderate; the majority outside the palace, conscious of little power

and many grievances, were less afraid of change.

And there was a force outside the palace which was gradually tending to

give the vague desires of that majority the character of a determinate

will. That force was the preaching of Savonarola. Impelled partly by

the spiritual necessity that was laid upon him to guide the people, and

partly by the prompting of public-men who could get no measures carried

without his aid, he was rapidly passing in his daily sermons from the

general to the special--from telling his hearers that they must postpone

their private passions and interests to the public good, to telling them

precisely what sort of government they must have in order to promote

that good--from "Choose whatever is best for all" to "Choose the Great

Council," and "the Great Council is the will of God."

To Savonarola these were as good as identical propositions. The Great

Council was the only practicable plan for giving an expression to the

public will large enough to counteract the vitiating influence of party

interests: it was a plan that would make honest impartial public action

at least possible. And the purer the government of Florence would

become--the more secure from the designs of men who saw their own

advantage in the moral debasement of their fellows--the nearer would the

Florentine people approach the character of a pure community, worthy to

lead the way in the renovation of the Church and the world. And Fra

Girolamo's mind never stopped short of that sublimest end: the objects

towards which he felt himself working had always the same moral

magnificence. He had no private malice--he sought no petty

gratification. Even in the last terrible days, when ignominy, torture,

and the fear of torture, had laid bare every hidden weakness of his

soul, he could say to his importunate judges: "Do not wonder if it seems

to you that I have told but few things; for my purposes were few and

great." [Note 1.]

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. "Se vi pare che io abbia detto poche cose, non ve ne

maravigliate, perche le mie cose erano poche e grandi."

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX.

ARIADNE DISCROWNS HERSELF.

It was more than three weeks before the contents of the library were all

packed and carried away. And Romola, instead of shutting her eyes and

ears, had watched the process. The exhaustion consequent on violent

emotion is apt to bring a dreamy disbelief in the reality of its cause;

and in the evening, when the workmen were gone, Romola took her

hand-lamp and walked slowly round amongst the confusion of straw and

wooden cases, pausing at every vacant pedestal, every well-known object

laid prostrate, with a sort of bitter desire to assure herself that

there was a sufficient reason why her love was gone and the world was

barren for her. And still, as the evenings came, she went and went

again; no longer to assure herself, but because this vivifying of pain

and despair about her father's memory was the strongest life left to her

affections. On the 23rd of December, she knew that the last packages

were going. She ran to the loggia at the top of the house that she

might not lose the last pang of seeing the slow wheels move across the

bridge.

It was a cloudy day, and nearing dusk. Arno ran dark and shivering; the

hills were mournful; and Florence with its girdling stone towers had

that silent, tomb-like look, which unbroken shadow gives to a city seen

from above. Santa Croce, where her father lay, was dark amidst that

darkness, and slowly crawling over the bridge, and slowly vanishing up

the narrow street, was the white load, like a cruel, deliberate Fate

carrying away her father's lifelong hope to bury it in an unmarked

grave. Romola felt less that she was seeing this herself than that her

father was conscious of it as he lay helpless under the imprisoning

stones, where her hand could not reach his to tell him that he was not

alone.

She stood still even after the load had disappeared, heedless of the

cold, and soothed by the gloom which seemed to cover her like a mourning

garment and shut out the discord of joy. When suddenly the great bell

in the palace-tower rang out a mighty peal: not the hammer-sound of

alarm, but an agitated peal of triumph; and one after another every

other bell in every other tower seemed to catch the vibration and join

the chorus. And, as the chorus swelled and swelled till the air seemed

made of sound--little flames, vibrating too, as if the sound had caught

fire, burst out between the turrets of the palace and on the girdling

towers.

That sudden clang, that leaping light, fell on Romola like sharp wounds.

They were the triumph of demons at the success of her husband's

treachery, and the desolation of her life. Little more than three weeks

ago she had been intoxicated with the sound of those very bells; and in

the gladness of Florence, she had heard a prophecy of her own gladness.

But now the general joy seemed cruel to her: she stood aloof from that

common life--that Florence which was flinging out its loud exultation to

stun the ears of sorrow and loneliness. She could never join hands with

gladness again, but only with those whom it was in the hard nature of

gladness to forget. And in her bitterness she felt that all rejoicing

was mockery. Men shouted pagans with their souls full of heaviness, and

then looked in their neighbours' faces to see if there was really such a

thing as joy. Romola had lost her belief in the happiness she had once

thirsted for: it was a hateful, smiling, soft-handed thing, with a

narrow, selfish heart.

She ran down from the loggia, with her hands pressed against her ears,

and was hurrying across the antechamber, when she was startled by

unexpectedly meeting her husband, who was coming to seek her.

His step was elastic, and there was a radiance of satisfaction about him

not quite usual.

"What! the noise was a little too much for you?" he said; for Romola, as

she started at the sight of him, had pressed her hands all the closer

against her ears. He took her gently by the wrist, and drew her arm

within his, leading her into the saloon surrounded with the dancing

nymphs and fauns, and then went on speaking: "Florence is gone quite mad

at getting its Great Council, which is to put an end to all the evils

under the sun; especially to the vice of merriment. You may well look

stunned, my Romola, and you are cold. You must not stay so late under

that windy loggia without wrappings. I was coming to tell you that I am

suddenly called to Rome about some learned business for Bernardo

Rucellai. I am going away immediately, for I am to join my party at San

Gaggio to-night, that we may start early in the morning. I need give

you no trouble; I have had my packages made already. It will not be

very long before I am back again."

He knew he had nothing to expect from her but quiet endurance of what he

said and did. He could not even venture to kiss her brow this evening,

but just pressed her hand to his lips, and left her. Tito felt that

Romola was a more unforgiving woman than he had imagined; her love was

not that sweet clinging instinct, stronger than all judgments, which, he

began to see now, made the great charm of a wife. Still, this petrified

coldness was better than a passionate, futile opposition. Her pride and

capability of seeing where resistance was useless had the inconvenience.

But when the door had closed on Tito, Romola lost the look of cold

immobility winch came over her like an inevitable frost whenever he

approached her. Inwardly she was very far from being in a state of

quiet endurance, and the days that had passed since the scene which had

divided her from Tito had been days of active planning and preparation

for the fulfilment of a purpose.

The first thing she did now was to call old Maso to her.

"Maso," she said, in a decided tone, "we take our journey to-morrow

morning. We shall be able now to overtake that first convoy of cloth,

while they are waiting at San Piero. See about the two mules to-night,

and be ready to set off with them at break of day, and wait for me at

Trespiano."

She meant to take Maso with her as far as Bologna, and then send him

back with letters to her godfather and Tito, telling them that she was

gone and never meant to return. She had planned her departure so that

its secrecy might be perfect, and her broken love and life be hidden

away unscanned by vulgar eyes. Bernardo del Nero had been absent at his

villa, willing to escape from political suspicions to his favourite

occupation of attending to his land, and she had paid him the debt

without a personal interview. He did not even know that the library was

sold, and was left to conjecture that some sudden piece of good fortune

had enabled Tito to raise this sum of money. Maso had been taken into

her confidence only so far that he knew her intended journey was a

secret; and to do just what she told him was the thing he cared most for

in his withered wintry age.

Romola did not mean to go to bed that night. When she had fastened the

door she took her taper to the carved and painted chest which contained

her wedding-clothes. The white silk and gold lay there, the long white

veil and the circlet of pearls. A great sob rose as she looked at them:

they seemed the shroud of her dead happiness. In a tiny gold loop of

the circlet a sugar-plum had lodged--a pink hailstone from the shower of

sweets: Tito had detected it first, and had said that it should always

remain there. At certain moments--and this was one of them--Romola was

carried, by a sudden wave of memory, back again into the time of perfect

trust, and felt again the presence of the husband whose love made the

world as fresh and wonderful to her as to a little child that sits in

stillness among the sunny flowers: heard the gentle tones and saw the

soft eyes without any lie in them, and breathed again that large freedom

of the soul which comes from the faith that the being who is nearest to

us is greater than ourselves. And in those brief moments the tears

always rose: the woman's lovingness felt something akin to what the

bereaved mother feels when the tiny fingers seem to lie warm on her

bosom, and yet are marble to her lips as she bends over the silent bed.

But there was something else lying in the chest besides the

wedding-clothes: it was something dark and coarse, rolled up in a close

bundle. She turned away her eyes from the white and gold to the dark

bundle, and as her hands touched the serge, her tears began to be

checked. That coarse roughness recalled her fully to the present, from

which love and delight were gone. She unfastened the thick white cord

and spread the bundle out on the table. It was the grey serge dress of

a sister belonging to the third order of Saint Francis, living in the

world but especially devoted to deeds of piety--a personage whom the

Florentines were accustomed to call a Pinzochera. Romola was going to

put on this dress as a disguise, and she determined to put it on at

once, so that, if she needed sleep before the morning, she might wake up

in perfect readiness to be gone. She put off her black garment, and as

she thrust her soft white arms into the harsh sleeves of the serge

mantle and felt the hard girdle of rope hurt her fingers as she tied it,

she courted those rude sensations: they were in keeping with her new

scorn of that thing called pleasure which made men base--that dexterous

contrivance for selfish ease, that shrinking from endurance and strain,

when others were bowing beneath burdens too heavy for them, which now

made one image with her husband. Then she gathered her long hair

together, drew it away tight from her face, bound it in a great hard

knot at the back of her head, and taking a square piece of black silk,

tied it in the fashion of a kerchief close across her head and under her

chin; and over that she drew the cowl. She lifted the candle to the

mirror. Surely her disguise would be complete to any one who had not

lived very near to her. To herself she looked strangely like her

brother Dino: the full oval of the cheek had only to be wasted; the

eyes, already sad, had only to become a little sunken. Was she getting

more like him in anything else? Only in this, that she understood now

how men could be prompted to rush away for ever from earthly delights,

how they could be prompted to dwell on images of sorrow rather than of

beauty and joy.

But she did not linger at the mirror: she set about collecting and

packing all the relics of her father and mother that were too large to

be carried in her small travelling-wallet. They were all to be put in

the chest along with her wedding-clothes, and the chest was to be

committed to her godfather when she was safely gone. First she laid in

the portraits; then one by one every little thing that had a sacred

memory clinging to it was put into her wallet or into the chest.

She paused. There was still something else to be stript away from her,

belonging to that past on which she was going to turn her back for ever.

She put her thumb and her forefinger to her betrothal ring; but they

rested there, without drawing it off. Romola's mind had been rushing

with an impetuous current towards this act, for which she was preparing:

the act of quitting a husband who had disappointed all her trust, the

act of breaking an outward tie that no longer represented the inward

bond of love. But that force of outward symbols by which our active

life is knit together so as to make an inexorable external identity for

us, not to be shaken by our wavering consciousness, gave a strange

effect to this simple movement towards taking off her ring--a movement

which was but a small sequence of her energetic resolution. It brought

a vague but arresting sense that she was somehow violently rending her

life in two: a presentiment that the strong impulse which had seemed to

exclude doubt and make her path clear might after all be blindness, and

that there was something in human bonds which must prevent them from

being broken with the breaking of illusions.

If that beloved Tito who had placed the betrothal ring on her finger was

not in any valid sense the same Tito whom she had ceased to love, why

should she return to him the sign of their union, and not rather retain

it as a memorial? And this act, which came as a palpable demonstration

of her own and his identity, had a power unexplained to herself, of

shaking Romola. It is the way with half the truth amidst which we live,

that it only haunts us and makes dull pulsations that are never born

into sound. But there was a passionate voice speaking within her that

presently nullified all such muffled murmurs.

"It cannot be! I cannot be subject to him. He is false. I shrink from

him. I despise him!"

She snatched the ring from her finger and laid it on the table against

the pen with which she meant to write. Again she felt that there could

be no law for her but the law of her affections. That tenderness and

keen fellow-feeling for the near and the loved which are the main

outgrowth of the affections, had made the religion of her life: they had

made her patient in spite of natural impetuosity: they would have

sufficed to make her heroic. But now all that strength was gone, or,

rather, it was converted into the strength of repulsion. She had

recoiled from Tito in proportion to the energy of that young belief and

love which he had disappointed, of that lifelong devotion to her father

against which he had committed an irredeemable offence. And it seemed

as if all motive had slipped away from her, except the indignation and

scorn that made her tear herself asunder from him.

She was not acting after any precedent, or obeying any adopted maxims.

The grand severity of the stoical philosophy in which her father had

taken care to instruct her, was familiar enough to her ears and lips,

and its lofty spirit had raised certain echoes within her; but she had

never used it, never needed it as a rule of life. She had endured and

forborne because she loved: maxims which told her to feel less, and not

to cling close lest the onward course of great Nature should jar her,

had been as powerless on her tenderness as they had been on her father's

yearning for just fame. She had appropriated no theories: she had

simply felt strong in the strength of affection, and life without that

energy came to her as an entirely new problem.

She was going to solve the problem in a way that seemed to her very

simple. Her mind had never yet bowed to any obligation apart from

personal love and reverence; she had no keen sense of any other human

relations, and all she had to obey now was the instinct to sever herself

from the man she loved no longer.

Yet the unswerving resolution was accompanied with continually varying

phases of anguish. And now that the active preparation for her

departure was almost finished, she lingered: she deferred writing the

irrevocable words of parting from all her little world. The emotions of

the past weeks seemed to rush in again with cruel hurry, and take

possession even of her limbs. She was going to write, and her hand

fell. Bitter tears came now at the delusion which had blighted her

young years, tears very different from the sob of remembered happiness

with which she had looked at the circlet of pearls and the pink

hailstone. And now she felt a tingling shame at the words of ignominy

she had cast, at Tito--"Have you robbed some one else who is \_not\_

dead?" To have had such words wrung from her--to have uttered them to

her husband seemed a degradation of her whole life. Hard speech between

those who have loved is hideous in the memory, like the sight of

greatness and beauty sunk into vice and rags.

That heart-cutting comparison of the present with the past urged itself

upon Romola till it even transformed itself into wretched sensations:

she seemed benumbed to everything but inward throbbings, and began to

feel the need of some hard contact. She drew her hands tight along the

harsh knotted cord that hung from her waist. She started to her feet

and seized the rough lid of the chest: there was nothing else to go in?

No. She closed the lid, pressing her hand upon the rough carving, and

looked it.

Then she remembered that she had still to complete her equipment as a

Pinzochera. The large leather purse or scarsella, with small coin in

it, had to be hung on the cord at her waist (her florins and small

jewels, presents from her godfather and cousin Brigida, were safely

fastened within her serge mantle)--and on the other side must hang the

rosary.

It did not occur to Romola, as she hung that rosary by her side, that

something else besides the mere garb would perhaps be necessary to

enable her to pass as a Pinzochera, and that her whole air and

expression were as little as possible like those of a sister whose

eyelids were used to be bent, and whose lips were used to move in silent

iteration. Her inexperience prevented her from picturing distant

details, and it helped her proud courage in shutting out any foreboding

of danger and insult. She did not know that any Florentine woman had

ever done exactly what she was going to do: unhappy wives often took

refuge with their friends, or in the cloister, she knew, but both those

courses were impossible to her; she had invented a lot for herself--to

go to the most learned woman in the world, Cassandra Fedele, at Venice,

and ask her how an instructed woman could support herself in a lonely

life there.

She was not daunted by the practical difficulties in the way or the dark

uncertainty at the end. Her life could never be happy any more, but it

must not, could not, be ignoble. And by a pathetic mixture of childish

romance with her woman's trials, the philosophy which had nothing to do

with this great decisive deed of hers had its place in her imagination

of the future: so far as she conceived her solitary loveless life at

all, she saw it animated by a proud stoical heroism, and by an

indistinct but strong purpose of labour, that she might be wise enough

to write something which would rescue her father's name from oblivion.

After all, she was only a young girl--this poor Romola, who had found

herself at the end of her joys.

There were other things yet to be done. There was a small key in a

casket on the table--but now Romola perceived that her taper was dying

out, and she had forgotten to provide herself with any other light. In

a few moments the room was in total darkness. Feeling her way to the

nearest chair, she sat down to wait for the morning.

Her purpose in seeking the key had called up certain memories winch had

come back upon her during the past week with the new vividness that

remembered words always have for us when we have learned to give them a

new meaning. Since the shook of the revelation which had seemed to

divide her for ever from Tito, that last interview with Dino had never

been for many hours together out of her mind. And it solicited her all

the more, because while its remembered images pressed upon her almost

with the imperious force of sensations, they raised struggling thoughts

which resisted their influence. She could not prevent herself from

hearing inwardly the dying prophetic voice saying again and again,--"The

man whose face was a blank loosed thy hand and departed; and as he went,

I could see his face, and it was the face of the great Tempter... And

thou, Romola, didst wring thy hands and seek for water, and there was

none... and the plain was bare and stony again, and thou wast alone in

the midst of it. And then it seemed that the night fell, and I saw no

more." She could not prevent herself from dwelling with a sort of

agonised fascination on the wasted face; on the straining gaze at the

crucifix; on the awe which had compelled her to kneel; on the last

broken words and then the unbroken silence--on all the details of the

death-scene, which had seemed like a sudden opening into a world apart

from that of her lifelong knowledge.

But her mind was roused to resistance of impressions that, from being

obvious phantoms, seemed to be getting solid in the daylight. As a

strong body struggles against fumes with the more violence when they

begin to be stifling, a strong soul struggles against phantasies with

all the more alarmed energy when they threaten to govern in the place of

thought.

What had the words of that vision to do with her real sorrows? That

fitting of certain words was a mere chance; the rest was all vague--nay,

those words themselves were vague; they were determined by nothing but

her brother's memories and beliefs. He believed there was something

fatal in pagan learning; he believed that celibacy was more holy than

marriage; he remembered their home, and all the objects in the library;

and of these threads the vision was woven. What reasonable warrant

could she have had for believing in such a vision and acting on it?

None. True as the voice of foreboding had proved, Romola saw with

unshaken conviction that to have renounced Tito in obedience to a

warning like that, would have been meagre-hearted folly. Her trust had

been delusive, but she would have chosen over again to have acted on it

rather than be a creature led by phantoms and disjointed whispers in a

world where there was the large music of reasonable speech, and the warm

grasp of living hands.

But the persistent presence of these memories, linking themselves in her

imagination with her actual lot, gave her a glimpse of understanding

into the lives which had before lain utterly aloof from her sympathy--

the lives of the men and women who were led by such inward images and

voices.

"If they were only a little stronger in me," she said to herself, "I

should lose the sense of what that vision really was, and take it for a

prophetic light. I might in time get to be a seer of visions myself,

like the Suora Maddalena, and Camilla Rucellai, and the rest."

Romola shuddered at the possibility. All the instruction, all the main

influences of her life had gone to fortify her scorn of that sickly

superstition which led men and women, with eyes too weak for the

daylight, to sit in dark swamps and try to read human destiny by the

chance flame of wandering vapours.

And yet she was conscious of something deeper than that coincidence of

words which made the parting contact with her dying brother live anew in

her mind, and gave a new sisterhood to the wasted face. If there were

much more of such experience as his in the world, she would like to

understand it--would even like to learn the thoughts of men who sank in

ecstasy before the pictured agonies of martyrdom. There seemed to be

something more than madness in that supreme fellowship with suffering.

The springs were all dried up around her; she wondered what other waters

there were at which men drank and found strength in the desert. And

those moments in the Duomo when she had sobbed with a mysterious

mingling of rapture and pain, while Fra Girolamo offered himself a

willing sacrifice for the people, came back to her as if they had been a

transient taste of some such far-off fountain. But again she shrank

from impressions that were alluring her within the sphere of visions and

narrow fears which compelled men to outrage natural affections as Dino

had done.

This was the tangled web that Romola had in her mind as she sat weary in

the darkness. No radiant angel came across the gloom with a clear

message for her. In those times, as now, there were human beings who

never saw angels or heard perfectly clear messages. Such truth as came

to them was brought confusedly in the voices and deeds of men not at all

like the seraphs of unfailing wing and piercing vision--men who believed

falsities as well as truths, and did the wrong as well as the right.

The helping hands stretched out to them were the hands of men who

stumbled and often saw dimly, so that these beings unvisited by angels

had no other choice than to grasp that stumbling guidance along the path

of reliance and action which is the path of life, or else to pause in

loneliness and disbelief, which is no path, but the arrest of inaction

and death.

And so Romola, seeing no ray across the darkness, and heavy with

conflict that changed nothing, sank at last to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN.

THE TABERNACLE UNLOCKED.

Romola was waked by a tap at the door. The cold light of early morning

was in the room, and Maso was come for the travelling-wallet. The old

man could not help starting when she opened the door, and showed him,

instead of the graceful outline he had been used to, crowned with the

brightness of her hair, the thick folds of the grey mantle and the pale

face shadowed by the dark cowl.

"It is well, Maso," said Romola, trying to speak in the calmest voice,

and make the old man easy. "Here is the wallet quite ready. You will

go on quietly, and I shall not be far behind you. When you get out of

the gates you may go more slowly, for I shall perhaps join you before

you get to Trespiano."

She closed the door behind him, and then put her hand on the key which

she had taken from the casket the last thing in the night. It was the

original key of the little painted tabernacle: Tito had forgotten to

drown it in the Arno, and it had lodged, as such small things will, in

the corner of the embroidered scarsella which he wore with the purple

tunic. One day, long after their marriage, Romola had found it there,

and had put it by, without using it, but with a sense of satisfaction

that the key was within reach. The cabinet on which the tabernacle

stood had been moved to the side of the room, close to one of the

windows, where the pale morning light fell upon it so as to make the

painted forms discernible enough to Romola, who know them well,--the

triumphant Bacchus, with his clusters and his vine-clad spear, clasping

the crowned Ariadne; the Loves showering roses, the wreathed vessel, the

cunning-eyed dolphins, and the rippled sea: all encircled by a flowery

border, like a bower of paradise. Romola looked at the familiar images

with new bitterness and repulsion: they seemed a more pitiable mockery

than ever on this chill morning, when she had waked up to wander in

loneliness. They had been no tomb of sorrow, but a lying screen.

Foolish Ariadne! with her gaze of love, as if that bright face, with its

hyacinthine curls like tendrils among the vines, held the deep secret of

her life!

"Ariadne is wonderfully transformed," thought Romola. "She would look

strange among the vines and the roses now."

She took up the mirror, and looked at herself once more. But the sight

was so startling in this morning light that she laid it down again, with

a sense of shrinking almost as strong as that with which she had turned

from the joyous Ariadne. The recognition of her own face, with the cowl

about it, brought back the dread lest she should be drawn at last into

fellowship with some wretched superstition--into the company of the

howling fanatics and weeping nuns who had been her contempt from

childhood till now. She thrust the key into the tabernacle hurriedly:

hurriedly she opened it, and took out the crucifix, without looking at

it; then, with trembling fingers, she passed a cord through the little

ring, hung the crucifix round her neck, and hid it in the bosom of her

mantle. "For Dino's sake," she said to herself. Still there were the

letters to be written which Maso was to carry back from Bologna. They

were very brief. The first said--

"Tito, my love for you is dead; and therefore, so far as I was yours, I

too am dead. Do not try to put in force any laws for the sake of

fetching me back: that would bring you no happiness. The Romola you

married can never return. I need explain nothing to you after the words

I uttered to you the last time we spoke long together. If you supposed

them to be words of transient anger, you will know now that they were

the sign of an irreversible change.

"I think you will fulfil my wish that my bridal chest should be sent to

my godfather, who gave it me. It contains my wedding-clothes and the

portraits and other relics of my father and mother."

She folded the ring inside this letter, and wrote Tito's name outside.

The next letter was to Bernardo del Nero:--

"Dearest Godfather,--If I could have been any good to your life by

staying I would not have gone away to a distance. But now I am gone.

Do not ask the reason; and if you love my father, try to prevent any one

from seeking me. I could not bear my life at Florence. I cannot bear

to tell any one why. Help to cover my lot in silence. I have asked

that my bridal chest should be sent to you: when you open it, you will

know the reason. Please to give all the things that were my mother's to

my cousin Brigida, and ask her to forgive me for not saying any words of

parting to her.

"Farewell, my second father. The best thing I have in life is still to

remember your goodness and be grateful to you.

"Romola."

Romola put the letters, along with the crucifix, within the bosom of her

mantle, and then felt that everything was done. She was ready now to

depart.

No one was stirring in the house, and she went almost as quietly as a

grey phantom down the stairs and into the silent street. Her heart was

palpitating violently, yet she enjoyed the sense of her firm tread on

the broad flags--of the swift movement, which was like a chained-up

resolution set free at last. The anxiety to carry out her act, and the

dread of any obstacle, averted sorrow; and as she reached the Ponte

Rubaconte, she felt less that Santa Croce was in her sight than that the

yellow streak of morning which parted the grey was getting broader and

broader, and that, unless she hastened her steps, she should have to

encounter faces.

Her simplest road was to go right on to the Borgo Pinti, and then along

by the walls to the \_Porta\_, San Gallo, from which she must leave the

city, and this road carried her by the Piazza di Santa Croco. But she

walked as steadily and rapidly as ever through the piazza, not trusting

herself to look towards the church. The thought that any eyes might be

turned on her with a look of curiosity and recognition, and that

indifferent minds might be set speculating on her private sorrows, made

Romola shrink physically as from the imagination of torture. She felt

degraded even by that act of her husband from which she was helplessly

suffering. But there was no sign that any eyes looked forth from

windows to notice this tall grey sister, with the firm step, and proud

attitude of the cowled head. Her road lay aloof from the stir of early

traffic, and when she reached the Porta San Gallo, it was easy to pass

while a dispute was going forward about the toll for panniers of eggs

and market produce which were just entering.

Out! Once past the houses of the Borgo, she would be beyond the last

fringe of Florence, the sky would be broad above her, and she would have

entered on her new life--a life of loneliness and endurance, but of

freedom. She had been strong enough to snap asunder the bonds she had

accepted in blind faith: whatever befell her, she would no more feel the

breath of soft hated lips warm upon her cheek, no longer feel the breath

of an odious mind stifling her own. The bare wintry morning, the chill

air, were welcome in their severity: the leafless trees, the sombre

hills, were not haunted by the gods of beauty and joy, whose worship she

had forsaken for ever.

But presently the light burst forth with sudden strength, and shadows

were thrown across the road. It seemed that the sun was going to chase

away the greyness. The light is perhaps never felt more strongly as a

divine presence stirring all those inarticulate sensibilities which are

our deepest life, than in these moments when it instantaneously awakens

the shadows. A certain awe which inevitably accompanied this most

momentous act of her life became a more conscious element in Romola's

feeling as she found herself in the sudden presence of the impalpable

golden glory and the long shadow of herself that was not to be escaped.

Hitherto she had met no one but an occasional contadino with mules, and

the many turnings of the road on the level prevented her from seeing

that Maso was not very far ahead of her. But when she had passed Pietra

and was on rising ground, she lifted up the hanging roof of her cowl and

looked eagerly before her.

The cowl was dropped again immediately. She had seen, not Maso, but--

two monks, who were approaching within a few yards of her. The edge of

her cowl making a pent-house on her brow had shut out the objects above

the level of her eyes, and for the last few moments she had been looking

at nothing but the brightness on the path and at her own shadow, tall

and shrouded like a dread spectre.

She wished now that she had not looked up. Her disguise made her

especially dislike to encounter monks: they might expect some pious

passwords of which she knew nothing, and she walked along with a careful

appearance of unconsciousness till she had seen the skirts of the black

mantles pass by her. The encounter had made her heart beat

disagreeably, for Romola had an uneasiness in her religious disguise, a

shame at this studied concealment, which was made more distinct by a

special effort to appear unconscious under actual glances.

But the black skirts would be gone the faster because they were going

down-hill; and seeing a great flat stone against a cypress that rose

from a projecting green bank, she yielded to the desire which the slight

shock had given her, to sit down and rest.

She turned her back on Florence, not meaning to look at it till the

monks were quite out of sight, and raising the edge of her cowl again

when she had seated herself, she discerned Maso and the mules at a

distance where it was not hopeless for her to overtake them, as the old

man would probably linger in expectation of her.

Meanwhile she might pause a little. She was free and alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT.

THE BLACK MARKS BECOME MAGICAL.

That journey of Tito's to Rome, which had removed many difficulties from

Romola's departure, had been resolved on quite suddenly, at a supper,

only the evening before.

Tito had set out towards that supper with agreeable expectations. The

meats were likely to be delicate, the wines choice, the company

distinguished; for the place of entertainment was the Selva or Orto de'

Rucellai, or, as we should say, the Rucellai Gardens; and the host,

Bernardo Rucellai, was quite a typical Florentine grandee. Even his

family name has a significance which is prettily symbolic: properly

understood, it may bring before us a little lichen, popularly named

\_orcella\_ or \_roccella\_, which grows on the rocks of Greek isles and in

the Canaries; and having drunk a great deal of light into its little

stems and button-heads, will, under certain circumstances, give it out

again as a reddish purple dye, very grateful to the eyes of men. By

bringing the excellent secret of this dye, called \_oricello\_, from the

Levant to Florence, a certain merchant, who lived nearly a hundred years

before our Bernardo's time, won for himself and his descendants much

wealth, and the pleasantly-suggestive surname of Oricellari, or

Roccellari, which on Tuscan tongues speedily became Rucellai.

And our Bernardo, who stands out more prominently than the rest on this

purple background, had added all sorts of distinction to the family

name: he had married the sister of Lorenzo de' Medici, and had had the

most splendid wedding in the memory of Florentine upholstery; and for

these and other virtues he had been sent on embassies to France and

Venice, and had been chosen Gonfaloniere; he had not only built himself

a fine palace, but had finished putting the black and white marble

facade to the church of Santa Maria Novella; he had planted a garden

with rare trees, and had made it classic ground by receiving within it

the meetings of the Platonic Academy, orphaned by the death of Lorenzo;

he had written an excellent, learned book, of a new topographical sort,

about ancient Rome; he had collected antiquities; he had a pure

Latinity. The simplest account of him, one sees, reads like a laudatory

epitaph, at the end of which the Greek and Ausonian Muses might be

confidently requested to tear their hair, and Nature to desist from any

second attempt to combine so many virtues with one set of viscera.

His invitation had been conveyed to Tito through Lorenzo Tornabuoni,

with an emphasis which would have suggested that the object of the

gathering was political, even if the public questions of the time had

been less absorbing. As it was, Tito felt sure that some party purposes

were to be furthered by the excellent flavours of stewed fish and old

Greek wine; for Bernardo Rucellai was not simply an influential

personage, he was one of the elect Twenty who for three weeks had held

the reins of Florence. This assurance put Tito in the best spirits as

he made his way to the Via della Scala, where the classic garden was to

be found: without it, he might have had some uneasy speculation as to

whether the high company he would have the honour of meeting was likely

to be dull as well as distinguished; for he had had experience of

various dull suppers even in the Rucellai gardens, and especially of the

dull philosophic sort, wherein he had not only been called upon to

accept an entire scheme of the universe (which would have been easy to

him), but to listen to an exposition of the same, from the origin of

things to their complete ripeness in the tractate of the philosopher

then speaking.

It was a dark evening, and it was only when Tito crossed the occasional

light of a lamp suspended before an image of the Virgin, that the

outline of his figure was discernible enough for recognition. At such

moments any one caring to watch his passage from one of these lights to

another might have observed that the tall and graceful personage with

the mantle folded round him was followed constantly by a very different

form, thickset and elderly, in a serge tunic and felt hat. The

conjunction might have been taken for mere chance, since there were many

passengers along the streets at this hour. But when Tito stopped at the

gate of the Rucellai gardens, the figure behind stopped too. The

\_sportello\_, or smaller door of the gate, was already being held open by

the servant, who, in the distraction of attending to some question, had

not yet closed it since the last arrival, and Tito turned in rapidly,

giving his name to the servant, and passing on between the evergreen

bushes that shone like metal in the torchlight. The follower turned in

too.

"Your name?" said the servant.

"Baldassarre Calvo," was the immediate answer.

"You are not a guest; the guests have all passed."

"I belong to Tito Melema, who has just gone in. I am to wait in the

gardens."

The servant hesitated. "I had orders to admit only guests. Are you a

servant of Messer Tito?"

"No, friend, I am not a servant; I am a scholar."

There are men to whom you need only say, "I am a buffalo," in a certain

tone of quiet confidence, and they will let you pass. The porter gave

way at once, Baldassarre entered, and heard the door closed and chained

behind him, as he too disappeared among the shining bushes.

Those ready and firm answers argued a great change in Baldassarre since

the last meeting face to face with Tito, when the dagger broke in two.

The change had declared itself in a startling way.

At the moment when the shadow of Tito passed in front of the hovel as he

departed homeward, Baldassarre was sitting in that state of after-tremor

known to every one who is liable to great outbursts of passion: a state

in which physical powerlessness is sometimes accompanied by an

exceptional lucidity of thought, as if that disengagement of excited

passion had carried away a fire-mist and left clearness behind it. He

felt unable to rise and walk away just yet; his limbs seemed benumbed;

he was cold, and his hands shook. But in that bodily helplessness he

sat surrounded, not by the habitual dimness and vanishing shadows, but

by the clear images of the past; he was living again in an unbroken

course through that life which seemed a long preparation for the taste

of bitterness.

For some minutes he was too thoroughly absorbed by the images to reflect

on the fact that he saw them, and note the fact as a change. But when

that sudden clearness had travelled through the distance, and came at

last to rest on the scene just gone by, he felt fully where he was: he

remembered Monna Lisa and Tessa. Ah! \_he\_ then was the mysterious

husband; he who had another wife in the Via de' Bardi. It was time to

pick up the broken dagger and go--go and leave no trace of himself; for

to hide his feebleness seemed the thing most like power that was left to

him. He leaned to take up the fragments of the dagger; then he turned

towards the book which lay open at his side. It was a fine large

manuscript, an odd volume of Pausanias. The moonlight was upon it, and

he could see the large letters at the head of the page:

MESSENIKA. KB. [In Greek characters.]

In old days he had known Pausanias familiarly; yet an hour or two ago he

had been looking hopelessly at that page, and it had suggested no more

meaning to him than if the letters had been black weather-marks on a

wall; but at this moment they were once more the magic signs that

conjure up a world. That moonbeam falling on the letters had raised

Messenia before him, and its struggle against the Spartan oppression.

He snatched up the book, but the light was too pale for him to read

further by. No matter: he knew that chapter; he read inwardly. He saw

the stoning of the traitor Aristocrates--stoned by a whole people, who

cast him out from their borders to lie unburied, and set up a pillar

with verses upon it telling how Time had brought home justice to the

unjust. The words arose within him, and stirred innumerable vibrations

of memory. He forgot that he was old: he could almost have shouted.

The light was come again, mother of knowledge and joy! In that

exultation his limbs recovered their strength: he started up with his

broken dagger and book, and went out under the broad moonlight.

It was a nipping frosty air, but Baldassarre could feel no chill--he

only felt the glow of conscious power. He walked about and paused on

all the open spots of that high ground, and looked down on the domed and

towered city, sleeping darkly under its sleeping guardians, the

mountains; on the pale gleam of the river; on the valley vanishing

towards the peaks of snow; and felt himself master of them all.

That sense of mental empire which belongs to us all in moments of

exceptional clearness was intensified for him by the long days and

nights in which memory had been little more than the consciousness of

something gone. That city, which had been a weary labyrinth, was

material that he could subdue to his purposes now: his mind glanced

through its affairs with flashing conjecture; he was once more a man who

knew cities, whose sense of vision was instructed with large experience,

and who felt the keen delight of holding all things in the grasp of

language. Names! Images!--his mind rushed through its wealth without

pausing, like one who enters on a great inheritance.

But amidst all that rushing eagerness there was one End presiding in

Baldassarre's consciousness,--a dark deity in the inmost cell, who only

seemed forgotten while his hecatomb was being prepared. And when the

first triumph in the certainty of recovered power had had its way, his

thoughts centred themselves on Tito. That fair slippery viper could not

escape him now; thanks to struggling justice, the heart that never

quivered with tenderness for another had its sensitive selfish fibres

that could be reached by the sharp point of anguish. The soul that

bowed to no right, bowed to the great lord of mortals, Pain.

He could search into every secret of Tito's life now: he knew some of

the secrets already, and the failure of the broken dagger, which seemed

like frustration, had been the beginning of achievement. Doubtless that

sudden rage had shaken away the obstruction which stifled his soul.

Twice before, when his memory had partially returned, it had been in

consequence of sudden excitation: once when he had had to defend himself

from an enraged dog: once when he had been overtaken by the waves, and

had had to scramble up a rock to save himself.

Yes, but if this time, as then, the light were to die out, and the

dreary conscious blank come back again! This time the light was

stronger and steadier; but what security was there that before the

morrow the dark fog would not be round him again? Even the fear seemed

like the beginning of feebleness: he thought with alarm that he might

sink the faster for this excited vigil of his on the hill, which was

expending his force; and after seeking anxiously for a sheltered corner

where he might lie down, he nestled at last against a heap of warm

garden straw, and so fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes again it was daylight. The first moments were

filled with strange bewilderment: he was a man with a double identity;

to which had he awaked? to the life of dim-sighted sensibilities like

the sad heirship of some fallen greatness, or to the life of recovered

power? Surely the last, for the events of the night all came back to

him: the recognition of the page in Pausanias, the crowding resurgence

of facts and names, the sudden wide prospect which had given him such a

moment as that of the Maenad in the glorious amaze of her morning waking

on the mountain top.

He took up the book again, he read, he remembered without reading. He

saw a name, and the images of deeds rose with it: he saw the mention of

a deed, and he linked it with a name. There were stories of inexpiable

crimes, but stories also of guilt that seemed successful. There were

sanctuaries for swift-footed miscreants: baseness had its armour, and

the weapons of justice sometimes broke against it. What then? If

baseness triumphed everywhere else, if it could heap to itself all the

goods of the world and even hold the keys of hell, it would never

triumph over the hatred which it had itself awakened. It could devise

no torture that would seem greater than the torture of submitting to its

smile. Baldassarre felt the indestructible independent force of a

supreme emotion, which knows no terror, and asks for no motive, which is

itself an ever-burning motive, consuming all other desire. And now in

this morning light, when the assurance came again that the fine fibres

of association were active still, and that his recovered self had not

departed, all his gladness was but the hope of vengeance.

From that time till the evening on which we have seen him enter the

Rucellai gardens, he had been incessantly, but cautiously, inquiring

into Tito's position and all his circumstances, and there was hardly a

day on which he did not contrive to follow his movements. But he wished

not to arouse any alarm in Tito: he wished to secure a moment when the

hated favourite of blind fortune was at the summit of confident ease,

surrounded by chief men on whose favour he depended. It was not any

retributive payment or recognition of himself for his own behoof, on

which Baldassarre's whole soul was bent: it was to find the sharpest

edge of disgrace and shame by which a selfish smiler could be pierced;

it was to send through his marrow the most sudden shock of dread. He

was content to lie hard, and live stintedly--he had spent the greater

part of his remaining money in buying another poniard: his hunger and

his thirst were after nothing exquisite but an exquisite vengeance. He

had avoided addressing himself to any one whom he suspected of intimacy

with Tito, lest an alarm raised in Tito's mind should urge him either to

flight or to some other counteracting measure which hard-pressed

ingenuity might devise. For this reason he had never entered Nello's

shop, which he observed that Tito frequented, and he had turned aside to

avoid meeting Piero di Cosimo.

The possibility of frustration gave added eagerness to his desire that

the great opportunity he sought should not be deferred. The desire was

eager in him on another ground; he trembled lest his memory should go

again. Whether from the agitating presence of that fear, or from some

other causes, he had twice felt a sort of mental dizziness, in which the

inward sense or imagination seemed to be losing the distinct forms of

things. Once he had attempted to enter the Palazzo Vecchio and make his

way into a council-chamber where Tito was, and had failed. But now, on

this evening, he felt that his occasion was come.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE.

A SUPPER IN THE RUCELLAI GARDENS.

On entering the handsome pavilion, Tito's quick glance soon discerned in

the selection of the guests the confirmation of his conjecture that the

object of the gathering was political, though, perhaps, nothing more

distinct than that strengthening of party which comes from

good-fellowship. Good dishes and good wine were at that time believed

to heighten the consciousness of political preferences, and in the

inspired ease of after-supper talk it was supposed that people

ascertained their own opinions with a clearness quite inaccessible to

uninvited stomachs. The Florentines were a sober and frugal people; but

wherever men have gathered wealth, Madonna della Gozzoviglia and San

Buonvino have had their worshippers; and the Rucellai were among the few

Florentine families who kept a great table and lived splendidly. It was

not probable that on this evening there would be any attempt to apply

high philosophic theories; and there could be no objection to the bust

of Plato looking on, or even to the modest presence of the cardinal

virtues in fresco on the walls.

That bust of Plato had been long used to look down on conviviality of a

more transcendental sort, for it had been brought from Lorenzo's villa

after his death, when the meetings of the Platonic Academy had been

transferred to these gardens. Especially on every thirteenth of

November, reputed anniversary of Plato's death, it had looked down from

under laurel leaves on a picked company of scholars and philosophers,

who met to eat and drink with moderation, and to discuss and admire,

perhaps with less moderation, the doctrines of the great master:--on

Pico della Mirandola, once a Quixotic young genius with long curls,

astonished at his own powers and astonishing Rome with heterodox theses;

afterwards a more humble student with a consuming passion for inward

perfection, having come to find the universe more astonishing than his

own cleverness:--on innocent, laborious Marsilio Ficino, picked out

young to be reared as a Platonic philosopher, and fed on Platonism in

all its stages till his mind was perhaps a little pulpy from that too

exclusive diet:--on Angelo Poliziano, chief literary genius of that age,

a born poet, and a scholar without dulness, whose phrases had blood in

them and are alive still:--or, further back, on Leon Battista Alberti, a

reverend senior when those three were young, and of a much grander type

than they, a robust, universal mind, at once practical and theoretic,

artist, man of science, inventor, poet:--and on many more valiant

workers whose names are not registered where every day we turn the leaf

to read them, but whose labours make a part, though an unrecognised

part, of our inheritance, like the ploughing and sowing of past

generations.

Bernardo Rucellai was a man to hold a distinguished place in that

Academy even before he became its host and patron. He was still in the

prime of life, not more than four and forty, with a somewhat haughty,

cautiously dignified presence; conscious of an amazingly pure Latinity,

but, says Erasmus, not to be caught speaking Latin--no word of Latin to

be sheared off him by the sharpest of Teutons. He welcomed Tito with

more marked favour than usual and gave him a place between Lorenzo

Tornabuoni and Giannozzo Pucci, both of them accomplished young members

of the Medicean party.

Of course the talk was the lightest in the world while the brass bowl

filled with scented water was passing round, that the company might wash

their hands, and rings flashed on white fingers under the wax-lights,

and there was the pleasant fragrance of fresh white damask newly come

from France. The tone of remark was a very common one in those times.

Some one asked what Dante's pattern old Florentine would think if the

life could come into him again under his leathern belt and bone clasp,

and he could see silver forks on the table? And it was agreed on all

hands that the habits of posterity would be very surprising to

ancestors, if ancestors could only know them.

And while the silver forks were just dallying with the appetising

delicacies that introduced the more serious business of the supper--such

as morsels of liver, cooked to that exquisite point that they would melt

in the mouth--there was time to admire the designs on the enamelled

silver centres of the brass service, and to say something, as usual,

about the silver dish for confetti, a masterpiece of Antonio Pollajuolo,

whom patronising Popes had seduced from his native Florence to more

gorgeous Rome.

"Ah, I remember," said Niccolo Ridolfi, a middle-aged man, with that

negligent ease of manner which, seeming to claim nothing, is really

based on the lifelong consciousness of commanding rank--"I remember our

Antonio getting bitter about his chiselling and enamelling of these

metal things, and taking in a fury to painting, because, said he, `the

artist who puts his work into gold and silver, puts his brains into the

melting-pot.'"

"And that is not unlikely to be a true foreboding of Antonio's," said

Giannozzo Pucci. "If this pretty war with Pisa goes on, and the revolt

only spreads a little to our other towns, it is not only our silver

dishes that are likely to go; I doubt whether Antonio's silver saints

round the altar of San Giovanni will not some day vanish from the eyes

of the faithful to be worshipped more devoutly in the form of coin."

"The Frate is preparing us for that already," said Tornabuoni. "He is

telling the people that God will not have silver crucifixes and starving

stomachs; and that the church is best adorned with the gems of holiness

and the fine gold of brotherly love."

"A very useful doctrine of war-finance, as many a Condottiere has

found," said Bernardo Rucellai, drily. "But politics come on after the

confetti, Lorenzo, when we can drink wine enough to wash them down; they

are too solid to be taken with roast and boiled."

"Yes, indeed," said Niccolo Ridolfi. "Our Luigi Pulci would have said

this delicate boiled kid must be eaten with an impartial mind. I

remember one day at Careggi, when Luigi was in his rattling vein, he was

maintaining that nothing perverted the palate like opinion. `Opinion,'

said he, `corrupts the saliva--that's why men took to pepper.

Scepticism is the only philosophy that doesn't bring a taste in the

mouth.' `Nay,' says poor Lorenzo de' Medici, `you must be out there,

Luigi. Here is this untainted sceptic, Matteo Franco, who wants hotter

sauce than any of us.' `Because he has a strong opinion of himself,'

flashes out Luigi, which is the original egg of all other opinion. \_He\_

a sceptic? He believes in the immortality of his own verses. He is

such a logician as that preaching friar who described the pavement of

the bottomless pit. Poor Luigi! his mind was like sharpest steel that

can touch nothing without cutting."

"And yet a very gentle-hearted creature," said Giannozzo Pucci. "It

seemed to me his talk was a mere blowing of soap-bubbles. What

dithyrambs he went into about eating and drinking! and yet he was as

temperate as a butterfly."

The light talk and the solid eatables were not soon at an end, for after

the roast and boiled meats came the indispensable capon and game, and,

crowning glory of a well-spread table, a peacock cooked according to the

receipt of Apicius for cooking partridges, namely, with the feathers on,

but not plucked afterwards, as that great authority ordered concerning

his partridges; on the contrary, so disposed on the dish that it might

look as much as possible like a live peacock taking its unboiled repose.

Great was the skill required in that confidential servant who was the

official carver, respectfully to turn the classical though insipid bird

on its back, and expose the plucked breast from which he was to dispense

a delicate slice to each of the honourable company, unless any one

should be of so independent a mind as to decline that expensive

toughness and prefer the vulgar digestibility of capon.

Hardly any one was so bold. Tito quoted Horace and dispersed his slice

in small particles over his plate; Bernardo Rucellai made a learned

observation about the ancient price of peacocks' eggs, but did not

pretend to eat his slice; and Niccolo Ridolfi held a mouthful on his

fork while he told a favourite story of Luigi Pulci's, about a man of

Siena, who, wanting to give a splendid entertainment at moderate

expense, bought a wild goose, cut off its beak and webbed feet, and

boiled it in its feathers, to pass for a pea-hen.

In fact, very little peacock was eaten; but there was the satisfaction

of sitting at a table where peacock was served up in a remarkable

manner, and of knowing that such caprices were not within reach of any

but those who supped with the very wealthiest men. And it would have

been rashness to speak slightingly of peacock's flesh, or any other

venerable institution, at a time when Fra Girolamo was teaching the

disturbing doctrine that it was not the duty of the rich to be luxurious

for the sake of the poor.

Meanwhile, in the chill obscurity that surrounded this centre of warmth,

and light, and savoury odours, the lonely disowned man was walking in

gradually narrowing circuits. He paused among the trees, and looked in

at the windows, which made brilliant pictures against the gloom. He

could hear the laughter; he could see Tito gesticulating with careless

grace, and hear his voice, now alone, now mingling in the merry

confusion of interlacing speeches. Baldassarre's mind was highly

strung. He was preparing himself for the moment when he could win his

entrance into this brilliant company; and he had a savage satisfaction

in the sight of Tito's easy gaiety, which seemed to be preparing the

unconscious victim for more effective torture.

But the men seated among the branching tapers and the flashing cups

could know nothing of the pale fierce face that watched them from

without. The light can be a curtain as well as the darkness.

And the talk went on with more eagerness as it became less disconnected

and trivial. The sense of citizenship was just then strongly forced

even on the most indifferent minds. What the overmastering Fra Girolamo

was saying and prompting was really uppermost in the thoughts of every

one at table; and before the stewed fish was removed, and while the

favourite sweets were yet to come, his name rose to the surface of the

conversation, and, in spite of Rucellai's previous prohibition, the talk

again became political. At first, while the servants remained present,

it was mere gossip: what had been done in the Palazzo on the first day's

voting for the Great Council; how hot-tempered and domineering Francesco

Valori was, as if he were to have everything his own way by right of his

austere virtue, and how it was clear to everybody who heard Soderini's

speeches in favour of the Great Council and also heard the Frate's

sermons, that they were both kneaded in the same trough.

"My opinion is," said Niccolo Ridolfi, "that the Frate has a longer head

for public matters than Soderini or any Piagnone among them: you may

depend on it that Soderini is his mouthpiece more than he is

Soderini's."

"No, Niccolo; there I differ from you," said Bernardo Ruccellai: "the

Frate has an acute mind, and readily sees what will serve his own ends;

but it is not likely that Pagolantonio Soderini, who has had long

experience of affairs, and has specially studied the Venetian Council,

should be much indebted to a monk for ideas on that subject. No, no;

Soderini loads the cannon; though, I grant you, Fra Girolamo brings the

powder and lights the match. He is master of the people, and the people

are getting master of us. Ecco!"

"Well," said Lorenzo Tornabuoni, presently, when the room was clear of

servants, and nothing but wine was passing round, "whether Soderini is

indebted or not, \_we\_ are indebted to the Frate for the general amnesty

which has gone along with the scheme of the Council. We might have done

without the fear of God and the reform of morals being passed by a

majority of black beans; but that excellent proposition, that our

Medicean heads should be allowed to remain comfortably on our shoulders,

and that we should not be obliged to hand over our property in fines,

has my warm approval, and it is my belief that nothing but the Frate's

predominance could have procured that for us. And you may rely on it

that Fra Girolamo is as firm as a rock on that point of promoting peace.

I have had an interview with him."

There was a murmur of surprise and curiosity at the farther end of the

table; but Bernardo Rucellai simply nodded, as if he knew what

Tornabuoni had to say, and wished him to go on.

"Yes," proceeded Tornabuoni, "I have been favoured with an interview in

the Frate's own cell, which, let me tell you, is not a common favour;

for I have reason to believe that even Francesco Valori very seldom sees

him in private. However, I think he saw me the more willingly because I

was not a ready-made follower, but had to be converted. And, for my

part, I see clearly enough that the only safe and wise policy for us

Mediceans to pursue is to throw our strength into the scale of the

Frate's party. We are not strong enough to make head on our own behalf;

and if the Frate and the popular party were upset, every one who hears

me knows perfectly well what other party would be uppermost just now:

Nerli, Alberti, Pazzi, and the rest--\_Arrabbiati\_, as somebody

christened them the other day--who, instead of giving us an amnesty,

would be inclined to fly at our throats like mad dogs, and not be

satisfied till they had banished half of us."

There were strong interjections of assent to this last sentence of

Tornabuoni's, as he paused and looked round a moment.

"A wise dissimulation," he went on, "is the only course for moderate

rational men in times of violent party feeling. I need hardly tell this

company what are my real political attachments: I am not the only man

here who has strong personal ties to the banished family; but, apart

from any such ties, I agree with my more experienced friends, who are

allowing me to speak for them in their presence, that the only lasting

and peaceful state of things for Florence is the predominance of some

single family interest. This theory of the Frate's, that we are to have

a popular government, in which every man is to strive only for the

general good, and know no party names, is a theory that may do for some

isle of Cristoforo Colombo's finding, but will never do for our fine old

quarrelsome Florence. A change must come before long, and with patience

and caution we have every chance of determining the change in our

favour. Meanwhile, the best thing we can do will be to keep the Frate's

flag flying, for if any other were to be hoisted just now it would be a

black flag for us."

"It's true," said Niccolo Ridolfi, in a curt decisive way. "What you

say is true, Lorenzo. For my own part, I am too old for anybody to

believe that I've changed my feathers. And there are certain of us--our

old Bernardo del Nero for one--whom you would never persuade to borrow

another man's shield. But we can lie still, like sleepy old dogs; and

it's clear enough that barking would be of no use just now. As for this

psalm-singing party, who vote for nothing but the glory of God, and want

to make believe we can all love each other, and talk as if vice could be

swept out with a besom by the Magnificent Eight, their day will not be a

long one. After all the talk of scholars, there are but two sorts of

government: one where men show their teeth at each other, and one where

men show their tongues and lick the feet of the strongest. They'll get

their Great Council finally voted to-morrow--that's certain enough--and

they'll think they've found out a new plan of government; but as sure as

there's a human skin under every lucco in the Council, their new plan

will end like every other, in snarling or in licking. That's my view of

things as a plain man. Not that I consider it becoming in men of family

and following, who have got others depending on their constancy and on

their sticking to their colours, to go a-hunting with a fine net to

catch reasons in the air, like doctors of law. I say frankly that, as

the head of my family, I shall be true to my old alliances; and I have

never yet seen any chalk-mark on political reasons to tell me which is

true and which is false. My friend Bernardo Rucellai here is a man of

reasons, I know, and I have no objection to anybody's finding fine-spun

reasons for me, so that they don't interfere with my actions as a man of

family who has faith to keep with his connections."

"If that is an appeal to me, Niccolo," said Bernardo Rucellai, with a

formal dignity, in amusing contrast with Ridolfi's curt and pithy ease,

"I may take this opportunity of saying, that while my wishes are partly

determined by long-standing personal relations, I cannot enter into any

positive schemes with persons over whose actions I have no control. I

myself might be content with a restoration of the old order of things;

but with modifications--with important modifications. And the one point

on which I wish to declare my concurrence with Lorenzo Tornabuoni is,

that the best policy to be pursued by our friends is, to throw the

weight of their interest into the scale of the popular party. For

myself, I condescend to no dissimulation; nor do I at present see the

party or the scheme that commands my full assent. In all alike there is

crudity and confusion of ideas, and of all the twenty men who are my

colleagues in the present crisis, there is not one with whom I do not

find myself in wide disagreement."

Niccolo Ridolfi shrugged his shoulders, and left it to some one else to

take up the ball. As the wine went round the talk became more and more

frank and lively, and the desire of several at once to be the chief

speaker, as usual caused the company to break up into small knots of two

and three.

It was a result which had been foreseen by Lorenzo Tornabuoni and

Giannozzo Pucci, and they were among the first to turn aside from the

highroad of general talk and enter into a special conversation with

Tito, who sat between them; gradually pushing away their seats, and

turning their backs on the table and wine.

"In truth, Melema," Tornabuoni was saying at this stage, laying one

hose-clad leg across the knee of the other, and caressing his ankle, "I

know of no man in Florence who can serve our party better than you. You

see what most of our friends are: men who can no more hide their

prejudices than a dog can hide the natural tone of his bark, or eke men

whose political ties are so notorious, that they must always be objects

of suspicion. Giannozzo here, and I, I flatter myself, are able to

overcome that suspicion; we have that power of concealment and finesse,

without which a rational cultivated man, instead of having any

prerogative, is really at a disadvantage compared with a wild bull or a

savage. But, except yourself, I know of no one else on whom we could

rely for the necessary discretion."

"Yes," said Giannozzo Pucci, laying his hand on Tito's shoulder, "the

fact is, Tito mio, you can help us better than if you were Ulysses

himself, for I am convinced that Ulysses often made himself

disagreeable. To manage men one ought to have a sharp mind in a velvet

sheath. And there is not a soul in Florence who could undertake a

business like this journey to Rome, for example, with the same safety

that you can. There is your scholarship, which may always be a pretext

for such journeys; and what is better, there is your talent, which it

would be harder to match than your scholarship. Niccolo Macchiavelli

might have done for us if he had been on our side, but hardly so well.

He is too much bitten with notions, and has not your power of

fascination. All the worse for him. He has lost a great chance in

life, and you have got it."

"Yes," said Tornabuoni, lowering his voice in a significant manner, "you

have only to play your game well, Melema, and the future belongs to you.

For the Medici, you may rely upon it, will keep a foot in Rome as well

as in Florence, and the time may not be far-off when they will be able

to make a finer career for their adherents even than they did in old

days. Why shouldn't you take orders some day? There's a cardinal's hat

at the end of that road, and you would not be the first Greek who has

worn that ornament."

Tito laughed gaily. He was too acute not to measure Tornabuoni's

exaggerated flattery, but still the flattery had a pleasant flavour.

"My joints are not so stiff yet," he said, "that I can't be induced to

run without such a high prize as that. I think the income of an abbey

or two held `in commendam,' without the trouble of getting my head

shaved, would satisfy me at present."

"I was not joking," said Tornabuoni, with grave suavity; "I think a

scholar would always be the better off for taking orders. But we'll

talk of that another time. One of the objects to be first borne in

mind, is that you should win the confidence of the men who hang about

San Marco; that is what Giannozzo and I shall do, but you may carry it

farther than we can, because you are less observed. In that way you can

get a thorough knowledge of their doings, and you will make a broader

screen for your agency on our side. Nothing of course can be done

before you start for Rome, because this bit of business between Piero

de' Medici and the French nobles must be effected at once. I mean when

you come back, of course; I need say no more. I believe you could make

yourself the pet votary of San Marco, if you liked; but you are wise

enough to know that effective dissimulation is never immoderate."

"If it were not that an adhesion to the popular side is necessary to

your safety as an agent of our party, Tito mio," said Giannozzo Pucci,

who was more fraternal and less patronising in his manner than

Tornabuoni, "I could have wished your skill to have been employed in

another way, for which it is still better fitted. But now we must look

out for some other man among us who will manage to get into the

confidence of our sworn enemies, the Arrabbiati; we need to know their

movements more than those of the Frate's party, who are strong enough to

play above-board. Still, it would have been a difficult thing for you,

from your known relations with the Medici a little while back, and that

sort of kinship your wife has with Bernardo del Nero. We must find a

man who has no distinguished connections, and who has not yet taken any

side."

Tito was pushing his hair backward automatically, as his manner was, and

looking straight at Pucci with a scarcely perceptible smile on his lip.

"No need to look out for any one else," he said, promptly. "I can

manage the whole business with perfect ease. I will engage to make

myself the special confidant of that thick-headed Dolfo Spini, and know

his projects before he knows them himself."

Tito seldom spoke so confidently of his own powers, but he was in a

state of exaltation at the sudden opening of a new path before him,

where fortune seemed to have hung higher prizes than any he had thought

of hitherto. Hitherto he had seen success only in the form of favour;

it now flashed on him in the shape of power--of such power as is

possible to talent without traditional ties, and without beliefs. Each

party that thought of him as a tool might become dependent on him. His

position as an alien, his indifference to the ideas or prejudices of the

men amongst whom he moved, were suddenly transformed into advantages; he

became newly conscious of his own adroitness in the presence of a game

that he was called on to play. And all the motives which might have

made Tito shrink from the triple deceit that came before him as a

tempting game, had been slowly strangled in him by the successive

falsities of his life.

Our lives make a moral tradition for our individual selves, as the life

of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race; and to have

once acted nobly seems a reason why we should always be noble. But Tito

was feeling the effect of an opposite tradition: he had won no memories

of self-conquest and perfect faithfulness from which he could have a

sense of falling.

The triple colloquy went on with growing spirit till it was interrupted

by a call from the table. Probably the movement came from the listeners

in the party, who were afraid lest the talkers should tire themselves.

At all events it was agreed that there had been enough of gravity, and

Rucellai had just ordered new flasks of Montepulciano.

"How many minstrels are there among us?" he said, when there had been a

general rallying round the table. "Melema, I think you are the chief:

Matteo will give you the lute."

"Ah, yes!" said Giannozzo Pucci, "lead the last chorus from Poliziano's

`Orfeo,' that you have found such an excellent measure for, and we will

all fall in:--

"`Ciascum segua, o Bacco, te:

Bacco, Bacco, evoe, evoe!'"

The servant put the lute into Tito's hands, and then said something in

an undertone to his master. A little subdued questioning and answering

went on between them, while Tito touched the lute in a preluding way to

the strain of the chorus, and there was a confusion of speech and

musical humming all round the table. Bernardo Rucellai had said, "Wait

a moment, Melema;" but the words had been unheard by Tito, who was

leaning towards Pucci, and singing low to him the phrases of the

Maenad-chorus. He noticed nothing until the buzz round the table

suddenly ceased, and the notes of his own voice, with its soft low-toned

triumph, "Evoe, evoe!" fell in startling isolation.

It was a strange moment. Baldassarre had moved round the table till he

was opposite Tito, and as the hum ceased there might be seen for an

instant Baldassarre's fierce dark eyes bent on Tito's bright smiling

unconsciousness, while the low notes of triumph dropped from his lips

into the silence.

Tito looked up with a slight start, and his lips turned pale, but he

seemed hardly more moved than Giannozzo Pucci, who had looked up at the

same moment--or even than several others round the table; for that

sallow deep-lined face with the hatred in its eyes seemed a terrible

apparition across the wax-lit ease and gaiety. And Tito quickly

recovered some self-command. "A mad old man--he looks like it--he \_is\_

mad!" was the instantaneous thought that brought some courage with it;

for he could conjecture no inward change in Baldassarre since they had

met before. He just let his eyes fall and laid the lute on the table

with apparent ease; but his fingers pinched the neck of the lute hard

while he governed his head and his glance sufficiently to look with an

air of quiet appeal towards Bernardo Rucellai, who said at once--

"Good man, what is your business? What is the important declaration

that you have to make?"

"Messer Bernardo Rucellai, I wish you and your honourable friends to

know in what sort of company you are sitting. There is a traitor among

you."

There was a general movement of alarm. Every one present, except Tito,

thought of political danger and not of private injury.

Baldassarre began to speak as if he were thoroughly assured of what he

had to say; but, in spite of his long preparation for this moment, there

was the tremor of overmastering excitement in his voice. His passion

shook him. He went on, but he did not say what he had meant to say. As

he fixed his eyes on Tito again the passionate words were like blows--

they defied premeditation.

"There is a man among you who is a scoundrel, a liar, a robber. I was a

father to him. I took him from beggary when he was a child. I reared

him, I cherished him, I taught him, I made him a scholar. My head has

lain hard that his might have a pillow. And he left me in slavery; he

sold the gems that were mine, and when I came again, he denied me."

The last words had been uttered with almost convulsed agitation, and

Baldassarre paused, trembling. All glances were turned on Tito, who was

now looking straight at Baldassarre. It was a moment of desperation

that annihilated all feeling in him, except the determination to risk

anything for the chance of escape. And he gathered confidence from the

agitation by which Baldassarre was evidently shaken. He had ceased to

pinch the neck of the lute, and had thrust his thumbs into his belt,

while his lips had begun to assume a slight curl. He had never yet done

an act of murderous cruelty even to the smallest animal that could utter

a cry, but at that moment he would have been capable of treading the

breath from a smiling child for the sake of his own safety.

"What does this mean, Melema?" said Bernardo Rucellai, in a tone of

cautious surprise. He, as well as the rest of the company, felt

relieved that the tenor of the accusation was not political.

"Messer Bernardo," said Tito, "I believe this man is mad. I did not

recognise him the first time he encountered me in Florence, but I know

now that he is the servant who years ago accompanied me and my adoptive

father to Greece, and was dismissed on account of misdemeanours. His

name is Jacopo di Nola. Even at that time I believe his mind was

unhinged, for, without any reason, he had conceived a strange hatred

towards me; and now I am convinced that he is labouring under a mania

which causes him to mistake his identity. He has already attempted my

life since he has been in Florence; and I am in constant danger from

him. But he is an object of pity rather than of indignation. It is too

certain that my father is dead. You have only my word for it; but I

must leave it to your judgment how far it is probable that a man of

intellect and learning would have been lurking about in dark corners for

the last month with the purpose of assassinating me; or how far it is

probable that, if this man were my second father, I could have any

motive for denying him. That story about my being rescued from beggary

is the vision of a diseased brain. But it will be a satisfaction to me

at least if you will demand from him proofs of his identity, lest any

malignant person should choose to make this mad impeachment a reproach

to me."

Tito had felt more and more confidence as he went on; the lie was not so

difficult when it was once begun; and as the words fell easily from his

lips, they gave him a sense of power such as men feel when they have

begun a muscular feat successfully. In this way he acquired boldness

enough to end with a challenge for proofs.

Baldassarre, while he had been walking in the gardens and afterwards

waiting in an outer room of the pavilion with the servants, had been

making anew the digest of the evidence he would bring to prove his

identity and Tito's baseness, recalling the description and history of

his gems, and assuring himself by rapid mental glances that he could

attest his learning and his travels. It might be partly owing to this

nervous strain that the new shock of rage he felt as Tito's lie fell on

his ears brought a strange bodily effect with it: a cold stream seemed

to rush over him, and the last words of the speech seemed to be drowned

by ringing chimes. Thought gave way to a dizzy horror, as if the earth

were slipping away from under him. Every one in the room was looking at

him as Tito ended, and saw that the eyes which had had such fierce

intensity only a few minutes before had now a vague fear in them. He

clutched the back of a seat, and was silent.

Hardly any evidence could have been more in favour of Tito's assertion.

"Surely I have seen this man before, somewhere," said Tornabuoni.

"Certainly you have," said Tito, readily, in a low tone. "He is the

escaped prisoner who clutched me on the steps of the Duomo. I did not

recognise him then; he looks now more as he used to do, except that he

has a more unmistakable air of mad imbecility."

"I cast no doubt on your word, Melema," said Bernardo Rucellai, with

cautious gravity, "but you are right to desire some positive test of the

fact." Then turning to Baldassarre, he said, "If you are the person you

claim to be, you can doubtless give some description of the gems which

were your property. I myself was the purchaser of more than one gem

from Messer Tito--the chief rings, I believe, in his collection. One of

them is a fine sard, engraved with a subject from Homer. If, as you

allege, you are a scholar, and the rightful owner of that ring, you can

doubtless turn to the noted passage in Homer from which that subject is

taken. Do you accept this test, Melema? or have you anything to allege

against its validity? The Jacopo you speak of, was he a scholar?"

It was a fearful crisis for Tito. If he said "Yes," his quick mind told

him that he would shake the credibility of his story: if he said "No,"

he risked everything on the uncertain extent of Baldassarre's

imbecility. But there was no noticeable pause before he said, "No. I

accept the test."

There was a dead silence while Rucellai moved towards the recess where

the books were, and came back with the fine Florentine Homer in his

hand. Baldassarre, when he was addressed, had turned his head towards

the speaker, and Rucellai believed that he had understood him. But he

chose to repeat what he had said, that there might be no mistake as to

the test.

"The ring I possess," he said, "is a fine sard, engraved with a subject

from Homer. There was no other at all resembling it in Messer Tito's

collection. Will you turn to the passage in Homer from which that

subject is taken? Seat yourself here," he added, laying the book on the

table, and pointing to his own seat while he stood beside it.

Baldassarre had so far recovered from the first confused horror produced

by the sensation of rushing coldness and chiming din in the ears as to

be partly aware of what was said to him: he was aware that something was

being demanded from him to prove his identity, but he formed no distinct

idea of the details. The sight of the book recalled the habitual

longing and faint hope that he could read and understand, and he moved

towards the chair immediately.

The book was open before him, and he bent his head a little towards it,

while everybody watched him eagerly. He turned no leaf. His eyes

wandered over the pages that lay before him, and then fixed on them a

straining gaze. This lasted for two or three minutes in dead silence.

Then he lifted his hands to each side of his head, and said, in a low

tone of despair, "Lost, lost!"

There was something so piteous in the wandering look and the low cry,

that while they confirmed the belief in his madness they raised

compassion. Nay, so distinct sometimes is the working of a double

consciousness within us, that Tito himself, while he triumphed in the

apparent verification of his lie, wished that he had never made the lie

necessary to himself--wished he had recognised his father on the steps--

wished he had gone to seek him--wished everything had been different.

But he had borrowed from the terrible usurer Falsehood, and the loan had

mounted and mounted with the years, till he belonged to the usurer, body

and soul.

The compassion excited in all the witnesses was not without its danger

to Tito; for conjecture is constantly guided by feeling, and more than

one person suddenly conceived that this man might have been a scholar

and have lost his faculties. On the other hand, they had not present to

their minds the motives which could have led Tito to the denial of his

benefactor, and having no ill-will towards him, it would have been

difficult to them to believe that he had been uttering the basest of

lies. And the originally common type of Baldassarre's person, coarsened

by years of hardship, told as a confirmation of Tito's lie. If

Baldassarre, to begin with, could have uttered precisely the words he

had premeditated, there might have been something in the form of his

accusation which would have given it the stamp not only of true

experience but of mental refinement. But there had been no such

testimony in his impulsive agitated words: and there seemed the very

opposite testimony in the rugged face and the coarse hands that trembled

beside it, standing out in strong contrast in the midst of that

velvet-clad, fair-handed company.

His next movement, while he was being watched in silence, told against

him too. He took his hands from his head, and felt for something under

his tunic. Every one guessed what that movement meant--guessed that

there was a weapon at his side. Glances were interchanged; and Bernardo

Rucellai said, in a quiet tone, touching Baldassarre's shoulder--

"My friend, this is an important business of yours. You shall have all

justice. Follow me into a private room."

Baldassarre was still in that half-stunned state in which he was

susceptible to any prompting, in the same way as an insect that forms no

conception of what the prompting leads to. He rose from his seat, and

followed Rucellai out of the room.

In two or three minutes Rucellai came back again, and said--

"He is safe under lock and key. Piero Pitti, you are one of the

Magnificent Eight, what do you think of our sending Matteo to the palace

for a couple of sbirri, who may escort him to the Stinche? [The largest

prison in Florence.] If there is any danger in him, as I think there

is, he will be safe there; and we can inquire about him to-morrow."

Pitti assented, and the order was given.

"He is certainly an ill-looking fellow," said Tornabuoni. "And you say

he has attempted your life already, Melema?"

And the talk turned on the various forms of madness, and the fierceness

of the southern blood. If the seeds of conjecture unfavourable to Tito

had been planted in the mind of any one present, they were hardly strong

enough to grow without the aid of much daylight and ill-will. The

common-looking, wild-eyed old man, clad in serge, might have won belief

without very strong evidence, if he had accused a man who was envied and

disliked. As it was, the only congruous and probable view of the case

seemed to be the one that sent the unpleasant accuser safely out of

sight, and left the pleasant serviceable Tito just where he was before.

The subject gradually floated away, and gave place to others, till a

heavy tramp, and something like the struggling of a man who was being

dragged away, were heard outside. The sounds soon died out, and the

interruption seemed to make the last hour's conviviality more resolute

and vigorous. Every one was willing to forget a disagreeable incident.

Tito's heart was palpitating, and the wine tasted no better to him than

if it had been blood.

To-night he had paid a heavier price than ever to make himself safe. He

did not like the price, and yet it was inevitable that he should be glad

of the purchase.

And after all he led the chorus. He was in a state of excitement in

which oppressive sensations, and the wretched consciousness of something

hateful but irrevocable, were mingled with a feeling of triumph which

seemed to assert itself as the feeling that would subsist and be master

of the morrow.

And it \_was\_ master. For on the morrow, as we saw, when he was about to

start on his mission to Rome, he had the air of a man well satisfied

with the world.

CHAPTER FORTY.

AN ARRESTING VOICE.

When Romola sat down on the stone under the cypress, all things

conspired to give her the sense of freedom and solitude: her escape from

the accustomed walls and streets; the widening distance from her

husband, who was by this time riding towards Siena, while every hour

would take her farther on the opposite way; the morning stillness; the

great dip of ground on the roadside making a gulf between her and the

sombre calm of the mountains. For the first time in her life she felt

alone in the presence of the earth and sky, with no human presence

interposing and making a law for her.

Suddenly a voice close to her said--

"You are Romola de' Bardi, the wife of Tito Melema."

She knew the voice: it had vibrated through her more than once before;

and because she knew it, she did not turn round or look up. She sat

shaken by awe, and yet inwardly rebelling against the awe. It was one

of those black-skirted monks who was daring to speak to her, and

interfere with her privacy: that was all. And yet she was shaken, as if

that destiny which men thought of as a sceptred deity had come to her,

and grasped her with fingers of flesh.

"You are fleeing from Florence in disguise. I have a command from God

to stop you. You are not permitted to flee."

Romola's anger at the intrusion mounted higher at these imperative

words. She would not turn round to look at the speaker, whose examining

gaze she resented. Sitting quite motionless, she said--

"What right have you to speak to me, or to hinder me?"

"The right of a messenger. You have put on a religious garb, and you

have no religious purpose. You have sought the garb as a disguise. But

you were not suffered to pass me without being discerned. It was

declared to me who you were: it is declared to me that you are seeking

to escape from the lot God has laid upon you. You wish your true name

and your true place in life to be hidden, that you may choose for

yourself a new name and a new place, and have no rule but your own will.

And I have a command to call you back. My daughter, you must return to

your place."

Romola's mind rose in stronger rebellion with every sentence. She was

the more determined not to show any sign of submission, because the

consciousness of being inwardly shaken made her dread lest she should

fall into irresolution. She spoke with more irritation than before.

"I will not return. I acknowledge no right of priests and monks to

interfere with my actions. You have no power over me."

"I know--I know you have been brought up in scorn of obedience. But it

is not the poor monk who claims to interfere with you: it is the truth

that commands you. And you cannot escape it. Either you must obey it,

and it will lead you; or you must disobey it, and it will hang on you

with the weight of a chain which you will drag for ever. But you will

obey it, my daughter. Your old servant will return to you with the

mules; my companion is gone to fetch him; and you will go back to

Florence."

She started up with anger in her eyes, and faced the speaker. It was

Fra Girolamo: she knew that well enough before. She was nearly as tall

as he was, and their faces were almost on a level. She had started up

with defiant words ready to burst from her lips, but they fell back

again without utterance. She had met Fra Girolamo's calm glance, and

the impression from it was so new to her, that her anger sank ashamed as

something irrelevant.

There was nothing transcendent in Savonarola's face. It was not

beautiful. It was strong-featured, and owed all its refinement to

habits of mind and rigid discipline of the body. The source of the

impression his glance produced on Romola was the sense it conveyed to

her of interest in her and care for her apart from any personal feeling.

It was the first time she had encountered a gaze in which simple human

fellowship expressed itself as a strongly-felt bond. Such a glance is

half the vocation of the priest or spiritual guide of men, and Romola

felt it impossible again to question his authority to speak to her. She

stood silent, looking at him. And he spoke again.

"You assert your freedom proudly, my daughter. But who is so base as

the debtor that thinks himself free?"

There was a sting in those words, and Romola's countenance changed as if

a subtle pale flash had gone over it.

"And you are flying from your debts: the debt of a Florentine woman; the

debt of a wife. You are turning your back on the lot that has been

appointed for you--you are going to choose another. But can man or

woman choose duties? No more than they can choose their birthplace or

their father and mother. My daughter, you are fleeing from the presence

of God into the wilderness."

As the anger melted from Romola's mind, it had given place to a new

presentiment of the strength there might be in submission, if this man,

at whom she was beginning to look with a vague reverence, had some valid

law to show her. But no--it was impossible; he could not know what

determined her. Yet she could not again simply refuse to be guided; she

was constrained to plead; and in her new need to be reverent while she

resisted, the title which she had never given him before came to her

lips without forethought, "My father, you cannot know the reasons which

compel me to go. None can know them but myself. None can judge for me.

I have been driven by great sorrow. I am resolved to go."

"I know enough, my daughter: my mind has been so far illuminated

concerning you, that I know enough. You are not happy in your married

life; but I am not a confessor, and I seek to know nothing that should

be reserved for the seal of confession. I have a divine warrant to stop

you, which does not depend on such knowledge. You were warned by a

message from heaven, delivered in my presence--you were warned before

marriage, when you might still have lawfully chosen to be free from the

marriage-bond. But you chose the bond; and in wilfully breaking it--I

speak to you as a pagan, if the holy mystery of matrimony is not sacred

to you--you are breaking a pledge. Of what wrongs will you complain, my

daughter, when you yourself are committing one of the greatest wrongs a

woman and a citizen can be guilty of--withdrawing in secrecy and

disguise from a pledge which you have given in the face of God and your

fellow-men? Of what wrongs will you complain, when you yourself are

breaking the simplest law that lies at the foundation of the trust which

binds man to man--faithfulness to the spoken word? This, then, is the

wisdom you have gained by scorning the mysteries of the Church?--not to

see the bare duty of integrity, where the Church would have taught you

to see, not integrity only, but religion."

The blood had rushed to Romola's face, and she shrank as if she had been

stricken. "I would not have put on a disguise," she began; but she

could not go on,--she was too much shaken by the suggestion in the

Frate's words of a possible affinity between her own conduct and Tito's.

"And to break that pledge you fly from Florence: Florence, where there

are the only men and women in the world to whom you owe the debt of a

fellow-citizen."

"I should never have quitted Florence," said Romola, tremulously, "as

long as there was any hope of my fulfilling a duty to my father there."

"And do you own no tie but that of a child to her father in the flesh?

Your life has been spent in blindness, my daughter. You have lived with

those who sit on a hill aloof, and look down on the life of their

fellow-men. I know their vain discourse. It is of what has been in the

times which they fill with their own fancied wisdom, while they scorn

God's work in the present. And doubtless you were taught how there were

pagan women who felt what it was to live for the Republic; yet you have

never felt that you, a Florentine woman, should live for Florence. If

your own people are wearing a yoke, will you slip from under it, instead

of struggling with them to lighten it? There is hunger and misery in

our streets, yet you say, `I care not; I have my own sorrows; I will go

away, if peradventure I can ease them.' The servants of God are

struggling after a law of justice, peace, and charity, that the hundred

thousand citizens among whom you were born may be governed righteously;

but you think no more of this than if you were a bird, that may spread

its wings and fly whither it will in search of food to its liking. And

yet you have scorned the teaching of the Church, my daughter. As if

you, a wilful wanderer, following your own blind choice, were not below

the humblest Florentine woman who stretches forth her hands with her own

people, and craves a blessing for them; and feels a close sisterhood

with the neighbour who kneels beside her and is not of her own blood;

and thinks of the mighty purpose that God has for Florence; and waits

and endures because the promised work is great, and she feels herself

little."

"I was not going away to ease and self-indulgence," said Romola, raising

her head again, with a prompting to vindicate herself. "I was going

away to hardship. I expect no joy: it is gone from my life."

"You are seeking your own will, my daughter. You are seeking some good

other than the law you are bound to obey. But how will you find good?

It is not a thing of choice: it is a river that flows from the foot of

the Invisible Throne, and flows by the path of obedience. I say again,

man cannot choose his duties. You may choose to forsake your duties,

and choose not to have the sorrow they bring. But you will go forth;

and what will you find, my daughter? Sorrow without duty--bitter herbs,

and no bread with them."

"But if you knew," said Romola, clasping her hands and pressing them

tight, as she looked pleadingly at Fra Girolamo; "if you knew what it

was to me--how impossible it seemed to me to bear it."

"My daughter," he said, pointing to the cord round Romola's neck, "you

carry something within your mantle; draw it forth, and look at it."

Romola gave a slight start, but her impulse now was to do just what

Savonarola told her. Her self-doubt was grappled by a stronger will and

a stronger conviction than her own. She drew forth the crucifix. Still

pointing towards it, he said--

"There, my daughter, is the image of a Supreme Offering, made by Supreme

Love, because the need of man was great."

He paused, and she held the crucifix trembling--trembling under a sudden

impression of the wide distance between her present and her past self.

What a length of road she had travelled through since she first took

that crucifix from the Frate's hands! Had life as many secrets before

her still as it had for her then, in her young blindness? It was a

thought that helped all other subduing influences; and at the sound of

Fra Girolamo's voice again, Romola, with a quick involuntary movement,

pressed the crucifix against her mantle and looked at him with more

submission than before.

"Conform your life to that image, my daughter; make your sorrow an

offering: and when the fire of Divine charity burns within you, and you

behold the need of your fellow-men by the light of that flame, you will

not call your offering great. You have carried yourself proudly, as one

who held herself not of common blood or of common thoughts; but you have

been as one unborn to the true life of man. What! you say your love for

your father no longer tells you to stay in Florence? Then, since that

tie is snapped, you are without a law, without religion: you are no

better than a beast of the field when she is robbed of her young. If

the yearning of a fleshly love is gone, you are without love, without

obligation. See, then, my daughter, how you are below the life of the

believer who worships that image of the Supreme Offering, and feels the

glow of a common life with the lost multitude for whom that offering was

made, and beholds the history of the world as the history of a great

redemption in which he is himself a fellow-worker, in his own place and

among his own people! If you held that faith, my beloved daughter, you

would not be a wanderer flying from suffering, and blindly seeking the

good of a freedom which is lawlessness. You would feel that Florence

was the home of your soul as well as your birthplace, because you would

see the work that was given you to do there. If you forsake your place,

who will fill it? You ought to be in your place now, helping in the

great work by which God will purify Florence, and raise it to be the

guide of the nations. What! the earth is full of iniquity--full of

groans--the light is still struggling with a mighty darkness, and you

say, `I cannot bear my bonds; I will burst them asunder; I will go where

no man claims me'? My daughter, every bond of your life is a debt: the

right lies in the payment of that debt; it can lie nowhere else. In

vain will you wander over the earth; you will be wandering for ever away

from the right."

Romola was inwardly struggling with strong forces: that immense personal

influence of Savonarola, which came from the energy of his emotions and

beliefs: and her consciousness, surmounting all prejudice, that his

words implied a higher law than any she had yet obeyed. But the

resisting thoughts were not yet overborne.

"How, then, could Dino be right? He broke ties. He forsook his place."

"That was a special vocation. He was constrained to depart, else he

could not have attained the higher life. It would have been stifled

within him."

"And I too," said Romola, raising her hands to her brow, and speaking in

a tone of anguish, as if she were being dragged to some torture.

"Father, you may be wrong."

"Ask your conscience, my daughter. You have no vocation such as your

brother had. You are a wife. You seek to break your ties in self-will

and anger, not because the higher life calls upon you to renounce them.

The higher life begins for us, my daughter, when we renounce our own

will to bow before a Divine law. That seems hard to you. It is the

portal of wisdom, and freedom, and blessedness. And the symbol of it

hangs before you. That wisdom is the religion of the Cross. And you

stand aloof from it: you are a pagan; you have been taught to say, `I am

as the wise men who lived before the time when the Jew of Nazareth was

crucified.' And that is your wisdom! To be as the dead whose eyes are

closed, and whose ear is deaf to the work of God that has been since

their time. What has your dead wisdom done for you, my daughter? It

has left you without a heart for the neighbours among whom you dwell,

without care for the great work by which Florence is to be regenerated

and the world made holy; it has left you without a share in the Divine

life which quenches the sense of suffering Self in the ardours of an

ever-growing love. And now, when the sword has pierced your soul, you

say, `I will go away; I cannot bear my sorrow.' And you think nothing

of the sorrow and the wrong that are within the walls of the city where

you dwell: you would leave your place empty, when it ought to be filled

with your pity and your labour. If there is wickedness in the streets,

your steps should shine with the light of purity; if there is a cry of

anguish, you, my daughter, because you know the meaning of the cry,

should be there to still it. My beloved daughter, sorrow has come to

teach you a new worship: the sign of it hangs before you."

Romola's mind was still torn by conflict. She foresaw that she should

obey Savonarola and go back: his words had come to her as if they were

an interpretation of that revulsion from self-satisfied ease, and of

that new fellowship with suffering, which had already been awakened in

her. His arresting voice had brought a new condition into her life,

which made it seem impossible to her that she could go on her way as if

she had not heard it; yet she shrank as one who sees the path she must

take, but sees, too, that the hot lava lies there. And the instinctive

shrinking from a return to her husband brought doubts. She turned away

her eyes from Fra Girolamo, and stood for a minute or two with her hands

hanging clasped before her, like a statue. At last she spoke, as if the

words were being wrung from her, still looking on the ground.

"My husband... he is not... my love is gone!"

"My daughter, there is the bond of a higher love. Marriage is not

carnal only, made for selfish delight. See what that thought leads you

to! It leads you to wander away in a false garb from all the

obligations of your place and name. That would not have been, if you

had learned that it is a sacramental vow, from which none but God can

release you. My daughter, your life is not as a grain of sand, to be

blown by the winds; it is a thing of flesh and blood, that dies if it be

sundered. Your husband is not a malefactor?"

Romola started. "Heaven forbid! No; I accuse him of nothing."

"I did not suppose he was a malefactor. I meant, that if he were a

malefactor, your place would be in the prison beside him. My daughter,

if the cross comes to you as a wife, you must carry it as a wife. You

may say, `I will forsake my husband,' but you cannot cease to be a

wife."

"Yet if--oh, how could I bear--" Romola had involuntarily begun to say

something which she sought to banish from her mind again.

"Make your marriage-sorrows an offering too, my daughter: an offering to

the great work by which sin and sorrow are being made to cease. The end

is sure, and is already beginning. Here in Florence it is beginning,

and the eyes of faith behold it. And it may be our blessedness to die

for it: to die daily by the crucifixion of our selfish will--to die at

last by laying our bodies on the altar. My daughter, you are a child of

Florence; fulfil the duties of that great inheritance. Live for

Florence--for your own people, whom God is preparing to bless the earth.

Bear the anguish and the smart. The iron is sharp--I know, I know--it

rends the tender flesh. The draught is bitterness on the lips. But

there is rapture in the cup--there is the vision which makes all life

below it dross for ever. Come, my daughter, come back to your place!"

While Savonarola spoke with growing intensity, his arms tightly folded

before him still, as they had been from the first, but his face alight

as from an inward flame, Romola felt herself surrounded and possessed by

the glow of his passionate faith. The chill doubts all melted away; she

was subdued by the sense of something unspeakably great to which she was

being called by a strong being who roused a new strength within herself.

In a voice that was like a low, prayerful cry, she said--

"Father, I will be guided. Teach me! I will go back."

Almost unconsciously she sank on her knees. Savonarola stretched out

his hands over her; but feeling would no longer pass through the channel

of speech, and he was silent.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE.

COMING BACK.

"Rise, my daughter," said Fra Girolamo at last. "Your servant is

waiting not far off with the mules. It is time that I should go onward

to Florence."

Romola arose from her knees. That silent attitude had been a sort of

sacrament to her, confirming the state of yearning passivity on which

she had newly entered. By the one act of renouncing her resolve to quit

her husband, her will seemed so utterly bruised that she felt the need

of direction even in small things. She lifted up the edge of her cowl,

and saw Maso and the second Dominican standing with their backs towards

her on the edge of the hill about ten yards from her; but she looked at

Savonarola again without speaking, as if the order to Maso to turn back

must come from him and not from her.

"I will go and call them," he said, answering her glance of appeal; "and

I will recommend you, my daughter, to the Brother who is with me. You

desire to put yourself under guidance, and to learn that wisdom which

has been hitherto as foolishness to you. A chief gate of that wisdom is

the sacrament of confession. You will need a confessor, my daughter,

and I desire to put you under the care of Fra Salvestro, one of the

brethren of San Marco, in whom I most confide."

"I would rather have no guidance but yours, father," said Romola,

looking anxious.

"My daughter, I do not act as a confessor. The vocation I have

withdraws me from offices that would force me into frequent contact with

the laity, and interfere with my special duties."

"Then shall I not be able to speak to you in private? if I waver, if--"

Romola broke off from rising agitation. She felt a sudden alarm lest

her new strength in renunciation should vanish if the immediate personal

influence of Savonarola vanished.

"My daughter, if your soul has need of the word in private from my lips,

you will let me know it through Fra Salvestro, and I will see you in the

sacristy or in the choir of San Marco. And I will not cease to watch

over you. I will instruct my brother concerning you, that he may guide

you into that path of labour for the suffering and the hungry to which

you are called as a daughter of Florence in these times of hard need. I

desire to behold you among the feebler and more ignorant sisters as the

apple-tree among the trees of the forest, so that your fairness and all

natural gifts may be but as a lamp through which the Divine light shines

the more purely. I will go now and call your servant."

When Maso had been sent a little way in advance, Fra Salvestro came

forward, and Savonarola led Romola towards him. She had beforehand felt

an inward shrinking from a new guide who was a total stranger to her:

but to have resisted Savonarola's advice would have been to assume an

attitude of independence at a moment when all her strength must be drawn

from the renunciation of independence. And the whole bent of her mind

now was towards doing what was painful rather than what was easy. She

bowed reverently to Fra Salvestro before looking directly at him; but

when she raised her head and saw him fully, her reluctance became a

palpitating doubt. There are men whose presence infuses trust and

reverence; there are others to whom we have need to carry our trust and

reverence ready-made; and that difference flashed on Romola as she

ceased to have Savonarola before her, and saw in his stead Fra Salvestro

Maruffi. It was not that there was anything manifestly repulsive in Fra

Salvestro's face and manner, any air of hypocrisy, any tinge of

coarseness; his face was handsomer than Fra Girolamo's, his person a

little taller. He was the long-accepted confessor of many among the

chief personages in Florence, and had therefore had large experience as

a spiritual director. But his face had the vacillating expression of a

mind unable to concentrate itself strongly in the channel of one great

emotion or belief--an expression which is fatal to influence over an

ardent nature like Romola's. Such an expression is not the stamp of

insincerity; it is the stamp simply of a shallow soul, which will often

be found sincerely striving to fill a high vocation, sincerely composing

its countenance to the utterance of sublime formulas, but finding the

muscles twitch or relax in spite of belief, as prose insists on coming

instead of poetry to the man who has not the divine frenzy. Fra

Salvestro had a peculiar liability to visions, dependent apparently on a

constitution given to somnambulism. Savonarola believed in the

supernatural character of these visions, while Fra Salvestro himself had

originally resisted such an interpretation of them, and had even rebuked

Savonarola for his prophetic preaching: another proof, if one were

wanted, that the relative greatness of men is not to be gauged by their

tendency to disbelieve the superstitions of their age. For of these two

there can be no question which was the great man and which the small.

The difference between them was measured very accurately by the change

in Romola's feeling as Fra Salvestro began to address her in words of

exhortation and encouragement. After her first angry resistance of

Savonarola had passed away, she had lost all remembrance of the old

dread lest any influence should drag her within the circle of fanaticism

and sour monkish piety. But now again, the chill breath of that dread

stole over her. It could have no decisive effect against the impetus

her mind had just received; it was only like the closing of the grey

clouds over the sunrise, which made her returning path monotonous and

sombre.

And perhaps of all sombre paths that on which we go back after treading

it with a strong resolution is the one that most severely tests the

fervour of renunciation. As they re-entered the city gates the light

snow-flakes fell about them; and as the grey sister walked hastily

homeward from the Piazza di San Marco, and trod the bridge again, and

turned in at the large door in the Via de' Bardi, her footsteps were

marked darkly on the thin carpet of snow, and her cowl fell laden and

damp about her face.

She went up to her room, threw off her serge, destroyed the parting

letters, replaced all her precious trifles, unbound her hair, and put on

her usual black dress. Instead of taking a long exciting journey, she

was to sit down in her usual place. The snow fell against the windows,

and she was alone.

She felt the dreariness, yet her courage was high, like that of a seeker

who has come on new signs of gold. She was going to thread life by a

fresh clue. She had thrown all the energy of her will into

renunciation. The empty tabernacle remained locked, and she placed

Dino's crucifix outside it.

Nothing broke the outward monotony of her solitary home, till the night

came like a white ghost at the windows. Yet it was the most memorable

Christmas-eve in her life to Romola, this of 1494.

PART THREE.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO.

ROMOLA IN HER PLACE.

It was the thirtieth of October 1496. The sky that morning was clear

enough, and there was a pleasant autumnal breeze. But the Florentines

just then thought very little about the land breezes: they were thinking

of the gales at sea, which seemed to be uniting with all other powers to

disprove the Frate's declaration that Heaven took special care of

Florence.

For those terrible gales had driven away from the coast of Leghorn

certain ships from Marseilles, freighted with soldiery and corn; and

Florence was in the direst need, first of food, and secondly of fighting

men. Pale Famine was in her streets, and her territory was threatened

on all its borders.

For the French king, that new Charlemagne, who had entered Italy in

anticipatory triumph, and had conquered Naples without the least

trouble, had gone away again fifteen months ago, and was even, it was

feared, in his grief for the loss of a new-born son, losing the languid

intention of coming back again to redress grievances and set the Church

in order. A league had been formed against him--a Holy League, with

Pope Borgia at its head--to "drive out the barbarians," who still

garrisoned the fortress of Naples. That had a patriotic sound; but,

looked at more closely, the Holy League seemed very much like an

agreement among certain wolves to drive away all other wolves, and then

to see which among themselves could snatch the largest share of the

prey. And there was a general disposition to regard Florence not as a

fellow-wolf, but rather as a desirable carcass. Florence, therefore, of

all the chief Italian States, had alone declined to join the League,

adhering still to the French alliance.

She had declined at her peril. At this moment Pisa, still righting

savagely for liberty, was being encouraged not only by strong forces

from Venice and Milan, but by the presence of the German Emperor

Maximilian, who had been invited by the League, and was joining the

Pisans with such troops as he had in the attempt to get possession of

Leghorn, while the coast was invested by Venetian and Genoese ships.

And if Leghorn should fall into the hands of the enemy, woe to Florence!

For if that one outlet towards the sea were closed, hedged in as she

was on the land by the bitter ill-will of the Pope and the jealousy of

smaller States, how could succours reach her?

The government of Florence had shown a great heart in this urgent need,

meeting losses and defeats with vigorous effort, raising fresh money,

raising fresh soldiers, but not neglecting the good old method of

Italian defence--conciliatory embassies. And while the scarcity of food

was every day becoming greater, they had resolved, in opposition to old

precedent, not to shut out the starving country people, and the

mendicants driven from the gates of other cities, who came flocking to

Florence like birds from a land of snow.

These acts of a government in which the disciples of Savonarola made the

strongest element were not allowed to pass without criticism. The

disaffected were plentiful, and they saw clearly that the government

took the worst course for the public welfare. Florence ought to join

the League and make common cause with the other great Italian States,

instead of drawing down their hostility by a futile adherence to a

foreign ally. Florence ought to take care of her own citizens, instead

of opening her gates to famine and pestilence in the shape of starving

contadini and alien mendicants.

Every day the distress became sharper: every day the murmurs became

louder. And, to crown the difficulties of the government, for a month

and more--in obedience to a mandate from Rome--Fra Girolamo had ceased

to preach. But on the arrival of the terrible news that the ships from

Marseilles had been driven back, and that no corn was coming, the need

for the voice that could infuse faith and patience into the people

became too imperative to be resisted. In defiance of the Papal mandate

the Signoria requested Savonarola to preach. And two days ago he had

mounted again the pulpit of the Duomo, and had told the people only to

wait and be steadfast and the divine help would certainly come.

It was a bold sermon: he consented to have his frock stripped off him

if, when Florence persevered in fulfilling the duties of piety and

citizenship, God did not come to her rescue.

Yet at present, on this morning of the thirtieth, there were no signs of

rescue. Perhaps if the precious Tabernacle of the Madonna dell'

Impruneta were brought into Florence and carried in devout procession to

the Duomo, that Mother, rich in sorrows and therefore in mercy, would

plead for the suffering city? For a century and a half there were

records how the Florentines, suffering from drought, or flood, or

famine, or pestilence, or the threat of wars, had fetched the potent

image within their walls, and had found deliverance. And grateful

honour had been done to her and her ancient church of L'Impruneta; the

high house of Buondelmonti, patrons of the church, had to guard her

hidden image with bare sword; wealth had been poured out for prayers at

her shrine, for chantings, and chapels, and ever-burning lights; and

lands had been added, till there was much quarrelling for the privilege

of serving her. The Florentines were deeply convinced of her

graciousness to them, so that the sight of her tabernacle within their

walls was like the parting of the cloud, and the proverb ran, that the

Florentines had a Madonna who would do what they pleased.

When were they in more need of her pleading pity than now? And already,

the evening before, the tabernacle containing the miraculous hidden

image had been brought with high and reverend escort from L'Impruneta,

the privileged spot six miles beyond the gate of San Piero that looks

towards Rome, and had been deposited in the church of San Gaggio,

outside the gate, whence it was to be fetched in solemn procession by

all the fraternities, trades, and authorities of Florence.

But the Pitying Mother had not yet entered within the walls, and the

morning arose on unchanged misery and despondency. Pestilence was

hovering in the track of famine. Not only the hospitals were full, but

the courtyards of private houses had been turned into refuges and

infirmaries; and still there was unsheltered want. And early this

morning, as usual, members of the various fraternities who made it part

of their duty to bury the unfriended dead, were bearing away the corpses

that had sunk by the wayside. As usual, sweet womanly forms, with the

refined air and carriage of the well-born, but in the plainest garb,

were moving about the streets on their daily errands of tending the sick

and relieving the hungry.

One of these forms was easily distinguishable as Romola de' Bardi. Clad

in the simplest garment of black serge, with a plain piece of black

drapery drawn over her head, so as to hide all her hair, except the

bands of gold that rippled apart on her brow, she was advancing from the

Ponte Vecchio towards the Por' Santa Maria--the street in a direct line

with the bridge--when she found her way obstructed by the pausing of a

bier, which was being carried by members of the company of San Jacopo

del Popolo, in search for the unburied dead. The brethren at the head

of the bier were stooping to examine something, while a group of idle

workmen, with features paled and sharpened by hunger, were clustering

around and all talking at once.

"He's dead, I tell you! Messer Domeneddio has loved him well enough to

take him."

"Ah, and it would be well for us all if we could have our legs stretched

out and go with our heads two or three \_bracci\_ foremost! It's ill

standing upright with hunger to prop you."

"Well, well, he's an old fellow. Death has got a poor bargain. Life's

had the best of him."

"And no Florentine, ten to one! A beggar turned out of Siena. San

Giovanni defend us! They've no need of soldiers to fight us. They send

us an army of starving men."

"No, no! This man is one of the prisoners turned out of the Stinche. I

know by the grey patch where the prison badge was."

"Keep quiet! Lend a hand! Don't you see the brethren are going to lift

him on the bier?"

"It's likely he's alive enough if he could only look it. The soul may

be inside him if it had only a drop of \_vernaccia\_ to warm it."

"In truth, I think he is not dead," said one of the brethren, when they

had lifted him on the bier. "He has perhaps only sunk down for want of

food."

"Let me try to give him some wine," said Romola, coming forward. She

loosened the small flask which she carried at her belt, and, leaning

towards the prostrate body, with a deft hand she applied a small ivory

implement between the teeth, and poured into the mouth a few drops of

wine. The stimulus acted: the wine was evidently swallowed. She poured

more, till the head was moved a little towards her, and the eyes of the

old man opened full upon her with the vague look of returning

consciousness.

Then for the first time a sense of complete recognition came over

Romola. Those wild dark eyes opening in the sallow deep-lined face,

with the white beard, which was now long again, were like an

unmistakable signature to a remembered handwriting. The light of two

summers had not made that image any fainter in Romola's memory: the

image of the escaped prisoner, whom she had seen in the Duomo the day

when Tito first wore the armour--at whose grasp Tito was paled with

terror in the strange sketch she had seen in Piero's studio. A wretched

tremor and palpitation seized her. Now at last, perhaps, she was going

to know some secret which might be more bitter than all that had gone

before. She felt an impulse to dart away as from a sight of horror; and

again, a more imperious need to keep close by the side of this old man

whom, the divination of keen feeling told her, her husband had injured.

In the very instant of this conflict she still leaned towards him and

kept her right-hand ready to administer more wine, while her left was

passed under his neck. Her hands trembled, but their habit of soothing

helpfulness would have served to guide them without the direction of her

thought.

Baldassarre was looking at \_her\_ for the first time. The close

seclusion in which Romola's trouble had kept her in the weeks preceding

her flight and his arrest, had denied him the opportunity he had sought

of seeing the Wife who lived in the Via de' Bardi: and at this moment

the descriptions he had heard of the fair golden-haired woman were all

gone, like yesterday's waves.

"Will it not be well to carry him to the steps of San Stefano?" said

Romola. "We shall cease then to stop up the street, and you can go on

your way with your bier."

They had only to move onward for about thirty yards before reaching the

steps of San Stefano, and by this time Baldassarre was able himself to

make some efforts towards getting off the bier, and propping himself on

the steps against the church-doorway. The charitable brethren passed

on, but the group of interested spectators, who had nothing to do and

much to say, had considerably increased. The feeling towards the old

man was not so entirely friendly now it was quite certain that he was

alive, but the respect inspired by Romola's presence caused the passing

remarks to be made in a rather more subdued tone than before.

"Ah, they gave him his morsel every day in the Stinche--that's why he

can't do so well without it. You and I, Cecco, know better what it is

to go to bed fasting."

"\_Gnaffe\_! that's why the Magnificent Eight have turned out some of the

prisoners, that they may shelter honest people instead. But if every

thief is to be brought to life with good wine and wheaten bread, we

Ciompi had better go and fill ourselves in Arno while the water's

plenty."

Romola had seated herself on the steps by Baldassarre, and was saying,

"Can you eat a little bread now? perhaps by-and-by you will be able, if

I leave it with you. I must go on, because I have promised to be at the

hospital. But I will come back if you will wait here, and then I will

take you to some shelter. Do you understand? Will you wait? I will

come back."

He looked dreamily at her, and repeated her words, "come back." It was

no wonder that his mind was enfeebled by his bodily exhaustion, but she

hoped that he apprehended her meaning. She opened her basket, which was

filled with pieces of soft bread, and put one of the pieces into his

hand.

"Do you keep your bread for those that can't swallow, madonna?" said a

rough-looking fellow, in a red night-cap, who had elbowed his way into

the inmost circle of spectators--a circle that was pressing rather

closely on Romola.

"If anybody isn't hungry," said another, "I say, let him alone. He's

better off than people who've got craving stomachs and no breakfast."

"Yes, indeed; if a man's a mind to die, it's a time to encourage him,

instead of making him come back to life against his will. Dead men want

no trencher."

"Oh, you don't understand the Frate's charity," said a young man in an

excellent cloth tunic, whose face showed no signs of want. "The Frate

has been preaching to the birds, like Saint Anthony, and he's been

telling the hawks they were made to feed the sparrows, as every good

Florentine citizen was made to feed six starving beggar-men from Arezzo

or Bologna. Madonna, there, is a pious Piagnone: she's not going to

throw away her good bread on honest citizens who've got all the Frate's

prophecies to swallow."

"Come, madonna," said he of the red cap, "the old thief doesn't eat the

bread, you see: you'd better try \_us\_. We fast so much, we're half

saints already."

The circle had narrowed till the coarse men--most of them gaunt from

privation--had left hardly any margin round Romola. She had been taking

from her basket a small horn-cup, into which she put the piece of bread

and just moistened it with wine; and hitherto she had not appeared to

heed them. But now she rose to her feet, and looked round at them.

Instinctively the men who were nearest to her pushed backward a little,

as if their rude nearness were the fault of those behind. Romola held

out the basket of bread to the man in the night-cap, looking at him

without any reproach in her glance, as she said--

"Hunger is hard to bear, I know, and you have the power to take this

bread if you will. It was saved for sick women and children. You are

strong men; but if you do not choose to suffer because you are strong,

you have the power to take everything from the weak. You can take the

bread from this basket; but I shall watch by this old man; I shall

resist your taking the bread from \_him\_."

For a few moments there was perfect silence, while Romola looked at the

faces before her, and held out the basket of bread. Her own pale face

had the slightly pinched look and the deepening of the eye-socket which

indicate unusual fasting in the habitually temperate, and the large

direct gaze of her hazel eyes was all the more impressive.

The man in the night-cap looked rather silly, and backed, thrusting his

elbow into his neighbour's ribs with an air of moral rebuke. The

backing was general, every one wishing to imply that he had been pushed

forward against his will; and the young man in the fine cloth tunic had

disappeared.

But at this moment the armed servitors of the Signoria, who had begun to

patrol the line of streets through which the procession was to pass,

came up to disperse the group which was obstructing the narrow street.

The man addressed as Cecco retreated from a threatening mace up the

church-steps, and said to Romola, in a respectful tone--

"Madonna, if you want to go on your errands, I'll take care of the old

man."

Cecco was a wild-looking figure: a very ragged tunic, made shaggy and

variegated by cloth-dust and clinging fragments of wool, gave relief to

a pair of bare bony arms and a long sinewy neck; his square jaw shaded

by a bristly black beard, his bridgeless nose and low forehead, made his

face look as if it had been crushed down for purposes of packing, and a

narrow piece of red rag tied over his ears seemed to assist in the

compression. Romola looked at him with some hesitation.

"Don't distrust me, madonna," said Cecco, who understood her look

perfectly; "I am not so pretty as you, but I've got an old mother who

eats my porridge for me. What! there's a heart inside me, and I've

bought a candle for the most Holy Virgin before now. Besides, see

there, the old fellow is eating his sop. He's hale enough: he'll be on

his legs as well as the best of us by-and-by."

"Thank you for offering to take care of him, friend," said Romola,

rather penitent for her doubting glance. Then leaning to Baldassarre,

she said, "Pray wait for me till I come again."

He assented with a slight movement of the head and hand, and Romola went

on her way towards the hospital of San Matteo, in the Piazza di San

Marco.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE.

THE UNSEEN MADONNA.

In returning from the hospital, more than an hour later, Romola took a

different road, making a wider circuit towards the river, which she

reached at some distance from the Ponte Vecchio. She turned her steps

towards that bridge, intending to hasten to San Stefano in search of

Baldassarre. She dreaded to know more about him, yet she felt as if, in

forsaking him, she would be forsaking some near claim upon her.

But when she approached the meeting of the roads where the Por' Santa

Maria would be on her right-hand and the Ponte Vecchio on her left, she

found herself involved in a crowd who suddenly fell on their knees; and

she immediately knelt with them. The Cross was passing--the Great Cross

of the Duomo--which headed the procession. Romola was later than she

had expected to be, and now she must wait till the procession had

passed. As she rose from her knees, when the Cross had disappeared, the

return to a standing posture, with nothing to do but gaze, made her more

conscious of her fatigue than she had been while she had been walking

and occupied. A shopkeeper by her side said--

"Madonna Romola, you will be weary of standing: Gian Fantoni will be

glad to give you a seat in his house. Here is his door close, at hand.

Let me open it for you. What! he loves God and the Frate as we do. His

house is yours."

Romola was accustomed now to be addressed in this fraternal way by

ordinary citizens, whose faces were familiar to her from her having seen

them constantly in the Duomo. The idea of home had come to be

identified for her less with the house in the Via de' Bardi, where she

sat in frequent loneliness, than with the towered circuit of Florence,

where there was hardly a turn of the streets at which she was not

greeted with looks of appeal or of friendliness. She was glad enough to

pass through the open door on her right-hand and be led by the fraternal

hose-vendor to an upstairs-window, where a stout woman with three

children, all in the plain garb of Piagnoni, made a place for her with

much reverence above the bright hanging draperies. From this corner

station she could see, not only the procession pouring in solemn

slowness between the lines of houses on the Ponto Vecchio, but also the

river and the Lung' Arno on towards the bridge of the Santa Trinita.

In sadness and in stillness came the slow procession. Not even a

wailing chant broke the silent appeal for mercy: there was only the

tramp of footsteps, and the faint sweep of woollen garments. They were

young footsteps that were passing when Romola first looked from the

window--a long train of the Florentine youth, bearing high in the midst

of them the white image of the youthful Jesus, with a golden glory above

his head, standing by the tall cross where the thorns and the nails lay

ready.

After that train of fresh beardless faces came the mysterious-looking

Companies of Discipline, bound by secret rules to self-chastisement, and

devout praise, and special acts of piety; all wearing a garb which

concealed the whole head and face except the eyes. Every one knew that

these mysterious forms were Florentine citizens of various ranks, who

might be seen at ordinary times going about the business of the shop,

the counting-house, or the State; but no member now was discernible as

son, husband, or father. They had dropped their personality, and walked

as symbols of a common vow. Each company had its colour and its badge,

but the garb of all was a complete shroud, and left no expression but

that of fellowship.

In comparison with them, the multitude of monks seemed to be strongly

distinguished individuals, in spite of the common tonsure and the common

frock. First came a white stream of reformed Benedictines; and then a

much longer stream of the Frati Minori, or Franciscans, in that age all

clad in grey, with the knotted cord round their waists, and some of them

with the \_zoccoli\_, or wooden sandals, below their bare feet;--perhaps

the most numerous order in Florence, owning many zealous members who

loved mankind and hated the Dominicans. And after the grey came the

black of the Augustinians of San Spirito with more cultured human faces

above it--men who had inherited the library of Boccaccio, and had made

the most learned company in Florence when learning was rarer; then the

white over dark of the Carmelites; and then again the unmixed black of

the Servites, that famous Florentine order founded by seven merchants

who forsook their gains to adore the Divine Mother.

And now the hearts of all onlookers began to beat a little faster,

either with hatred or with love, for there was a stream of black and

white coming over the bridge--of black mantles over white scapularies;

and every one knew that the Dominicans were coming. Those of Fiesole

passed first. One black mantle parted by white after another, one

tonsured head after another, and still expectation was suspended. They

were very coarse mantles, all of them, and many were threadbare, if not

ragged; for the Prior of San Marco had reduced the fraternities under

his rule to the strictest poverty and discipline. But in the long line

of black and white there was at last singled out a mantle only a little

more worn than the rest, with a tonsured head above it which might not

have appeared supremely remarkable to a stranger who had not seen it on

bronze medals, with the sword of God as its obverse; or surrounded by an

armed guard on the way to the Duomo; or transfigured by the inward flame

of the orator as it looked round on a rapt multitude.

As the approach of Savonarola was discerned, none dared conspicuously to

break the stillness by a sound which would rise above the solemn tramp

of footsteps and the faint sweep of garments; nevertheless his ear, as

well as other ears, caught a mingled sound of slow hissing that longed

to be curses, and murmurs that longed to be blessings. Perhaps it was

the sense that the hissing predominated which made two or three of his

disciples in the foreground of the crowd, at the meeting of the roads,

fall on their knees as if something divine were passing. The movement

of silent homage spread: it went along the sides of the streets like a

subtle shock, leaving some unmoved, while it made the most bend the knee

and bow the head. But the hatred, too, gathered a more intense

expression; and as Savonarola passed up the Por' Santa Maria, Romola

could see that some one at an upper window spat upon him.

Monks again--Frati Umiliati, or Humbled Brethren, from Ognissanti, with

a glorious tradition of being the earliest workers in the wool-trade;

and again more monks--Vallombrosan and other varieties of Benedictines,

reminding the instructed eye by niceties of form and colour that in ages

of abuse, long ago, reformers had arisen who had marked a change of

spirit by a change of garb; till at last the shaven crowns were at an

end, and there came the train of untonsured secular priests.

Then followed the twenty-one incorporated Arts of Florence in long

array, with their banners floating above them in proud declaration that

the bearers had their distinct functions, from the bakers of bread to

the judges and notaries. And then all the secondary officers of State,

beginning with the less and going on to the greater, till the line of

secularities was broken by the Canons of the Duomo, carrying a sacred

relic--the very head, enclosed in silver, of San Zenobio, immortal

bishop of Florence, whose virtues were held to have saved the city

perhaps a thousand years before.

Here was the nucleus of the procession. Behind the relic came the

archbishop in gorgeous cope, with canopy held above him; and after him

the mysterious hidden Image--hidden first by rich curtains of brocade

enclosing an outer painted tabernacle, but within this, by the more

ancient tabernacle which had never been opened in the memory of living

men, or the fathers of living men. In that inner shrine was the image

of the Pitying Mother, found ages ago in the soil of L'Impruneta,

uttering a cry as the spade struck it. Hitherto the unseen Image had

hardly ever been carried to the Duomo without having rich gifts borne

before it. There was no reciting the list of precious offerings made by

emulous men and communities, especially of veils and curtains and

mantles. But the richest of all these, it was said, had been given by a

poor abbess and her nuns, who, having no money to buy materials, wove a

mantle of gold brocade with their prayers, embroidered it and adorned it

with their prayers, and, finally, saw their work presented to the

Blessed Virgin in the great Piazza by two beautiful youths who spread

out white wings and vanished in the blue.

But to-day there were no gifts carried before the tabernacle: no

donations were to be given to-day except to the poor. That had been the

advice of Fra Girolamo, whose preaching never insisted on gifts to the

invisible powers, but only on help to visible need; and altars had been

raised at various points in front of the churches, on which the

oblations for the poor were deposited. Not even a torch was carried.

Surely the hidden Mother cared less for torches and brocade than for the

wail of the hungry people. Florence was in extremity: she had done her

utmost, and could only wait for something divine that was not in her own

power.

The Frate in the torn mantle had said that help would certainly come,

and many of the faint-hearted were clinging more to their faith in the

Frate's word, than to their faith in the virtues of the unseen Image.

But there were not a few of the fierce-hearted who thought with secret

rejoicing that the Frate's word might be proved false.

Slowly the tabernacle moved forward, and knees were bent. There was

profound stillness; for the train of priests and chaplains from

L'Impruneta stirred no passion in the onlookers. The procession was

about to close with the Priors and the Gonfaloniere: the long train of

companies and symbols, which have their silent music and stir the mind

as a chorus stirs it, was passing out of sight, and now a faint yearning

hope was all that struggled with the accustomed despondency.

Romola, whose heart had been swelling, half with foreboding, half with

that enthusiasm of fellowship which the life of the last two years had

made as habitual to her as the consciousness of costume to a vain and

idle woman, gave a deep sigh, as at the end of some long mental tension,

and remained on her knees for very languor; when suddenly there flashed

from between the houses on to the distant bridge something

bright-coloured. In the instant, Romola started up and stretched out

her arms, leaning from the window, while the black drapery fell from her

head, and the golden gleam of her hair and the flush in her face seemed

the effect of one illumination. A shout arose in the same instant; the

last troops of the procession paused, and all faces were turned towards

the distant bridge.

But the bridge was passed now: the horseman was pressing at full gallop

along by the Arno; the sides of his bay horse, just streaked with foam,

looked all white from swiftness; his cap was flying loose by his red

becchetto, and he waved an olive-branch in his hand. It was a

messenger--a messenger of good tidings! The blessed olive-branch spoke

afar off. But the impatient people could not wait. They rushed to meet

the on-comer, and seized his horse's rein, pushing and trampling.

And now Romola could see that the horseman was her husband, who had been

sent to Pisa a few days before on a private embassy. The recognition

brought no new flash of joy into her eyes. She had checked her first

impulsive attitude of expectation; but her governing anxiety was still

to know what news of relief had come for Florence.

"Good news!"

"Best news!"

"News to be paid with hose!" (\_novelle da calze\_) were the vague

answers with which Tito met the importunities of the crowd, until he had

succeeded in pushing on his horse to the spot at the meeting of the ways

where the Gonfaloniere and the Priors were awaiting him. There he

paused, and, bowing low, said--

"Magnificent Signori! I have to deliver to you the joyful news that the

galleys from France, laden with corn and men, have arrived safely in the

port of Leghorn, by favour of a strong wind, which kept the enemy's

fleet at a distance."

The words had no sooner left Tito's lips than they seemed to vibrate up

the streets. A great shout rang through the air, and rushed along the

river; and then another, and another; and the shouts were heard

spreading along the line of the procession towards the Duomo; and then

there were fainter answering shouts, like the intermediate plash of

distant waves in a great lake whose waters obey one impulse.

For some minutes there was no attempt to speak further: the Signoria

themselves lifted up their caps, and stood bare-headed in the presence

of a rescue which had come from outside the limit of their own power--

from that region of trust and resignation which has been in all ages

called divine.

At last, as the signal was given to move forward, Tito said, with a

smile--

"I ought to say, that any hose to be bestowed by the Magnificent

Signoria in reward of these tidings are due, not to me, but to another

man who had ridden hard to bring them, and would have been here in my

place if his horse had not broken down just before he reached Signa.

Meo di Sasso will doubtless be here in an hour or two, and may all the

more justly claim the glory of the messenger, because he has had the

chief labour and has lost the chief delight."

It was a graceful way of putting a necessary statement, and after a word

of reply from the \_Proposto\_, or spokesman of the Signoria, this

dignified extremity of the procession passed on, and Tito turned his

horse's head to follow in its train, while the great bell of the Palazzo

Vecchio was already beginning to swing, and give a louder voice to the

people's joy in that moment, when Tito's attention had ceased to be

imperatively directed, it might have been expected that he would look

round and recognise Romola; but he was apparently engaged with his cap,

which, now the eager people were leading his horse, he was able to seize

and place on his head, while his right-hand was still encumbered by the

olive-branch. He had a becoming air of lassitude after his exertions;

and Romola, instead of making any effort to be recognised by him, threw

her black drapery over her head again, and remained perfectly quiet.

Yet she felt almost sure that Tito had seen her; he had the power of

seeing everything without seeming to see it.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR.

THE VISIBLE MADONNA.

The crowd had no sooner passed onward than Romola descended to the

street, and hastened to the steps of San Stefano. Cecco had been

attracted with the rest towards the Piazza, and she found Baldassarre

standing alone against the church-door, with the horn-cup in his hand,

waiting for her. There was a striking change in him: the blank, dreamy

glance of a half-returned consciousness had given place to a fierceness

which, as she advanced and spoke to him, flashed upon her as if she had

been its object. It was the glance of caged fury that sees its prey

passing safe beyond the bars.

Romola started as the glance was turned on her, but her immediate

thought was that he had seen Tito. And as she felt the look of hatred

grating on her, something like a hope arose that this man might be the

criminal, and that her husband might not have been guilty towards him.

If she could learn that now, by bringing Tito face to face with him, and

have her mind set at rest!

"If you will come with me," she said, "I can give you shelter and food

until you are quite rested and strong. Will you come?"

"Yes," said Baldassarre, "I shall be glad to get my strength. I want to

get my strength," he repeated, as if he were muttering to himself,

rather than speaking to her.

"Come!" she said, inviting him to walk by her side, and taking the way

by the Arno towards the Ponte Rubaconte as the more private road.

"I think you are not a Florentine," she said, presently, as they turned

on to the bridge.

He looked round at her without speaking. His suspicious caution was

more strongly upon him than usual, just now that the fog of confusion

and oblivion was made denser by bodily feebleness. But she was looking

at him too, and there was something in her gentle eyes which at last

compelled him to answer her. But he answered cautiously--

"No, I am no Florentine; I am a lonely man."

She observed his reluctance to speak to her, and dared not question him

further, lest he should desire to quit her. As she glanced at him from

time to time, her mind was busy with thoughts which quenched the faint

hope that there was nothing painful to be revealed about her husband.

If this old man had been in the wrong, where was the cause for dread and

secrecy!

They walked on in silence till they reached the entrance into the Via

de' Bardi, and Romola noticed that he turned and looked at her with a

sudden movement as if some shock had passed through him. A few moments

after, she paused at the half-open door of the court and turned towards

him.

"Ah!" he said, not waiting for her to speak, "you are his wife."

"Whose wife?" said Romola.

It would have been impossible for Baldassarre to recall any name at that

moment. The very force with which the image of Tito pressed upon him

seemed to expel any verbal sign. He made no answer, but looked at her

with strange fixedness.

She opened the door wide and showed the court covered with straw, on

which lay four or five sick people, while some little children crawled

or sat on it at their ease--tiny pale creatures, biting straws and

gurgling.

"If you will come in," said Romola, tremulously, "I will find you a

comfortable place, and bring you some more food."

"No, I will not come in," said Baldassarre. But he stood still,

arrested by the burden of impressions under which his mind was too

confused to choose a course.

"Can I do nothing for you?" said Romola. "Let me give you some money

that you may buy food. It will be more plentiful soon."

She had put her hand into her scarsella as she spoke, and held out her

palm with several \_grossi\_ in it. She purposely offered him more than

she would have given to any other man in the same circumstances. He

looked at the coins a little while, and then said--

"Yes, I will take them."

She poured the coins into his palm, and he grasped them tightly.

"Tell me," said Romola, almost beseechingly. "What shall you--"

But Baldassarre had turned away from her, and was walking again towards

the bridge. Passing from it, straight on up the Via del Fosso, he came

upon the shop of Niccolo Caparra, and turned towards it without a pause,

as if it had been the very object of his search. Niccolo was at that

moment in procession with the armourers of Florence, and there was only

one apprentice in the shop. But there were all sorts of weapons in

abundance hanging there, and Baldassarre's eyes discerned what he was

more hungry for than for bread. Niccolo himself would probably have

refused to sell anything that might serve as a weapon to this man with

signs of the prison on him; but the apprentice, less observant and

scrupulous, took three \_grossi\_ for a sharp hunting-knife without any

hesitation. It was a conveniently small weapon, which Baldassarre could

easily thrust within the breast of his tunic, and he walked on, feeling

stronger. That sharp edge might give deadliness to the thrust of an

aged arm: at least it was a companion, it was a power in league with

him, even if it failed. It would break against armour, but was the

armour sure to be always there? In those long months while vengeance

had lain in prison, baseness had perhaps become forgetful and secure.

The knife had been bought with the traitor's own money. That was just.

Before he took the money, he had felt what he should do with it--buy a

weapon. Yes, and if possible, food too; food to nourish the arm that

would grasp the weapon, food to nourish the body which was the temple of

vengeance. When he had had enough bread, he should be able to think and

act--to think first how he could hide himself, lest Tito should have him

dragged away again.

With that idea of hiding in his mind, Baldassarre turned up the

narrowest streets, bought himself some meat and bread, and sat down

under the first loggia to eat. The bells that swung out louder and

louder peals of joy, laying hold of him and making him vibrate along

with all the air, seemed to him simply part of that strong world which

was against him.

Romola had watched Baldassarre until he had disappeared round the

turning into the Piazza de' Mozzi, half feeling that his departure was a

relief, half reproaching herself for not seeking with more decision to

know the truth about him, for not assuring herself whether there were

any guiltless misery in his lot which she was not helpless to relieve.

Yet what could she have done if the truth had proved to be the burden of

some painful secret about her husband, in addition to the anxieties that

already weighed upon her? Surely a wife was permitted to desire

ignorance of a husband's wrong-doing, since she alone must not protest

and warn men against him. But that thought stirred too many intricate

fibres of feeling to be pursued now in her weariness. It was a time to

rejoice, since help had come to Florence; and she turned into the court

to tell the good news to her patients on their straw beds.

She closed the door after her, lest the bells should drown her voice,

and then throwing the black drapery from her head, that the women might

see her better, she stood in the midst and told them that corn was

coming, and that the bells were ringing for gladness at the news. They

all sat up to listen, while the children trotted or crawled towards her,

and pulled her black skirts, as if they were impatient at being all that

long way off her face. She yielded to them, weary as she was, and sat

down on the straw, while the little pale things peeped into her basket

and pulled her hair down, and the feeble voices around her said, "The

Holy Virgin be praised!"

"It was the procession!"

"The Mother of God has had pity on us!"

At last Romola rose from the heap of straw, too tired to try and smile

any longer, saying as she turned up the stone steps--

"I will come by-and-by, to bring you your dinner."

"Bless you, madonna! bless you!" said the faint chorus, in much the same

tone as that in which they had a few minutes before praised and thanked

the unseen Madonna.

Romola cared a great deal for that music. She had no innate taste for

tending the sick and clothing the ragged, like some women to whom the

details of such work are welcome in themselves, simply as an occupation.

Her early training had kept her aloof from such womanly labours; and if

she had not brought to them the inspiration of her deepest feelings,

they would have been irksome to her. But they had come to be the one

unshaken resting-place of her mind, the one narrow pathway on which the

light fell clear. If the gulf between herself and Tito which only

gathered a more perceptible wideness from her attempts to bridge it by

submission, brought a doubt whether, after all, the bond to which she

had laboured to be true might not itself be false--if she came away from

her confessor, Fra Salvestro, or from some contact with the disciples of

Savonarola amongst whom she worshipped, with a sickening sense that

these people were miserably narrow, and with an almost impetuous

reaction towards her old contempt for their superstition--she found

herself recovering a firm footing in her works of womanly sympathy.

Whatever else made her doubt, the help she gave to her fellow-citizens

made her sure that Fra Girolamo had been right to call her back.

According to his unforgotten words, her place had not been empty: it had

been filled with her love and her labour. Florence had had need of her,

and the more her own sorrow pressed upon her, the more gladness she felt

in the memories, stretching through the two long years, of hours and

moments in which she had lightened the burden of life to others. All

that ardour of her nature which could no longer spend itself in the

woman's tenderness for father and husband, had transformed itself into

an enthusiasm of sympathy with the general life. She had ceased to

think that her own lot could be happy--had ceased to think of happiness

at all: the one end of her life seemed to her to be the diminishing of

sorrow.

Her enthusiasm was continually stirred to fresh vigour by the influence

of Savonarola. In spite of the wearisome visions and allegories from

which she recoiled in disgust when they came as stale repetitions from

other lips than his, her strong affinity for his passionate sympathy and

the splendour of his aims had lost none of its power. His burning

indignation against the abuses and oppression that made the daily story

of the Church and of States had kindled the ready fire in her too. His

special care for liberty and purity of government in Florence, with his

constant reference of this immediate object to the wider end of a

universal regeneration, had created in her a new consciousness of the

great drama of human existence in which her life was a part; and through

her daily helpful contact with the less fortunate of her fellow-citizens

this new consciousness became something stronger than a vague sentiment;

it grew into a more and more definite motive of self-denying practice.

She thought little about dogmas, and shrank from reflecting closely on

the Frate's prophecies of the immediate scourge and closely--following

regeneration. She had submitted her mind to his and had entered into

communion with the Church, because in this way she had found an

immediate satisfaction for moral needs which all the previous culture

and experience of her life had left hungering. Fra Girolamo's voice had

waked in her mind a reason for living, apart from personal enjoyment and

personal affection; but it was a reason that seemed to need feeding with

greater forces than she possessed within herself, and her submissive use

of all offices of the Church was simply a watching and waiting if by any

means fresh strength might come. The pressing problem for Romola just

then was not to settle questions of controversy, but to keep alive that

flame of unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a

life of active love.

Her trust in Savonarola's nature as greater than her own made a large

part of the strength she had found. And the trust was not to be lightly

shaken. It is not force of intellect which causes ready repulsion from

the aberration and eccentricities of greatness, any more than it is

force of vision that causes the eye to explore the warts on a face

bright with human expression; it is simply the negation of high

sensibilities. Romola was so deeply moved by the grand energies of

Savonarola's nature, that she found herself listening patiently to all

dogmas and prophecies, when they came in the vehicle of his ardent faith

and believing utterance. [Note.]

No soul is desolate as long as there is a human being for whom it can

feel trust and reverence. Romola's trust in Savonarola was something

like a rope suspended securely by her path, making her step elastic

while she grasped it; if it were suddenly removed, no firmness of the

ground she trod could save her from staggering, or perhaps from falling.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note. He himself had had occasion enough to note the efficacy of that

vehicle. "If," he says in the \_Compendium Revelationum\_, "you speak of

such as have not heard these things from me, I admit that they who

disbelieve are more than they who believe, because it is one thing to

hear him who inwardly feels these things, and another to hear him who

feels them not; ... and, therefore, it is well said by Saint Jerome,

`Habet nescio quid latentis energiae vivae vocis actus, et in aures

discipuli de auctoris ore transfusa fortis sonat.'"

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE.

AT THE BARBER'S SHOP.

After that welcome appearance as the messenger with the olive-branch,

which was an unpromised favour of fortune, Tito had other commissions to

fulfil of a more premeditated character. He paused at the Palazzo

Vecchio, and awaited there the return of the Ten, who managed external

and war affairs, that he might duly deliver to them the results of his

private mission to Pisa, intended as a preliminary to an avowed embassy

of which Bernardo Rucellai was to be the head, with the object of

coming, if possible, to a pacific understanding with the Emperor

Maximilian and the League.

Tito's talents for diplomatic work had been well ascertained, and as he

gave with fulness and precision the results of his inquiries and

interviews, Bernardo del Nero, who was at that time one of the Ten,

could not withhold his admiration. He would have withheld it if he

could; for his original dislike of Tito had returned, and become

stronger, since the sale of the library. Romola had never uttered a

word to her godfather on the circumstances of the sale, and Bernardo had

understood her silence as a prohibition to him to enter on the subject,

but he felt sure that the breach of her father's wish had been a

blighting grief to her, and the old man's observant eyes discerned other

indications that her married life was not happy.

"Ah," he said, inwardly, "that doubtless is the reason she has taken to

listening to Fra Girolamo, and going amongst the Piagnoni, which I never

expected from her. These women, if they are not happy, and have no

children, must either take to folly or to some overstrained religion

that makes them think they've got all heaven's work on their shoulders.

And as for my poor child Romola, it is as I always said--the cramming

with Latin and Greek has left her as much a woman as if she had done

nothing all day but prick her fingers with the needle. And this husband

of hers, who gets employed everywhere, because he's a tool with a smooth

handle, I wish Tornabuoni and the rest may not find their fingers cut.

Well, well, \_solco torto, sacco dritto\_--many a full sack comes from a

crooked furrow; and he who will be captain of none but honest men will

have small hire to pay."

With this long-established conviction that there could be no moral

sifting of political agents, the old Florentine abstained from all

interference in Tito's disfavour. Apart from what must be kept sacred

and private for Romola's sake, Bernardo had nothing direct to allege

against the useful Greek, except that he was a Greek, and that he,

Bernardo, did not like him; for the doubleness of feigning attachment to

the popular government, while at heart a Medicean, was common to Tito

with more than half the Medicean party. He only feigned with more skill

than the rest: that was all. So Bernardo was simply cold to Tito, who

returned the coldness with a scrupulous, distant respect. And it was

still the notion in Florence that the old tie between Bernardo and Bardo

made any service done to Romola's husband an acceptable homage to her

godfather.

After delivering himself of his charge at the Old Palace, Tito felt that

the avowed official work of the day was done. He was tired and adust

with long riding; but he did not go home. There were certain things in

his scarsella and on his mind, from which he wished to free himself as

soon as possible, but the opportunities must be found so skilfully that

they must not seem to be sought. He walked from the Palazzo in a

sauntering fashion towards the Piazza del Duomo. The procession was at

an end now, but the bells were still ringing, and the people were moving

about the streets restlessly, longing for some more definite vent to

their joy. If the Frate could have stood up in the great Piazza and

preached to them, they might have been satisfied, but now, in spite of

the new discipline which declared Christ to be the special King of the

Florentines and required all pleasures to be of a Christian sort, there

was a secret longing in many of the youngsters who shouted "Viva Gesu!"

for a little vigorous stone throwing in sign of thankfulness.

Tito, as he passed along, could not escape being recognised by some as

the welcome bearer of the olive-branch, and could only rid himself of an

inconvenient ovation, chiefly in the form of eager questions, by telling

those who pressed on him that Meo di Sasso, the true messenger from

Leghorn, must now be entering, and might certainly be met towards the

Porta San Frediano. He could tell much more than Tito knew.

Freeing himself from importunities in this adroit manner, he made his

way to the Piazza del Duomo, casting his long eyes round the space with

an air of the utmost carelessness, but really seeking to detect some

presence which might furnish him with one of his desired opportunities.

The fact of the procession having terminated at the Duomo made it

probable that there would be more than the usual concentration of

loungers and talkers in the Piazza and round Nello's shop. It was as he

expected. There was a group leaning against the rails near the north

gates of the Baptistery, so exactly what he sought, that he looked more

indifferent than ever, and seemed to recognise the tallest member of the

group entirely by chance as he had half passed him, just turning his

head to give him a slight greeting, while he tossed the end of his

\_becchetto\_ over his left shoulder.

Yet the tall, broad-shouldered personage greeted in that slight way

looked like one who had considerable claims. He wore a

richly-embroidered tunic, with a great show of linen, after the newest

French mode, and at his belt there hung a sword and poniard of fine

workmanship. His hat, with a red plume in it, seemed a scornful protest

against the gravity of Florentine costume, which had been exaggerated to

the utmost under the influence of the Piagnoni. Certain undefinable

indications of youth made the breadth of his face and the large diameter

of his waist appear the more emphatically a stamp of coarseness, and his

eyes had that rude desecrating stare at all men and things which to a

refined mind is as intolerable as a bad odour or a flaring light.

He and his companions, also young men dressed expensively and wearing

arms, were exchanging jokes with that sort of ostentatious laughter

which implies a desire to prove that the laughter is not mortified

though some people might suspect it. There were good reasons for such a

suspicion; for this broad-shouldered man with the red feather was Dolfo

Spini, leader of the Compagnacci, or Evil Companions--that is to say, of

all the dissolute young men belonging to the old aristocratic party,

enemies of the Mediceans, enemies of the popular government, but still

more bitter enemies of Savonarola. Dolfo Spini, heir of the great house

with the loggia, over the bridge of the Santa Trinita, had organised

these young men into an armed band, as sworn champions of extravagant

suppers and all the pleasant sins of the flesh, against reforming

pietists who threatened to make the world chaste and temperate to so

intolerable a degree that there would soon be no reason for living,

except the extreme unpleasantness of the alternative. Up to this very

morning he had been loudly declaring that Florence was given up to

famine and ruin entirely through its blind adherence to the advice of

the Frate, and that there could be no salvation for Florence but in

joining the League and driving the Frate out of the city--sending him to

Rome, in fact, whither he ought to have gone long ago in obedience to

the summons of the Pope. It was suspected, therefore, that Messer Dolfo

Spini's heart was not aglow with pure joy at the unexpected succours

which had come in apparent fulfilment of the Frate's prediction, and the

laughter, which was ringing out afresh as Tito joined the group at

Nello's door, did not serve to dissipate the suspicion. For leaning

against the door-post in the centre of the group was a close-shaven,

keen-eyed personage, named Niccolo Macchiavelli, who, young as he was,

had penetrated all the small secrets of egoism.

"Messer Dolfo's head," he was saying, "is more of a pumpkin than I

thought. I measure men's dulness by the devices they trust in for

deceiving others. Your dullest animal of all is he who grins and says

he doesn't mind just after he has had his shins kicked. If I were a

trifle duller, now," he went on, smiling as the circle opened to admit

Tito, "I should pretend to be fond of this Melema, who has got a

secretaryship that would exactly suit me--as if Latin ill-paid could

love better Latin that's better paid! Melema, you are a pestiferously

clever fellow, very much in my way, and I'm sorry to hear you've had

another piece of good-luck to-day."

"Questionable luck, Niccolo," said Tito, touching him on the shoulder in

a friendly way; "I have got nothing by it yet but being laid hold of and

breathed upon by wool-beaters, when I am as soiled and battered with

riding as a \_tabellario\_ (letter-carrier) from Bologna."

"Ah! you want a touch of my art, Messer Oratore," said Nello, who had

come forward at the sound of Tito's voice; "your chin, I perceive, has

yesterday's crop upon it. Come, come--consign yourself to the priest of

all the Muses. Sandro, quick with the lather!"

"In truth, Nello, that is just what I most desire at this moment," said

Tito, seating himself; "and that was why I turned my steps towards thy

shop, instead of going home at once, when I had done my business at the

Palazzo."

"Yes, indeed, it is not fitting that you should present yourself to

Madonna Romola with a rusty chin and a tangled \_zazzera\_. Nothing that

is not dainty ought to approach the Florentine lily; though I see her

constantly going about like a sunbeam amongst the rags that line our

corners--if indeed she is not more like a moonbeam now, for I thought

yesterday, when I met her, that she looked as pale and worn as that

fainting Madonna of Fra Giovanni's. You must see to it, my bel erudito:

she keeps too many fasts and vigils in your absence."

Tito gave a melancholy shrug. "It is too true, Nello. She has been

depriving herself of half her proper food \_every\_ day during this

famine. But what can I do? Her mind has been set all aflame. A

husband's influence is powerless against the Frate's."

"As every other influence is likely to be, that of the Holy Father

included," said Domenico Cennini, one of the group at the door, who had

turned in with Tito. "I don't know whether you have gathered anything

at Pisa about the way the wind sits at Rome, Melema?"

"Secrets of the council-chamber, Messer Domenico!" said Tito, smiling

and opening his palms in a deprecatory manner. "An envoy must be as

dumb as a father confessor."

"Certainly, certainly," said Cennini. "I ask for no breach of that

rule. Well, my belief is, that if his Holiness were to drive Fra

Girolamo to extremity, the Frate would move heaven and earth to get a

General Council of the Church--ay, and would get it too; and I, for one,

should not be sorry, though I'm no Piagnone."

"With leave of your greater experience, Messer Domenico," said

Macchiavelli, "I must differ from you--not in your wish to see a General

Council which might reform the Church, but in your belief that the Frate

will checkmate his Holiness. The Frate's game is an impossible one. If

he had contented himself with preaching against the vices of Rome, and

with prophesying that in some way, not mentioned, Italy would be

scourged, depend upon it Pope Alexander would have allowed him to spend

his breath in that way as long as he could find hearers. Such spiritual

blasts as those knock no walls down. But the Frate wants to be

something more than a spiritual trumpet: he wants to be a lever, and

what is more, he \_is\_ a lever. He wants to spread the doctrine of

Christ by maintaining a popular government in Florence, and the Pope, as

I know, on the best authority, has private views to the contrary."

"Then Florence will stand by the Frate," Cennini broke in, with some

fervour. "I myself should prefer that he would let his prophesying

alone, but if our freedom to choose our own government is to be

attacked--I am an obedient son of the Church, but I would vote for

resisting Pope Alexander the Sixth, as our forefathers resisted Pope

Gregory the Eleventh."

"But pardon me, Messer Domenico," said Macchiavelli, sticking his thumbs

into his belt, and speaking with that cool enjoyment of exposition which

surmounts every other force in discussion. "Have you correctly seized

the Frate's position? How is it that he has become a lever, and made

himself worth attacking by an acute man like his Holiness? Because he

has got the ear of the people: because he gives them threats and

promises, which they believe come straight from God, not only about

hell, purgatory, and paradise, but about Pisa and our Great Council.

But let events go against him, so as to shake the people's faith, and

the cause of his power will be the cause of his fall. He is

accumulating three sorts of hatred on his head--the hatred of average

mankind against every one who wants to lay on them a strict yoke of

virtue; the hatred of the stronger powers in Italy who want to farm

Florence for their own purposes; and the hatred of the people, to whom

he has ventured to promise good in this world, instead of confining his

promises to the next. If a prophet is to keep his power, he must be a

prophet like Mahomet, with an army at his back, that when the people's

faith is fainting it may be frightened into life again."

"Rather sum up the three sorts of hatred in one," said Francesco Cei,

impetuously, "and say he has won the hatred of all men who have sense

and honesty, by inventing hypocritical lies. His proper place is among

the false prophets in the Inferno, who walk with their heads turned

hind-foremost."

"You are too angry, my Francesco," said Macchiavelli, smiling; "you

poets are apt to cut the clouds in your wrath. I am no votary of the

Frate's, and would not lay down my little finger for his veracity. But

veracity is a plant of paradise, and the seeds have never flourished

beyond the walls. You, yourself, my Francesco, tell poetical lies only;

partly compelled by the poet's fervour, partly to please your audience;

but \_you\_ object to lies in prose. Well, the Frate differs from you as

to the boundary of poetry, that's all. When he gets into the pulpit of

the Duomo, he has the fervour within him, and without him he has the

audience to please. Ecco!"

"You are somewhat lax there, Niccolo," said Cennini, gravely. "I myself

believe in the Frate's integrity, though I don't believe in his

prophecies, and as long as his integrity is not disproved, we have a

popular party strong enough to protect him and resist foreign

interference."

"A party that seems strong enough," said Macchiavelli, with a shrug, and

an almost imperceptible glance towards Tito, who was abandoning himself

with much enjoyment to Nello's combing and scenting. "But how many

Mediceans are there among you? How many who will not be turned round by

a private grudge?"

"As to the Mediceans," said Cennini, "I believe there is very little

genuine feeling left on behalf of the Medici. Who would risk much for

Piero de' Medici? A few old staunch friends, perhaps, like Bernardo del

Nero; but even some of those most connected with the family are hearty

friends of the popular government, and would exert themselves for the

Frate. I was talking to Giannozzo Pucci only a little while ago, and I

am convinced there's nothing he would set his face against more than

against any attempt to alter the new order of things."

"You are right there, Messer Domenico," said Tito, with a laughing

meaning in his eyes, as he rose from the shaving-chair; "and I fancy the

tender passion came in aid of hard theory there. I am persuaded there

was some jealousy at the bottom of Giannozzo's alienation from Piero de'

Medici; else so amiable a creature as he would never feel the bitterness

he sometimes allows to escape him in that quarter. He was in the

procession with you, I suppose?"

"No," said Cennini; "he is at his villa--went there three days ago."

Tito was settling his cap and glancing down at his splashed hose as if

he hardly heeded the answer. In reality he had obtained a much-desired

piece of information. He had at that moment in his scarsella a crushed

gold ring which he had engaged to deliver to Giannozzo Pucci. He had

received it from an envoy of Piero de' Medici, whom he had ridden out of

his way to meet at Certaldo on the Siena road. Since Pucci was not in

the town, he would send the ring by Fra Michele, a Carthusian lay

Brother in the service of the Mediceans, and the receipt of that sign

would bring Pucci back to hear the verbal part of Tito's mission.

"Behold him!" said Nello, flourishing his comb and pointing it at Tito,

"the handsomest scholar in the world or in the wolds, [`Del mondo o di

maremma'] now he has passed through my hands! A trifle thinner in the

face, though, than when he came in his first bloom to Florence--eh? and,

I vow, there are some lines just faintly hinting themselves about your

mouth, Messer Oratore! Ah, mind is an enemy to beauty! I myself was

thought beautiful by the women at one time--when I was in my

swaddling-bands. But now--oime! I carry my unwritten poems in cipher

on my face!"

Tito, laughing with the rest as Nello looked at himself tragically in

the hand-mirror, made a sign of farewell to the company generally, and

took his departure.

"I'm of our old Piero di Cosimo's mind," said Francesco Cei. "I don't

half like Melema. That trick of smiling gets stronger than ever--no

wonder he has lines about the mouth."

"He's too successful," said Macchiavelli, playfully. "I'm sure there's

something wrong about him, else he wouldn't have that secretaryship."

"He's an able man," said Cennini, in a tone of judicial fairness. "I

and my brother have always found him useful with our Greek sheets, and

he gives great satisfaction to the Ten. I like to see a young man work

his way upward by merit. And the secretary Scala, who befriended him

from the first, thinks highly of him still, I know."

"Doubtless," said a notary in the background. "He writes Scala's

official letters for him, or corrects them, and gets well paid for it

too."

"I wish Messer Bartolommeo would pay \_me\_ to doctor his gouty Latin,"

said Macchiavelli, with a shrug. "Did \_he\_ tell you about the pay, Ser

Ceccone, or was it Melema himself?" he added, looking at the notary with

a face ironically innocent.

"Melema? no, indeed," answered Ser Ceccone. "He is as close as a nut.

He never brags. That's why he's employed everywhere. They say he's

getting rich with doing all sorts of underhand work."

"It \_is\_ a little too bad," said Macchiavelli, "and so many able

notaries out of employment!"

"Well, I must say I thought that was a nasty story a year or two ago

about the man who said he had stolen jewels," said Cei. "It got hushed

up somehow; but I remember Piero di Cosimo said, at the time, he

believed there was something in it, for he saw Melema's face when the

man laid hold of him, and he never saw a visage so `painted with fear,'

as our sour old Dante says."

"Come, spit no more of that venom, Francesco," said Nello, getting

indignant, "else I shall consider it a public duty to cut your hair awry

the next time I get you under my scissors. That story of the stolen

jewels was a lie. Bernardo Rucellai and the Magnificent Eight knew all

about it. The man was a dangerous madman, and he was very properly kept

out of mischief in prison. As for our Piero di Cosimo, his wits are

running after the wind of Mongibello: he has such an extravagant fancy

that he would take a lizard for a crocodile. No: that story has been

dead and buried too long--our noses object to it."

"It is true," said Macchiavelli. "You forget the danger of the

precedent, Francesco. The next mad beggarman may accuse you of stealing

his verses, or me, God help me! of stealing his coppers. Ah!" he went

on, turning towards the door, "Dolfo Spini has carried his red feather

out of the Piazza. That captain of swaggerers would like the Republic

to lose Pisa just for the chance of seeing the people tear the frock off

the Frate's back. With your pardon, Francesco--I know he is a friend of

yours--there are few things I should like better than to see him play

the part of Capo d'Oca, who went out to the tournament blowing his

trumpets and returned with them in a bag."

CHAPTER FORTY SIX.

BY A STREET LAMP.

That evening, when it was dark and threatening rain, Romola, returning

with Maso and the lantern by her side, from the hospital of San Matteo,

which she had visited after vespers, encountered her husband just

issuing from the monastery of San Marco. Tito, who had gone out again

shortly after his arrival in the Via de' Bardi, and had seen little of

Romola during the day, immediately proposed to accompany her home,

dismissing Maso, whose short steps annoyed him. It was only usual for

him to pay her such an official attention when it was obviously demanded

from him. Tito and Romola never jarred, never remonstrated with each

other. They were too hopelessly alienated in their inner life ever to

have that contest which is an effort towards agreement. They talked of

all affairs, public and private, with careful adherence to an adopted

course. If Tito wanted a supper prepared in the old library, now

pleasantly furnished as a banqueting-room, Romola assented, and saw that

everything needful was done: and Tito, on his side, left her entirely

uncontrolled in her daily habits, accepting the help she offered him in

transcribing or making digests, and in return meeting her conjectured

want of supplies for her charities. Yet he constantly, as on this very

morning, avoided exchanging glances with her; affected to believe that

she was out of the house, in order to avoid seeking her in her own room;

and playfully attributed to her a perpetual preference of solitude to

his society.

In the first ardour of her self-conquest, after she had renounced her

resolution of flight, Romola had made many timid efforts towards the

return of a frank relation between them. But to her such a relation

could only come by open speech about their differences, and the attempt

to arrive at a moral understanding; while Tito could only be saved from

alienation from her by such a recovery of her effusive tenderness as

would have presupposed oblivion of their differences. He cared for no

explanation between them; he felt any thorough explanation impossible:

he would have cared to have Romola fond again, and to her, fondness was

impossible. She could be submissive and gentle, she could repress any

sign of repulsion; but tenderness was not to be feigned. She was

helplessly conscious of the result: her husband was alienated from her.

It was an additional reason why she should be carefully kept outside of

secrets which he would in no case have chosen to communicate to her.

With regard to his political action he sought to convince her that he

considered the cause of the Medici hopeless; and that on that practical

ground, as well as in theory, he heartily served the popular government,

in which she had now a warm interest. But impressions subtle as odours

made her uneasy about his relations with San Marco. She was painfully

divided between the dread of seeing any evidence to arouse her

suspicions, and the impulse to watch lest any harm should come that she

might have arrested.

As they walked together this evening, Tito said--"The business of the

day is not yet quite ended for me. I shall conduct you to our door, my

Romola, and then I must fulfil another commission, which will take me an

hour, perhaps, before I can return and rest, as I very much need to do."

And then he talked amusingly of what he had seen at Pisa, until they

were close upon a loggia, near which there hung a lamp before a picture

of the Virgin. The street was a quiet one, and hitherto they had passed

few people; but now there was a sound of many approaching footsteps and

confused voices.

"We shall not get home without a wetting, unless we take shelter under

this convenient loggia," Tito said, hastily, hurrying Romola, with a

slightly startled movement, up the step of the loggia.

"Surely it is useless to wait for this small drizzling rain," said

Romola, in surprise.

"No: I felt it becoming heavier. Let us wait a little." With that

wakefulness to the faintest indication which belongs to a mind

habitually in a state of caution, Tito had detected by the glimmer of

the lamp that the leader of the advancing group wore a red feather and a

glittering sword-hilt--in fact, was almost the last person in the world

he would have chosen to meet at this hour with Romola by his side. He

had already during the day had one momentous interview with Dolfo Spini,

and the business he had spoken of to Romola as yet to be done was a

second interview with that personage, a sequence of the visit he had

paid at San Marco. Tito, by a long-preconcerted plan, had been the

bearer of letters to Savonarola--carefully-forged letters; one of them,

by a stratagem, bearing the very signature and seal of the Cardinal of

Naples, who of all the Sacred College had most exerted his influence at

Rome in favour of the Frate. The purport of the letters was to state

that the Cardinal was on his progress from Pisa, and, unwilling for

strong reasons to enter Florence, yet desirous of taking counsel with

Savonarola at this difficult juncture, intended to pause this very day

at San Casciano, about ten miles from the city, whence he would ride out

the next morning in the plain garb of a priest, and meet Savonarola, as

if casually, five miles on the Florence road, two hours after sunrise.

The plot, of which these forged letters were the initial step, was that

Dolfo Spini with a band of his Compagnacci was to be posted in ambush on

the road, at a lonely spot about five miles from the gates; that he was

to seize Savonarola with the Dominican brother who would accompany him

according to rule, and deliver him over to a small detachment of

Milanese horse in readiness near San Casciano, by whom he was to be

carried into the Roman territory.

There was a strong chance that the penetrating Frate would suspect a

trap, and decline to incur the risk, which he had for some time avoided,

of going beyond the city walls. Even when he preached, his friends held

it necessary that he should be attended by an armed guard; and here he

was called on to commit himself to a solitary road, with no other

attendant than a fellow-monk. On this ground the minimum of time had

been given him for decision, and the chance in favour of his acting on

the letters was, that the eagerness with which his mind was set on the

combining of interests within and without the Church towards the

procuring of a General Council, and also the expectation of immediate

service from the Cardinal in the actual juncture of his contest with the

Pope, would triumph over his shrewdness and caution in the brief space

allowed for deliberation.

Tito had had an audience of Savonarola, having declined to put the

letters into any hands but his, and with consummate art had admitted

that incidentally, and by inference, he was able so far to conjecture

their purport as to believe they referred to a rendezvous outside the

gates, in which case he urged that the Frate should seek an armed guard

from the Signoria, and offered his services in carrying the request with

the utmost privacy. Savonarola had replied briefly that this was

impossible: an armed guard was incompatible with privacy. He spoke with

a flashing eye, and Tito felt convinced that he meant to incur the risk.

Tito himself did not much care for the result. He managed his affairs

so cleverly, that all results, he considered, must turn to his

advantage. Whichever party came uppermost, he was secure of favour and

money. That is an indecorously naked statement; the fact, clothed as

Tito habitually clothed it, was that his acute mind, discerning the

equal hollowness of all parties, took the only rational course in making

them subservient to his own interest.

If Savonarola fell into the snare, there were diamonds in question and

papal patronage; if not, Tito's adroit agency had strengthened his

position with Savonarola and with Spini, while any confidences he

obtained from them made him the more valuable as an agent of the

Mediceans.

But Spini was an inconvenient colleague. He had cunning enough to

delight in plots, but not the ability or self-command necessary to so

complex an effect as secrecy. He frequently got excited with drinking,

for even sober Florence had its "Beoni," or topers, both lay and

clerical, who became loud at taverns and private banquets; and in spite

of the agreement between him and Tito, that their public recognition of

each other should invariably be of the coolest sort, there was always

the possibility that on an evening encounter he would be suddenly

blurting and affectionate. The delicate sign of casting the becchetto

over the left shoulder was understood in the morning, but the strongest

hint short of a threat might not suffice to keep off a fraternal grasp

of the shoulder in the evening.

Tito's chief hope now was that Dolfo Spini had not caught sight of him,

and the hope would have been well founded if Spini had had no clearer

view of him than he had caught of Spini. But, himself in shadow, he had

seen Tito illuminated for an instant by the direct rays of the lamp, and

Tito in his way was as strongly marked a personage as the captain of the

Compagnacci. Romola's black-shrouded figure had escaped notice, and she

now stood behind her husband's shoulder in the corner of the loggia.

Tito was not left to hope long.

"Ha! my carrier-pigeon!" grated Spini's harsh voice, in what he meant to

be an undertone, while his hand grasped Tito's shoulder; "what did you

run into hiding for? You didn't know it was comrades who were coming.

It's well I caught sight of you; it saves time. What of the chase

to-morrow morning? Will the bald-headed game rise? Are the falcons to

be got ready?"

If it had been in Tito's nature to feel an access of rage, he would have

felt it against this bull-faced accomplice, unfit either for a leader or

a tool. His lips turned white, but his excitement came from the

pressing difficulty of choosing a safe device. If he attempted to hush

Spini, that would only deepen Romola's suspicion, and he knew her well

enough to know that if some strong alarm were roused in her, she was

neither to be silenced nor hoodwinked: on the other hand, if he repelled

Spini angrily the wine-breathing Compagnaccio might become savage, being

more ready at resentment than at the divination of motives. He adopted

a third course, which proved that Romola retained one sort of power over

him--the power of dread.

He pressed her hand, as if intending a hint to her, and said in a

good-humoured tone of comradeship--

"Yes, my Dolfo, you may prepare in all security. But take no trumpets

with you."

"Don't be afraid," said Spini, a little piqued. "No need to play Ser

Saccente with me. I know where the devil keeps his tail as well as you

do. What! he swallowed the bait whole? The prophetic nose didn't scent

the hook at all?" he went on, lowering his tone a little, with a

blundering sense of secrecy.

"The brute will not be satisfied till he has emptied the bag," thought

Tito: but aloud he said,--"Swallowed all as easily as you swallow a cup

of Trebbiano. Ha! I see torches: there must be a dead body coming.

The pestilence has been spreading, I hear."

"Santiddio! I hate the sight of those biers. Good-night," said Spini,

hastily moving off.

The torches were really coming, but they preceded a church dignitary who

was returning homeward; the suggestion of the dead body and the

pestilence was Tito's device for getting rid of Spini without telling

him to go. The moment he had moved away, Tito turned to Romola, and

said, quietly--

"Do not be alarmed by anything that \_bestia\_ has said, my Romola. We

will go on now: I think the rain has not increased."

She was quivering with indignant resolution; it was of no use for Tito

to speak in that unconcerned way. She distrusted every word he could

utter.

"I will not go on," she said. "I will not move nearer home until I have

some security against this treachery being perpetrated."

"Wait, at least, until these torches have passed," said Tito, with

perfect self-command, but with a new rising of dislike to a wife who

this time, he foresaw, might have the power of thwarting him in spite of

the husband's predominance.

The torches passed, with the Vicario dell' Arcivescovo, and due

reverence was done by Tito, but Romola saw nothing outward. If for the

defeat of this treachery, in which she believed with all the force of

long presentiment, it had been necessary at that moment for her to

spring on her husband and hurl herself with him down a precipice, she

felt as if she could have done it. Union with this man! At that moment

the self-quelling discipline of two years seemed to be nullified: she

felt nothing but that they were divided.

They were nearly in darkness again, and could only see each other's

faces dimly.

"Tell me the truth, Tito--this time tell me the truth," said Romola, in

a low quivering voice. "It will be safer for you."

"Why should I desire to tell you anything else, my angry saint?" said

Tito, with a slight touch of contempt, which was the vent of his

annoyance; "since the truth is precisely that over which you have most

reason to rejoice--namely, that my knowing a plot of Spini's enables me

to secure the Frate from falling a victim to it."

"What is the plot?"

"That I decline to tell," said Tito. "It is enough that the Frate's

safety will be secured."

"It is a plot for drawing him outside the gates that Spini may murder

him."

"There has been no intention of murder. It is simply a plot for

compelling him to obey the Pope's summons to Rome. But as I serve the

popular government, and think the Frate's presence here is a necessary

means of maintaining it at present, I choose to prevent his departure.

You may go to sleep with entire ease of mind to-night."

For a moment Romola was silent. Then she said, in a voice of anguish,

"Tito, it is of no use: I have no belief in you."

She could just discern his action as he shrugged his shoulders, and

spread out his palms in silence. That cold dislike which is the anger

of unimpassioned beings was hardening within him.

"If the Frate leaves the city--if any harm happens to him," said Romola,

after a slight pause, in a new tone of indignant resolution,--"I will

declare what I have heard to the Signoria, and you will be disgraced.

What if I am your wife?" she went on, impetuously; "I will be disgraced

with you. If we are united, I am that part of you that will save you

from crime. Others shall not be betrayed."

"I am quite aware of what you would be likely to do, \_anima mia\_," said

Tito, in the coolest of his liquid tones; "therefore if you have a small

amount of reasoning at your disposal just now, consider that if you

believe me in nothing else, you may believe me when I say I will take

care of myself, and not put it in your power to ruin me."

"Then you assure me that the Frate is warned--he will not go beyond the

gates?"

"He shall not go beyond the gates."

There was a moment's pause, but distrust was not to be expelled.

"I will go back to San Marco now and find out," Romola said, making a

movement forward.

"You shall not!" said Tito, in a bitter whisper, seizing her wrists with

all his masculine force. "I am master of you. You shall not set

yourself in opposition to me."

There were passers-by approaching. Tito had heard them, and that was

why he spoke in a whisper. Romola was too conscious of being mastered

to have struggled, even if she had remained unconscious that witnesses

were at hand. But she was aware now of footsteps and voices, and her

habitual sense of personal dignity made her at once yield to Tito's

movement towards leading her from the loggia.

They walked on in silence for some time, under the small drizzling rain.

The first rush of indignation and alarm in Romola had begun to give way

to more complicated feelings, which rendered speech and action

difficult. In that simpler state of vehemence, open opposition to the

husband from whom she felt her soul revolting had had the aspect of

temptation for her; it seemed the easiest of all courses. But now,

habits of self-questioning, memories of impulse subdued, and that proud

reserve which all discipline had left unmodified, began to emerge from

the flood of passion. The grasp of her wrists, which asserted her

husband's physical predominance, instead of arousing a new fierceness in

her, as it might have done if her impetuosity had been of a more vulgar

kind, had given her a momentary shuddering horror at this form of

contest with him. It was the first time they had been in declared

hostility to each other since her flight and return, and the check given

to her ardent resolution then, retained the power to arrest her now. In

this altered condition her mind began to dwell on the probabilities that

would save her from any desperate course: Tito would not risk betrayal

by her; whatever had been his original intention, he must be determined

now by the fact that she knew of the plot. She was not bound now to do

anything else than to hang over him that certainty, that if he deceived

her, her lips would not, be closed. And then, it was possible--yes, she

must cling to that possibility till it was disproved--that Tito had

never meant to aid in the betrayal of the Frate.

Tito, on his side, was busy with thoughts, and did not speak again till

they were near home. Then he said--

"Well, Romola, have you now had time to recover calmness? If so, you

can supply your want of belief in me by a little rational inference: you

can see, I presume, that if I had had any intention of furthering

Spini's plot, I should now be aware that the possession of a fair

Piagnone for my wife, who knows the secret of the plot, would be a

serious obstacle in my way."

Tito assumed the tone which was just then the easiest to him,

conjecturing that in Romola's present mood persuasive deprecation would

be lost upon her.

"Yes, Tito," she said, in a low voice, "I think you believe that I would

guard the Republic from further treachery. You are right to believe it:

if the Frate is betrayed, I will denounce you." She paused a moment,

and then said, with an effort, "But it was not so. I have perhaps

spoken too hastily--you never meant it. Only, why will you seem to be

that man's comrade?"

"Such relations are inevitable to practical men, my Romola," said Tito,

gratified by discerning the struggle within her. "You fair creatures

live in the clouds. Pray go to rest with an easy heart," he added,

opening the door for her.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN.

CHECK.

Tito's clever arrangements had been unpleasantly frustrated by trivial

incidents which could not enter into a clever man's calculations. It

was very seldom that he walked with Romola in the evening, yet he had

happened to be walking with her precisely on this evening when her

presence was supremely inconvenient. Life was so complicated a game

that the devices of skill were liable to be defeated at every turn by

air-blown chances, incalculable as the descent of thistle-down.

It was not that he minded about the failure of Spini's plot, but he felt

an awkward difficulty in so adjusting his warning to Savonarola on the

one hand, and to Spini on the other, as not to incur suspicion.

Suspicion roused in the popular party might be fatal to his reputation

and ostensible position in Florence: suspicion roused in Dolfo Spini

might be as disagreeable in its effects as the hatred of a fierce dog

not to be chained.

If Tito went forthwith to the monastery to warn Savonarola before the

monks went to rest, his warning would follow so closely on his delivery

of the forged letters that he could not escape unfavourable surmises.

He could not warn Spini at once without telling him the true reason,

since he could not immediately allege the discovery that Savonarola had

changed his purpose; and he knew Spini well enough to know that his

understanding would discern nothing but that Tito had "turned round" and

frustrated the plot. On the other hand, by deferring his warning to

Savonarola until the morning, he would be almost sure to lose the

opportunity of warning Spini that the Frate had changed his mind; and

the band of Compagnacci would come back in all the rage of

disappointment. This last, however, was the risk he chose, trusting to

his power of soothing Spini by assuring him that the failure was due

only to the Frate's caution.

Tito was annoyed. If he had had to smile it would have been an unusual

effort to him. He was determined not to encounter Romola again, and he

did not go home that night.

She watched through the night, and never took off her clothes. She

heard the rain become heavier and heavier. She liked to hear the rain:

the stormy heavens seemed a safeguard against men's devices, compelling

them to inaction. And Romola's mind was again assailed, not only by the

utmost doubt of her husband, but by doubt as to her own conduct. What

lie might he not have told her? What project might he not have, of

which she was still ignorant? Every one who trusted Tito was in danger;

it was useless to try and persuade herself of the contrary. And was not

she selfishly listening to the promptings of her own pride, when she

shrank from warning men against him? "If her husband was a malefactor,

her place was in the prison by his side"--that might be; she was

contented to fulfil that claim. But was she, a wife, to allow a husband

to inflict the injuries that would make him a malefactor, when it might

be in her power to prevent them? Prayer seemed impossible to her. The

activity of her thought excluded a mental state of which the essence is

expectant passivity.

The excitement became stronger and stronger. Her imagination, in a

state of morbid activity, conjured up possible schemes by which, after

all, Tito would have eluded her threat; and towards daybreak the rain

became less violent, till at last it ceased, the breeze rose again and

dispersed the clouds, and the morning fell clear on all the objects

around her. It made her uneasiness all the less endurable. She wrapped

her mantle round her, and ran up to the loggia, as if there could be

anything in the wide landscape that might determine her action; as if

there could be anything but roofs hiding the line of street along which

Savonarola might be walking towards betrayal.

If she went to her godfather, might she not induce him, without any

specific revelation, to take measures for preventing Fra Girolamo from

passing the gates? But that might be too late. Romola thought, with

new distress, that she had failed to learn any guiding details from

Tito, and it was already long past seven. She must go to San Marco:

there was nothing else to be done.

She hurried down the stairs, she went out into the street without

looking at her sick people, and walked at a swift pace along the Via de'

Bardi towards the Ponte Vecchio. She would go through the heart of the

city; it was the most direct road, and, besides, in the great Piazza

there was a chance of encountering her husband, who, by some possibility

to which she still clung, might satisfy her of the Frate's safety, and

leave no need for her to go to San Marco. When she arrived in front of

the Palazzo Vecchio, she looked eagerly into the pillared court; then

her eyes swept the Piazza; but the well-known figure, once painted in

her heart by young love, and now branded there by eating pain, was

nowhere to be seen. She hurried straight on to the Piazza del Duomo.

It was already full of movement: there were worshippers passing up and

down the marble steps, there were men pausing for chat, and there were

market-people carrying their burdens. Between those moving figures

Romola caught a glimpse of her husband. On his way from San Marco he

had turned into Nello's shop, and was now leaning against the door-post.

As Romola approached she could see that he was standing and talking,

with the easiest air in the world, holding his cap in his hand, and

shaking back his freshly-combed hair. The contrast of this ease with

the bitter anxieties he had created convulsed her with indignation: the

new vision of his hardness heightened her dread. She recognised Cronaca

and two other frequenters of San Marco standing near her husband. It

flashed through her mind--"I will compel him to speak before those men."

And her light step brought her close upon him before he had time to

move, while Cronaca was saying, "Here comes Madonna Romola."

A slight shock passed through Tito's frame as he felt himself face to

face with his wife. She was haggard with her anxious watching, but

there was a flash of something else than anxiety in her eyes as she

said--

"Is the Frate gone beyond the gates?"

"No," said Tito, feeling completely helpless before this woman, and

needing all the self-command he possessed to preserve a countenance in

which there should seem to be nothing stronger than surprise.

"And you are certain that he is not going?" she insisted.

"I am certain that he is not going."

"That is enough," said Romola, and she turned up the steps, to take

refuge in the Duomo, till she could recover from her agitation.

Tito never had a feeling so near hatred as that with which his eyes

followed Romola retreating up the steps.

There were present not only genuine followers of the Frate, but Ser

Ceccone, the notary, who at that time, like Tito himself, was secretly

an agent of the Mediceans.

Ser Francesco di Ser Barone, more briefly known to infamy as Ser

Ceccone, was not learned, not handsome, not successful, and the reverse

of generous. He was a traitor without charm. It followed that he was

not fond of Tito Melema.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT.

COUNTER-CHECK.

It was late in the afternoon when Tito returned home. Romola, seated

opposite the cabinet in her narrow room, copying documents, was about to

desist from her work because the light was getting dim, when her husband

entered. He had come straight to this room to seek her, with a

thoroughly defined intention, and there was something new to Romola in

his manner and expression as he looked at her silently on entering, and,

without taking off his cap and mantle, leaned one elbow on the cabinet,

and stood directly in front of her.

Romola, fully assured during the day of the Frate's safety, was feeling

the reaction of some penitence for the access of distrust and

indignation which had impelled her to address her husband publicly on a

matter that she knew he wished to be private. She told herself that she

had probably been wrong. The scheming duplicity which she had heard

even her godfather allude to as inseparable from party tactics might be

sufficient to account for the connection with Spini, without the

supposition that Tito had ever meant to further the plot. She wanted to

atone for her impetuosity by confessing that she had been too hasty, and

for some hours her mind had been dwelling on the possibility that this

confession of hers might lead to other frank words breaking the two

years' silence of their hearts. The silence had been so complete, that

Tito was ignorant of her having fled from him and come back again; they

had never approached an avowal of that past which, both in its young

love and in the shock that shattered the love, lay locked away from them

like a banquet-room where death had once broken the feast.

She looked up at him with that submission in her glance which belonged

to her state of self-reproof; but the subtle change in his face and

manner arrested her speech. For a few moments they remained silent,

looking at each other.

Tito himself felt that a crisis was come in his married life. The

husband's determination to mastery, which lay deep below all blandness

and beseechingness, had risen permanently to the surface now, and seemed

to alter his face, as a face is altered by a hidden muscular tension

with which a man is secretly throttling or stamping out the life from

something feeble, yet dangerous.

"Romola," he began, in the cool liquid tone that made her shiver, "it is

time that we should understand each other." He paused.

"That is what I most desire, Tito," she said, faintly. Her sweet pale

face; with all its anger gone and nothing but the timidity of self-doubt

in it, seemed to give a marked predominance to her husband's dark

strength.

"You took a step this morning," Tito went on, "which you must now

yourself perceive to have been useless--which exposed you to remark and

may involve me in serious practical difficulties."

"I acknowledge that I was too hasty; I am sorry for any injustice I may

have done you." Romola spoke these words in a fuller and firmer tone;

Tito, she hoped, would look less hard when she had expressed her regret,

and then she could say other things.

"I wish you once for all to understand," he said, without any change of

voice, "that such collisions are incompatible with our position as

husband and wife. I wish you to reflect on the mode in which you were

led to that step, that the process may not he repeated."

"That depends chiefly on you, Tito," said Romola, taking fire slightly.

It was not at all what she had thought of saying, but we see a very

little way before us in mutual speech.

"You would say, I suppose," answered Tito, "that nothing is to occur in

future which can excite your unreasonable suspicions. You were frank

enough to say last night that you have no belief in me. I am not

surprised at any exaggerated conclusion you may draw from slight

premises, but I wish to point out to you what is likely to be the fruit

of your making such exaggerated conclusions a ground for interfering in

affairs of which you are ignorant. Your attention is thoroughly awake

to what I am saying?"

He paused for a reply.

"Yes," said Romola, flushing in irrepressible resentment at this cold

tone of superiority.

"Well, then, it may possibly not be very long before some other chance

words or incidents set your imagination at work devising crimes for me,

and you may perhaps rush to the Palazzo Vecchio to alarm the Signoria

and set the city in an uproar. Shall I tell you what may be the result?

Not simply the disgrace of your husband, to which you look forward with

so much courage, but the arrest and ruin of many among the chief men in

Florence, including Messer Bernardo del Nero."

Tito had meditated a decisive move, and he had made it. The flush died

out of Romola's face, and her very lips were pale--an unusual effect

with her, for she was little subject to fear. Tito perceived his

success.

"You would perhaps flatter yourself," he went on, "that you were

performing a heroic deed of deliverance; you might as well try to turn

locks with fine words as apply such notions to the politics of Florence.

The question now is, not whether you can have any belief in me, but

whether, now you have been warned, you will dare to rush, like a blind

man with a torch in his hand, amongst intricate affairs of which you

know nothing."

Romola felt as if her mind were held in a vice by Tito's: the

possibilities he had indicated were rising before her with terrible

clearness.

"I am too rash," she said. "I will try not to be rash."

"Remember," said Tito, with unsparing insistance, "that your act of

distrust towards me this morning might, for aught you knew, have had

more fatal effects than that sacrifice of your husband which you have

learned to contemplate without flinching."

"Tito, it is not so," Romola burst forth in a pleading tone, rising and

going nearer to him, with a desperate resolution to speak out. "It is

false that I would willingly sacrifice you. It has been the greatest

effort of my life to cling to you. I went away in my anger two years

ago, and I came back again because I was more bound to you than to

anything else on earth. But it is useless. You shut me out from your

mind. You affect to think of me as a being too unreasonable to share in

the knowledge of your affairs. You will be open with me about nothing."

She looked like his good angel pleading with him, as she bent her face

towards him with dilated eyes, and laid her hand upon his arm. But

Romola's touch and glance no longer stirred any fibre of tenderness in

her husband. The good-humoured, tolerant Tito, incapable of hatred,

incapable almost of impatience, disposed always to be gentle towards the

rest of the world, felt himself becoming strangely hard towards this

wife whose presence had once been the strongest influence he had known.

With all his softness of disposition, he had a masculine effectiveness

of intellect and purpose which, like sharpness of edge, is itself an

energy, working its way without any strong momentum. Romola had an

energy of her own which thwarted his, and no man, who is not

exceptionally feeble, will endure being thwarted by his wife. Marriage

must be a relation either of sympathy or of conquest.

No emotion darted across his face as he heard Romola for the first time

speak of having gone away from him. His lips only looked a little

harder as he smiled slightly and said--

"My Romola, when certain conditions are ascertained, we must make up our

minds to them. No amount of wishing will fill the Arno, as your people

say, or turn a plum into an orange. I have not observed even that

prayers have much efficacy that way. You are so constituted as to have

certain strong impressions inaccessible to reason: I cannot share those

impressions, and you have withdrawn all trust from me in consequence.

You have changed towards me; it has followed that I have changed towards

you. It is useless to take any retrospect. We have simply to adapt

ourselves to altered conditions."

"Tito, it would not be useless for us to speak openly," said Romola,

with the sort of exasperation that comes from using living muscle

against some lifeless insurmountable resistance. "It was the sense of

deception in you that changed me, and that has kept us apart. And it is

not true that I changed first. You changed towards me the night you

first wore that chain-armour. You had some secret from me--it was about

that old man--and I saw him again yesterday. Tito," she went on, in a

tone of agonised entreaty, "if you would once tell me everything, let it

be what it may--I would not mind pain--that there might be no wall

between us! Is it not possible that we could begin a new life?"

This time there was a flash of emotion across Tito's face. He stood

perfectly still; but the flash seemed to have whitened him. He took no

notice of Romola's appeal, but after a moment's pause, said quietly--

"Your impetuosity about trifles, Romola, has a freezing influence that

would cool the baths of Nero." At these cutting words, Romola shrank

and drew herself up into her usual self-sustained attitude. Tito went

on. "If by `that old man' you mean the mad Jacopo di Nola who attempted

my life and made a strange accusation against me, of which I told you

nothing because it would have alarmed you to no purpose, he, poor

wretch, has died in prison. I saw his name in the list of dead."

"I know nothing about his accusation," said Romola. "But I know he is

the man whom I saw with the rope round his neck in the Duomo--the man

whose portrait Piero di Cosimo painted, grasping your arm as he saw him

grasp it the day the French entered, the day you first wore the armour."

"And where is he now, pray?" said Tito, still pale, but governing

himself.

"He was lying lifeless in the street from starvation," said Romola. "I

revived him with bread and wine. I brought him to our door, but he

refused to come in. Then I gave him some money, and he went away

without telling me anything. But he had found out that I was your wife.

Who is he?"

"A man, half mad, half imbecile, who was once my father's servant in

Greece, and who has a rancorous hatred towards me because I got him

dismissed for theft. Now you have the whole mystery, and the further

satisfaction of knowing that I am again in danger of assassination. The

fact of my wearing the armour, about which you seem to have thought so

much, must have led you to infer that I was in danger from this man.

Was that the reason you chose to cultivate his acquaintance and invite

him into the house?"

Romola was mute. To speak was only like rushing with bare breast

against a shield.

Tito moved from his leaning posture, slowly took off his cap and mantle,

and pushed back his hair. He was collecting himself for some final

words. And Romola stood upright looking at him as she might have looked

at some on-coming deadly force, to be met only by silent endurance.

"We need not refer to these matters again, Romola," he said, precisely

in the same tone as that in which he had spoken at first. "It is enough

if you will remember that the next time your generous ardour leads you

to interfere in political affairs, you are likely, not to save any one

from danger, but to be raising scaffolds and setting houses on fire.

You are not yet a sufficiently ardent Piagnone to believe that Messer

Bernardo del Nero is the prince of darkness, and Messer Francesco Valori

the archangel Michael. I think I need demand no promise from you?"

"I have understood you too well, Tito."

"It is enough," he said, leaving the room.

Romola turned round with despair in her face and sank into her seat. "O

God, I have tried--I cannot help it. We shall always be divided."

Those words passed silently through her mind. "Unless," she said aloud,

as if some sudden vision had startled her into speech--"unless misery

should come and join us!"

Tito, too, had a new thought in his mind after he had closed the door

behind him. With the project of leaving Florence as soon as his life

there had become a high enough stepping-stone to a life elsewhere,

perhaps at Rome or Milan, there was now for the first, time associated a

desire to be free from Romola, and to leave her behind him. She had

ceased to belong to the desirable furniture of his life: there was no

possibility of an easy relation between them without genuineness on his

part. Genuineness implied confession of the past, and confession

involved a change of purpose. But Tito had as little bent that way as a

leopard has to lap milk when its teeth are grown. From all relations

that were not easy and agreeable, we know that Tito shrank: why should

he cling to them?

And Romola had made his relations difficult with others besides herself.

He had had a troublesome interview with Dolfo Spini, who had come back

in a rage after an ineffectual soaking with rain and long waiting in

ambush, and that scene between Romola and himself at Nello's door, once

reported in Spini's ear, might be a seed of something more unmanageable

than suspicion. But now, at least, he believed that he had mastered

Romola by a terror which appealed to the strongest forces of her nature.

He had alarmed her affection and her conscience by the shadowy image of

consequences; he had arrested her intellect by hanging before it the

idea of a hopeless complexity in affairs which defied any moral

judgment.

Yet Tito was not at ease. The world was not yet quite cushioned with

velvet, and, if it had been, he could not have abandoned himself to that

softness with thorough enjoyment; for before he went out again this

evening he put on his coat of chain-armour.

CHAPTER FORTY NINE.

THE PYRAMID OF VANITIES.

The wintry days passed for Romola as the white ships pass one who is

standing lonely on the shore--passing in silence and sameness, yet each

bearing a hidden burden of coming change. Tito's hint had mingled so

much dread with her interest in the progress of public affairs that she

had begun to court ignorance rather than knowledge. The threatening

German Emperor was gone again; and, in other ways besides, the position

of Florence was alleviated; but so much distress remained that Romola's

active duties were hardly diminished, and in these, as usual, her mind

found a refuge from its doubt.

She dared not rejoice that the relief which had come in extremity and

had appeared to justify the policy of the Frate's party was making that

party so triumphant, that Francesco Valori, hot-tempered chieftain of

the Piagnoni, had been elected Gonfaloniere at the beginning of the

year, and was making haste to have as much of his own liberal way as

possible during his two months of power. That seemed for the moment

like a strengthening of the party most attached to freedom, and a

reinforcement of protection to Savonarola; but Romola was now alive to

every suggestion likely to deepen her foreboding, that whatever the

present might be, it was only an unconscious brooding over the mixed

germs of Change which might any day become tragic. And already by

Carnival time, a little after mid-February, her presentiment was

confirmed by the signs of a very decided change: the Mediceans had

ceased to be passive, and were openly exerting themselves to procure the

election of Bernardo del Nero as the new Gonfaloniere.

On the last day of the Carnival, between ten and eleven in the morning,

Romola walked out, according to promise, towards the Corso degli

Albizzi, to fetch her cousin Brigida, that they might both be ready to

start from the Via de' Bardi early in the afternoon, and take their

places at a window which Tito had had reserved for them in the Piazza

della Signoria, where there was to be a scene of so new and striking a

sort, that all Florentine eyes must desire to see it. For the Piagnoni

were having their own way thoroughly about the mode of keeping the

Carnival. In vain Dolfo Spini and his companions had struggled to get

up the dear old masques and practical jokes, well spiced with indecency.

Such things were not to be in a city where Christ had been declared

king.

Romola set out in that languid state of mind with which every one enters

on a long day of sight-seeing purely for the sake of gratifying a child,

or some dear childish friend. The day was certainly an epoch in

carnival-keeping; but this phase of reform had not touched her

enthusiasm: and she did not know that it was an epoch in her own life

when \_another\_ lot would begin to be no longer secretly but visibly

entwined with her own.

She chose to go through the great Piazza that she might take a first

survey of the unparalleled sight there while she was still alone.

Entering it from the south, she saw something monstrous and

many-coloured in the shape of a pyramid, or, rather, like a huge

fir-tree, sixty feet high, with shelves on the branches, widening and

widening towards the base till they reached a circumference of eighty

yards. The Piazza was full of life: slight young figures, in white

garments, with olive wreaths on their heads, were moving to and fro

about the base of the pyramidal tree, carrying baskets full of

bright-coloured things; and maturer forms, some in the monastic frock,

some in the loose tunics and dark-red caps of artists, were helping and

examining, or else retreating to various points in the distance to

survey the wondrous whole: while a considerable group, amongst whom

Romola recognised Piero di Cosimo, standing on the marble steps of

Orgagna's Loggia, seemed to be keeping aloof in discontent and scorn.

Approaching nearer, she paused to look at the multifarious objects

ranged in gradation from the base to the summit of the pyramid. There

were tapestries and brocades of immodest design, pictures and sculptures

held too likely to incite to vice; there were boards and tables for all

sorts of games, playing-cards along with the blocks for printing them,

dice, and other apparatus for gambling; there were worldly music-books,

and musical instruments in all the pretty varieties of lute, drum,

cymbal, and trumpet; there were masks and masquerading-dresses used in

the old Carnival shows; there were handsome copies of Ovid, Boccaccio,

Petrarca, Pulci, and other books of a vain or impure sort; there were

all the implements of feminine vanity--rouge-pots, false hair, mirrors,

perfumes, powders, and transparent veils intended to provoke inquisitive

glances: lastly, at the very summit, there was the unflattering effigy

of a probably mythical Venetian merchant, who was understood to have

offered a heavy sum for this collection of marketable abominations, and,

soaring above him in surpassing ugliness, the symbolic figure of the old

debauched Carnival.

This was the preparation for a new sort of bonfire--the Burning of

Vanities. Hidden in the interior of the pyramid was a plentiful store

of dry fuel and gunpowder; and on this last day of the festival, at

evening, the pile of vanities was to be set ablaze to the sound of

trumpets, and the ugly old Carnival was to tumble into the flames amid

the songs of reforming triumph.

This crowning act of the new festivities could hardly have been prepared

but for a peculiar organisation which had been started by Savonarola two

years before. The mass of the Florentine boyhood and youth was no

longer left to its own genial promptings towards street mischief and

crude dissoluteness. Under the training of Fra Domenico, a sort of

lieutenant to Savonarola, lads and striplings, the hope of Florence,

were to have none but pure words on their lips, were to have a zeal for

Unseen Good that should put to shame the lukewarmness of their elders,

and were to know no pleasures save of an angelic sort--singing divine

praises and walking in white robes. It was for them that the ranges of

seats had been raised high against the walls of the Duomo; and they had

been used to hear Savonarola appeal to them as the future glory of a

city specially appointed to do the work of God.

These fresh-cheeked troops were the chief agents in the regenerated

merriment of the new Carnival, which was a sort of sacred parody of the

old. Had there been bonfires in the old time? There was to be a

bonfire now, consuming impurity from off the earth. Had there been

symbolic processions? There were to be processions now, but the symbols

were to be white robes and red crosses and olive wreaths--emblems of

peace and innocent gladness--and the banners and images held aloft were

to tell the triumphs of goodness. Had there been dancing in a ring

under the open sky of the Piazza, to the sound of choral voices chanting

loose songs? There was to be dancing in a ring now, but dancing of

monks and laity in fraternal love and divine joy, and the music was to

be the music of hymns. As for the collections from street passengers,

they were to be greater than ever--not for gross and superfluous:

suppers, but--for the benefit of the hungry and needy; and, besides,

there was the collecting of the \_Anathema\_, or the Vanities to be laid

on the great pyramidal bonfire.

Troops of young inquisitors went from house to house on this exciting

business of asking that the Anathema should be given up to them.

Perhaps, after the more avowed vanities had been surrendered, Madonna,

at the head of the household, had still certain little reddened balls

brought from the Levant, intended to produce on a sallow cheek a sudden

bloom of the most ingenuous falsity? If so, let her bring them down and

cast them into the basket of doom. Or, perhaps, she had ringlets and

coils of "dead hair?"--if so, let her bring them to the streetdoor, not

on her head, but in her hands, and publicly renounce the Anathema which

hid the respectable signs of age under a ghastly mockery of youth. And,

in reward, she would hear fresh young voices pronounce a blessing on her

and her house.

The beardless inquisitors, organised into little regiments, doubtless

took to their work very willingly. To coerce people by shame, or other

spiritual pelting, into the giving up of things it will probably vex

them to part with, is a form of piety to which the boyish mind is most

readily converted; and if some obstinately wicked men got enraged and

threatened the whip or the cudgel, this also was exciting. Savonarola

himself evidently felt about the training of these boys the difficulty

weighing on all minds with noble yearnings towards great ends, yet with

that imperfect perception of means which forces a resort to some

supernatural constraining influence as the only sure hope. The

Florentine youth had had very evil habits and foul tongues: it seemed at

first an unmixed blessing when they were got to shout "\_Viva Gesu\_!"

But Savonarola was forced at last to say from the pulpit, "There is a

little too much shouting of `\_Viva Gesu\_!' This constant utterance of

sacred words brings them into contempt. Let me have no more of that

shouting till the next Festa."

Nevertheless, as the long stream of white-robed youthfulness, with its

little red crosses and olive wreaths, had gone to the Duomo at dawn this

morning to receive the communion from the hands of Savonarola, it was a

sight of beauty; and, doubtless, many of those young souls were laying

up memories of hope and awe that might save them from ever resting in a

merely vulgar view of their work as men and citizens. There is no kind

of conscious obedience that is not an advance on lawlessness, and these

boys became the generation of men who fought greatly and endured greatly

in the last struggle of their Republic. Now, in the intermediate hours

between the early communion and dinner-time, they were making their last

perambulations to collect alms and vanities, and this was why Romola saw

the slim white figures moving to and fro about the base of the great

pyramid.

"What think you of this folly, Madonna Romola?" said a brusque voice

close to her ear. "Your Piagnoni will make \_l'inferno\_ a pleasant

prospect to us, if they are to carry things their own way on earth.

It's enough to fetch a cudgel over the mountains to see painters, like

Lorenzo di Credi and young Baccio there, helping to burn colour out of

life in this fashion."

"My good Piero," said Romola, looking up and smiling at the grim man,

"even you must be glad to see some of these things burnt. Look at those

gewgaws and wigs and rouge-pots: I have heard you talk as indignantly

against those things as Fra Girolamo himself."

"What then?" said Piero, turning round on her sharply. "I never said a

woman should make a black patch of herself against the background. Va!

Madonna Antigone, it's a shame for a woman with your hair and shoulders

to run into such nonsense--leave it to women who are not worth painting.

What! the most holy Virgin herself has always been dressed well; that's

the doctrine of the Church:--talk of heresy, indeed! And I should like

to know what the excellent Messer Bardo would have said to the burning

of the divine poets by these Frati, who are no better an imitation of

men than if they were onions with the bulbs uppermost. Look at that

Petrarca sticking up beside a rouge-pot: do the idiots pretend that the

heavenly Laura was a painted harridan? And Boccaccio, now: do you mean

to say, Madonna Romola--you who are fit to be a model for a wise Saint

Catherine of Egypt--do you mean to say you have never read the stories

of the immortal Messer Giovanni?"

"It is true I have read them, Piero," said Romola. "Some of them a

great many times over, when I was a little girl. I used to get the book

down when my father was asleep, so that I could read to myself."

"\_Ebbene\_?" said Piero, in a fiercely challenging tone.

"There are some things in them I do not want ever to forget," said

Romola; "but you must confess, Piero, that a great many of those stories

are only about low deceit for the lowest ends. Men do not want books to

make them think lightly of vice, as if life were a vulgar joke. And I

cannot blame Fra Girolamo for teaching that we owe our time to something

better."

"Yes, yes, it's very well to say so now you've read them," said Piero,

bitterly, turning on his heel and walking away from her.

Romola, too, walked on, smiling at Piero's innuendo, with a sort of

tenderness towards the old painter's anger, because she knew that her

father would have felt something like it. For herself, she was

conscious of no inward collision with the strict and sombre view of

pleasure which tended to repress poetry in the attempt to repress vice.

Sorrow and joy have each their peculiar narrowness; and a religious

enthusiasm like Savonarola's which ultimately blesses mankind by giving

the soul a strong propulsion towards sympathy with pain, indignation

against wrong, and the subjugation of sensual desire, must always incur

the reproach of a great negation. Romola's life had given her an

affinity for sadness which inevitably made her unjust towards merriment.

That subtle result of culture which we call Taste was subdued by the

need for deeper motive; just as the nicer demands of the palate are

annihilated by urgent hunger. Moving habitually amongst scenes of

suffering, and carrying woman's heaviest disappointment in her heart,

the severity which allied itself with self-renouncing beneficent

strength had no dissonance for her.

CHAPTER FIFTY.

TESSA ABROAD AND AT HOME.

Another figure easily recognised by us--a figure not clad in black, but

in the old red, green, and white--was approaching the Piazza that

morning to see the Carnival. She came from an opposite point, for Tessa

no longer lived on the hill of San Giorgio. After what had happened

there with Baldassarre, Tito had thought it best for that and other

reasons to find her a new home, but still in a quiet airy quarter, in a

house bordering on the wide garden grounds north of the Porta Santa

Croce.

Tessa was not come out sight-seeing without special leave. Tito had

been with her the evening before, and she had kept back the entreaty

which she felt to be swelling her heart and throat until she saw him in

a state of radiant ease, with one arm round the sturdy Lillo, and the

other resting gently on her own shoulder as she tried to make the tiny

Ninna steady on her legs. She was sure then that the weariness with

which he had come in and flung himself into his chair had quite melted

away from his brow and lips. Tessa had not been slow at learning a few

small stratagems by which she might avoid vexing Naldo and yet have a

little of her own way. She could read nothing else, but she had learned

to read a good deal in her husband's face.

And certainly the charm of that bright, gentle-humoured Tito who woke up

under the Loggia de' Cerchi on a Lenten morning five years before, not

having yet given any hostages to deceit, never returned so nearly as in

the person of Naldo, seated in that straight-backed, carved arm-chair

which he had provided for his comfort when he came to see Tessa and the

children. Tito himself was surprised at the growing sense of relief

which he felt in these moments. No guile was needed towards Tessa: she

was too ignorant and too innocent to suspect him of anything. And the

little voices calling him "Babbo" were very sweet in his ears for the

short while that he heard them. When he thought of leaving Florence, he

never thought of leaving Tessa and the little ones behind. He was very

fond of these round-cheeked, wide-eyed human things that clung about him

and knew no evil of him. And wherever affection can spring, it is like

the green leaf and the blossom--pure, and breathing purity, whatever

soil it may grow in. Poor Romola, with all her self-sacrificing effort,

was really helping to harden Tito's nature by chilling it with a

positive dislike which had beforehand seemed impossible in him; but

Tessa kept open the fountains of kindness.

"Ninna is very good without me now," began Tessa, feeling her request

rising very high in her throat, and letting Ninna seat herself on the

floor. "I can leave her with Monna Lisa any time, and if she is in the

cradle and cries, Lillo is as sensible as can be--he goes and thumps

Monna Lisa."

Lillo, whose great dark eyes looked all the darker because his curls

were of a light-brown like his mother's, jumped off Babbo's knee, and

went forthwith to attest his intelligence by thumping Monna Lisa, who

was shaking her head slowly over her spinning at the other end of the

room. "A wonderful boy!" said Tito, laughing. "Isn't he?" said Tessa,

eagerly, getting a little closer to him; "and I might go and see the

Carnival to-morrow, just for an hour or two, mightn't I?"

"Oh, you wicked pigeon!" said Tito, pinching her cheek; "those are your

longings, are they? What have you to do with carnivals now you are an

old woman with two children?"

"But old women like to see things," said Tessa, her lower lip hanging a

little. "Monna Lisa said she should like to go, only she's so deaf she

can't hear what is behind her, and she thinks we couldn't take care of

both the children."

"No, indeed, Tessa," said Tito, looking rather grave, "you must not

think of taking the children into the crowded streets, else I shall be

angry."

"But I have never been into the Piazza without leave," said Tessa, in a

frightened, pleading tone, "since the Holy Saturday, and I think Nofri

is dead, for you know the poor \_madre\_ died; and I shall never forget

the Carnival I saw once; it was so pretty--all roses and a king and

queen under them--and singing. I liked it better than the San

Giovanni."

"But there's nothing like that now, my Tessa. They are going to make a

bonfire in the Piazza--that's all. But I cannot let you go out by

yourself in the evening."

"Oh no, no! I don't want to go in the evening. I only want to go and

see the procession by daylight. There \_will\_ be a procession--is it not

true?"

"Yes, after a sort," said Tito, "as lively as a flight of cranes. You

must not expect roses and glittering kings and queens, my Tessa.

However, I suppose any string of people to be called a procession will

please your blue eyes. And there's a thing they have raised in the

Piazza de' Signori for the bonfire. You may like to see that. But come

home early, and look like a grave little old woman; and if you see any

men with feathers and swords, keep out of their way: they are very

fierce, and like to cut old women's heads off."

"Santa Madonna! where do they come from? Ah! you are laughing; it is

not so bad. But I will keep away from them. Only," Tessa went on in a

whisper, putting her lips near Naldo's ear, "if I might take Lillo with

me! He is very sensible."

"But who will thump Monna Lisa then, if she doesn't hear?" said Tito,

finding it difficult not to laugh, but thinking it necessary to look

serious. "No, Tessa, you could not take care of Lillo if you got into a

crowd, and he's too heavy for you to carry him."

"It is true," said Tessa, rather sadly, "and he likes to run away. I

forgot that. Then I will go alone. But now look at Ninna--you have not

looked at her enough."

Ninna was a blue-eyed thing, at the tottering, tumbling age--a fair

solid, which, like a loaded die, found its base with a constancy that

warranted prediction. Tessa went to snatch her up, and when Babbo was

paying due attention to the recent teeth and other marvels, she said, in

a whisper, "And shall I buy some confetti for the children?"

Tito drew some small coins from his scarsella, and poured them into her

palm.

"That will buy no end," said Tessa, delighted at this abundance. "I

shall not mind going without Lillo so much, if I bring him something."

So Tessa set out in the morning towards the great Piazza where the

bonfire was to be. She did not think the February breeze cold enough to

demand further covering than her green woollen dress. A mantle would

have been oppressive, for it would have hidden a new necklace and a new

clasp, mounted with silver, the only ornamental presents Tito had ever

made her. Tessa did not think at all of showing her figure, for no one

had ever told her it was pretty; but she was quite sure that her

necklace and clasp were of the prettiest sort ever worn by the richest

contadina, and she arranged her white hood over her head so that the

front of her necklace might be well displayed. These ornaments, she

considered, must inspire respect for her as the wife of some one who

could afford to buy them.

She tripped along very cheerily in the February sunshine, thinking much

of the purchases for the little ones, with which she was to fill her

small basket, and not thinking at all of any one who might be observing

her. Yet her descent from her upper storey into the street had been

watched, and she was being kept in sight as she walked by a person who

had often waited in vain to see if it were not Tessa who lived in that

house to which he had more than once dogged Tito. Baldassarre was

carrying a package of yarn: he was constantly employed in that way, as a

means of earning his scanty bread, and keeping the sacred fire of

vengeance alive; and he had come out of his way this morning, as he had

often done before, that he might pass by the house to which he had

followed Tito in the evening. His long imprisonment had so intensified

his timid suspicion and his belief in some diabolic fortune favouring

Tito, that he had not dared to pursue him, except under cover of a crowd

or of the darkness; he felt, with instinctive horror, that if Tito's

eyes fell upon him, he should again be held up to obloquy, again be

dragged away his weapon would be taken from him, and he should be cast

helpless into a prison-cell. His fierce purpose had become as stealthy

as a serpent's, which depends for its prey on one dart of the fang.

Justice was weak and unfriended; and he could not hear again the voice

that pealed the promise of vengeance in the Duomo; he had been there

again and again, but that voice, too, had apparently been stifled by

cunning strong-armed wickedness. For a long while, Baldassarre's ruling

thought was to ascertain whether Tito still wore the armour, for now at

last his fainting hope would have been contented with a successful stab

on this side the grave; but he would never risk his precious knife

again. It was a weary time he had had to wait for the chance of

answering this question by touching Tito's back in the press of the

street. Since then, the knowledge that the sharp steel was useless, and

that he had no hope but in some new device, had fallen with leaden

weight on his enfeebled mind. A dim vision of winning one of those two

wives to aid him came before him continually, and continually slid away.

The wife who had lived on the hill was no longer there. If he could

find her again, he might grasp some thread of a project, and work his

way to more clearness.

And this morning he had succeeded. He was quite certain now where this

wife lived, and as he walked, bent a little under his burden of yarn,

yet keeping the green and white figure in sight, his mind was dwelling

upon her and her circumstances as feeble eyes dwell on lines and

colours, trying to interpret them into consistent significance.

Tessa had to pass through various long streets without seeing any other

sign of the Carnival than unusual groups of the country people in their

best garments, and that disposition in everybody to chat and loiter

which marks the early hours of a holiday, before the spectacle has

begun. Presently, in her disappointed search for remarkable objects,

her eyes fell on a man with a pedlar's basket before him, who seemed to

be selling nothing but little red crosses to all the passengers. A

little red cross would be pretty to hang up over her bed; it would also

help to keep off harm, and would perhaps make Ninna stronger. Tessa

went to the other side of the street that she might ask the pedlar the

price of the crosses, fearing that they would cost a little too much for

her to spare from her purchase of sweets. The pedlar's back had been

turned towards her hitherto, but when she came near him she recognised

an old acquaintance of the Mercato, Bratti Ferravecchi, and, accustomed

to feel that she was to avoid old acquaintances, she turned away again

and passed to the other side of the street. But Bratti's eye was too

well practised in looking out at the corner after possible customers,

for her movement to have escaped him, and she was presently arrested by

a tap on the arm from one of the red crosses.

"Young woman," said Bratti, as she unwillingly turned her head, "you

come from some castello a good way off, it seems to me, else you'd never

think of walking about, this blessed Carnival, without a red cross in

your hand. Santa Madonna! Four white quattrini is a small price to pay

for your soul--prices rise in purgatory, let me tell you."

"Oh, I should like one," said Tessa, hastily, "but I couldn't spare four

white quattrini."

Bratti had at first regarded Tessa too abstractedly as a mere customer

to look at her with any scrutiny, but when she began to speak he

exclaimed, "By the head of San Giovanni, it must be the little Tessa,

and looking as fresh as a ripe apple! What! you've done none the worse,

then, for running away from father Nofri? You were in the right of it,

for he goes on crutches now, and a crabbed fellow with crutches is

dangerous; he can reach across the house and beat a woman as he sits."

"I'm married," said Tessa, rather demurely, remembering Naldo's command

that she should behave with gravity; "and my husband takes great care of

me."

"Ah, then, you've fallen on your feet! Nofri said you were

good-for-nothing vermin; but what then? An ass may bray a good while

before he shakes the stars down. I always said you did well to run

away, and it isn't often Bratti's in the wrong. Well, and so you've got

a husband and plenty of money? Then you'll never think much of giving

four white quattrini for a red cross. I get no profit; but what with

the famine and the new religion, all other merchandise is gone down.

You live in the country where the chestnuts are plenty, eh? You've

never wanted for polenta, I can see."

"No, I've never wanted anything," said Tessa, still on her guard.

"Then you can afford to buy a cross. I got a Padre to bless them, and

you get blessing and all for four quattrini. It isn't for the profit; I

hardly get a danaro by the whole lot. But then they're holy wares, and

it's getting harder and harder work to see your way to Paradise: the

very Carnival is like Holy Week, and the least you can do to keep the

Devil from getting the upper hand is to buy a cross. God guard you!

think what the Devil's tooth is! You've seen him biting the man in San

Giovanni, I should hope?"

Tessa felt much teased and frightened. "Oh, Bratti," she said, with a

discomposed face, "I want to buy a great many confetti: I've got little

Lillo and Ninna at home. And nice coloured sweet things cost a great

deal. And they will not like the cross so well, though I know it would

be good to have it."

"Come, then," said Bratti, fond of laying up a store of merits by

imagining possible extortions and then heroically renouncing them,

"since you're an old acquaintance, you shall have it for two quattrini.

It's making you a present of the cross, to say nothing of the blessing."

Tessa was reaching out her two quattrini with trembling hesitation, when

Bratti said abruptly, "Stop a bit! Where do you live?"

"Oh, a long way off," she answered, almost automatically, being

preoccupied with her quattrini; "beyond San Ambrogio, in the Via

Piccola, at the top of the house where the wood is stacked below."

"Very good," said Bratti, in a patronising tone; "then I'll let you have

the cross on trust, and call for the money. So you live inside the

gates? Well, well, I shall be passing."

"No, no!" said Tessa, frightened lest Naldo should be angry at this

revival of an old acquaintance. "I can spare the money. Take it now."

"No," said Bratti, resolutely; "I'm not a hard-hearted pedlar. I'll

call and see if you've got any rags, and you shall make a bargain. See,

here's the cross: and there's Pippo's shop not far behind you: you can

go and fill your basket, and I must go and get mine empty. \_Addio,

piccina\_."

Bratti went on his way, and Tessa, stimulated to change her money into

confetti before further accident, went into Pippo's shop, a little

fluttered by the thought that she had let Bratti know more about her

than her husband would approve. There were certainly more dangers in

coming to see the Carnival than in staying at home; and she would have

felt this more strongly if she had known that the wicked old man, who

had wanted to kill her husband on the hill, was still keeping her in

sight. But she had not noticed the man with the burden on his back.

The consciousness of having a small basketful of things to make the

children glad, dispersed her anxiety, and as she entered the Via de'

Libraj her face had its visual expression of childlike content. And now

she thought there was really a procession coming, for she saw white

robes and a banner, and her heart began to palpitate with expectation.

She stood a little aside, but in that narrow street there was the

pleasure of being obliged to look very close. The banner was pretty: it

was the Holy Mother with the Babe, whose love for her Tessa had believed

in more and more since she had had her babies; and the figures in white

had not only green wreaths on their heads, but little red crosses by

their side, which caused her some satisfaction that she also had her red

cross. Certainly, they looked as beautiful as the angels on the clouds,

and to Tessa's mind they too had a background of cloud, like everything

else that came to her in life. How and whence did they come? She did

not mind much about knowing. But one thing surprised her as newer than

wreaths and crosses; it was that some of the white figures carried

baskets between them. What could the baskets be for?

But now they were very near, and, to her astonishment, they wheeled

aside and came straight up to her. She trembled as she would have done

if Saint Michael in the picture had shaken his head at her, and was

conscious of nothing but terrified wonder till she saw close to her a

round boyish face, lower than her own, and heard a treble voice saying,

"Sister, you carry the Anathema about you. Yield it up to the blessed

Gesu, and He will adorn you with the gems of His grace."

Tessa was only more frightened, understanding nothing. Her first

conjecture settled on her basket of sweets. They wanted that, these

alarming angels. Oh dear, dear! She looked down at it.

"No, sister," said a taller youth, pointing to her necklace and the

clasp of her belt, "it is those vanities that are the Anathema. Take

off that necklace and unclasp that belt, that they may be burned in the

holy Bonfire of Vanities, and save \_you\_ from burning."

"It is the truth, my sister," said a still taller youth, evidently the

archangel of this band. "Listen to these voices speaking the divine

message. You already carry a red cross: let that be your only

adornment. Yield up your necklace and belt, and you shall obtain

grace."

This was too much. Tessa, overcome with awe, dared not say "no," but

she was equally unable to render up her beloved necklace and clasp. Her

pouting lips were quivering, the tears rushed to her eyes, and a great

drop fell. For a moment she ceased to see anything; she felt nothing

but confused terror and misery. Suddenly a gentle hand was laid on her

arm, and a soft, wonderful voice, as if the Holy Madonna were speaking,

said, "Do not be afraid; no one shall harm you."

Tessa looked up and saw a lady in black, with a young heavenly face and

loving hazel eyes. She had never seen any one like this lady before,

and under other circumstances might have had awestruck thoughts about

her; but now everything else was overcome by the sense that loving

protection was near her. The tears only fell the faster, relieving her

swelling heart, as she looked up at the heavenly face, and, putting her

hand to her necklace, said sobbingly--

"I can't give them to be burnt. My husband--he bought them for me--and

they are so pretty--and Ninna--oh, I wish I'd never come!"

"Do not ask her for them," said Romola, speaking to the white-robed boys

in a tone of mild authority. "It answers no good end for people to give

up such things against their will. That is not what Fra Girolamo

approves: he would have such things given up freely."

Madonna Romola's word was not to be resisted, and the white train moved

on. They even moved with haste, as if some new object had caught their

eyes; and Tessa felt with bliss that they were gone, and that her

necklace and clasp were still with her.

"Oh, I will go back to the house," she said, still agitated; "I will go

nowhere else. But if I should meet them again, and you not be there?"

she added, expecting everything from this heavenly lady.

"Stay a little," said Romola. "Come with me under this doorway, and we

will hide the necklace and clasp, and then you will be in no danger."

She led Tessa under the archway, and said, "Now, can we find room for

your necklace and belt in your basket? Ah! your basket is full of crisp

things that will break: let us be careful, and lay the heavy necklace

under them."

It was like a change in a dream to Tessa--the escape from nightmare into

floating safety and joy--to find herself taken care of by this lady, so

lovely, and powerful, and gentle. She let Romola unfasten her necklace

and clasp, while she herself did nothing but look up at the face that

bent over her.

"They are sweets for Lillo and Ninna," she said, as Romola carefully

lifted up the light parcels in the basket, and placed the ornaments

below them.

"Those are your children?" said Romola, smiling. "And you would rather

go home to them than see any more of the Carnival? Else you have not

far to go to the Piazza de' Signori, and there you would see the pile

for the great bonfire."

"No, oh no!" said Tessa, eagerly; "I shall never like bonfires again. I

will go back."

"You live at some castello, doubtless," said Romola, not waiting for an

answer. "Towards which gate do you go?"

"Towards Por' Santa Croce."

"Come, then," said Romola, taking her by the hand and leading her to the

corner of a street nearly opposite. "If you go down there," she said,

pausing, "you will soon be in a straight road. And I must leave you

now, because some one else expects me. You will not be frightened.

Your pretty things are quite safe now. Addio."

"Addio, Madonna," said Tessa, almost in a whisper, not knowing what else

it would be right to say; and in an instant the heavenly lady was gone.

Tessa turned to catch a last glimpse, but she only saw the tall gliding

figure vanish round the projecting stonework. So she went on her way in

wonder, longing to be once more safely housed with Monna Lisa,

undesirous of carnivals for evermore.

Baldassarre had kept Tessa in sight till the moment of her parting with

Romola: then he went away with his bundle of yarn. It seemed to him

that he had discerned a clue which might guide him if he could only

grasp the necessary details firmly enough. He had seen the two wives

together, and the sight had brought to his conceptions that vividness

which had been wanting before. His power of imagining facts needed to

be reinforced continually by the senses. The tall wife was the noble

and rightful wife; she had the blood in her that would be readily

kindled to resentment; she would know what scholarship was, and how it

might lie locked in by the obstructions of the stricken body, like a

treasure buried by earthquake. She could believe him: she would be

\_inclined\_ to believe him, if he proved to her that her husband was

unfaithful. Women cared about that: they would take vengeance for that.

If this wife of Tito's loved him, she would have a sense of injury

which Baldassarre's mind dwelt on with keen longing, as if it would be

the strength of another Will added to his own, the strength of another

mind to form devices.

Both these wives had been kind to Baldassarre, and their acts towards

him, being bound up with the very image of them, had not vanished from

his memory; yet the thought of their pain could not present itself to

him as a check. To him it seemed that pain was the order of the world

for all except the hard and base. If any were innocent, if any were

noble, where could the utmost gladness lie for them? Where it lay for

him--in unconquerable hatred and triumphant vengeance. But he must be

cautious: he must watch this wife in the Via de' Bardi, and learn more

of her; for even here frustration was possible. There was no power for

him now but in patience.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE.

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 flung 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 head-gear 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."

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO.

A PROPHETESS.

The incidents of that Carnival day seemed to Romola to carry no other

personal consequences to her than the new care of supporting poor cousin

Brigida in her fluctuating resignation to age and grey hairs; but they

introduced a Lenten time in which she was kept at a high pitch of mental

excitement and active effort.

Bernardo del Nero had been elected Gonfaloniere. By great exertions the

Medicean party had so far triumphed, and that triumph had deepened

Romola's presentiment of some secretly-prepared scheme likely to ripen

either into success or betrayal during these two months of her

godfather's authority. Every morning the dim daybreak as it peered into

her room seemed to be that haunting fear coming back to her. Every

morning the fear went with her as she passed through the streets on her

way to the early sermon in the Duomo: but there she gradually lost the

sense of its chill presence, as men lose the dread of death in the clash

of battle.

In the Duomo she felt herself sharing in a passionate conflict which had

wider relations than any enclosed within the walls of Florence. For

Savonarola was preaching--preaching the last course of Lenten sermons he

was ever allowed to finish in the Duomo: he knew that excommunication

was imminent, and he had reached the point of defying it. He held up

the condition of the Church in the terrible mirror of his unflinching

speech, which called things by their right names and dealt in no polite

periphrases; he proclaimed with heightening confidence the advent of

renovation--of a moment when there would be a general revolt against

corruption. As to his own destiny, he seemed to have a double and

alternating prevision: sometimes he saw himself taking a glorious part

in that revolt, sending forth a voice that would be heard through all

Christendom, and making the dead body of the Church tremble into new

life, as the body of Lazarus trembled when the Divine voice pierced the

sepulchre; sometimes he saw no prospect for himself but persecution and

martyrdom:--this life for him was only a vigil, and only after death

would come the dawn.

The position was one which must have had its impressiveness for all

minds that were not of the dullest order, even if they were inclined, as

Macchiavelli was, to interpret the Frate's character by a key that

presupposed no loftiness. To Romola, whose kindred ardour gave her a

firm belief in Savonarola's genuine greatness of purpose, the crisis was

as stirring as if it had been part of her personal lot. It blent itself

as an exalting memory with all her daily labours; and those labours were

calling not only for difficult perseverance, but for new courage.

Famine had never yet taken its flight from Florence, and all distress,

by its long continuance, was getting harder to bear; disease was

spreading in the crowded city, and the Plague was expected. As Romola

walked, often in weariness, among the sick, the hungry, and the

murmuring, she felt it good to be inspired by something more than her

pity--by the belief in a heroism struggling for sublime ends, towards

which the daily action of her pity could only tend feebly, as the dews

that freshen the weedy ground to-day tend to prepare an unseen harvest

in the years to come.

But that mighty music which stirred her in the Duomo was not without its

jarring notes. Since those first days of glowing hope when the Frate,

seeing the near triumph of good in the reform of the Republic and the

coming of the French deliverer, had preached peace, charity, and

oblivion of political differences, there had been a marked change of

conditions: political intrigue had been too obstinate to allow of the

desired oblivion; the belief in the French deliverer, who had turned his

back on his high mission, seemed to have wrought harm; and hostility,

both on a petty and on a grand scale, was attacking the Prophet with new

weapons and new determination.

It followed that the spirit of contention and self-vindication pierced

more and more conspicuously in his sermons; that he was urged to meet

the popular demands not only by increased insistance and detail

concerning visions and private revelations, but by a tone of defiant

confidence against objectors; and from having denounced the desire for

the miraculous, and declared that miracles had no relation to true

faith, he had come to assert that at the right moment the Divine power

would attest the truth of his prophetic preaching by a miracle. And

continually, in the rapid transitions of excited feeling, as the vision

of triumphant good receded behind the actual predominance of evil, the

threats of coming vengeance against vicious tyrants and corrupt priests

gathered some impetus from personal exasperation, as well as from

indignant zeal.

In the career of a great public orator who yields himself to the

inspiration of the moment, that conflict of selfish and unselfish

emotion which in most men is hidden in the chamber of the soul, is

brought into terrible evidence: the language of the inner voices is

written out in letters of fire.

But if the tones of exasperation jarred on Romola, there was often

another member of Fra Girolamo's audience to whom they were the only

thrilling tones, like the vibration of deep bass notes to the deaf.

Baldassarre had found out that the wonderful Frate was preaching again,

and as often as he could, he went to hear the Lenten sermon, that he

might drink in the threats of a voice which seemed like a power on the

side of justice. He went the more because he had seen that Romola went

too; for he was waiting and watching for a time when not only outward

circumstances, but his own varying mental state, would mark the right

moment for seeking an interview with her. Twice Romola had caught sight

of his face in the Duomo--once when its dark glance was fixed on hers.

She wished not to see it again, and yet she looked for it, as men look

for the reappearance of a portent. But any revelation that might be yet

to come about this old man was a subordinate fear now: it referred, she

thought, only to the past, and her anxiety was almost absorbed by the

present.

Yet the stirring Lent passed by; April, the second and final month of

her godfather's supreme authority, was near its close; and nothing had

occurred to fulfil her presentiment. In the public mind, too, there had

been fears, and rumours had spread from Home of a menacing activity on

the part of Piero de' Medici; but in a few days the suspected Bernardo

would go out of power.

Romola was trying to gather some courage from the review of her futile

fears, when on the twenty-seventh, as she was walking out on her usual

errands of mercy in the afternoon, she was met by a messenger from

Camilla Rucellai, chief among the feminine seers of Florence, desiring

her presence forthwith on matters of the highest moment. Romola, who

shrank with unconquerable repulsion from the shrill volubility of those

illuminated women, and had just now a special repugnance towards Camilla

because of a report that she had announced revelations hostile to

Bernardo del Nero, was at first inclined to send back a flat refusal.

Camilla's message might refer to public affairs, and Romola's immediate

prompting was to close her ears against knowledge that might only make

her mental burden heavier. But it had become so thoroughly her habit to

reject her impulsive choice, and to obey passively the guidance of

outward claims, that, reproving herself for allowing her presentiments

to make her cowardly and selfish, she ended by compliance, and went

straight to Camilla.

She found the nervous grey-haired woman in a chamber arranged as much as

possible like a convent cell. The thin fingers clutching Romola as she

sat, and the eager voice addressing her at first in a loud whisper,

caused her a physical shrinking that made it difficult for her to keep

her seat.

Camilla had a vision to communicate--a vision in which it had been

revealed to her by Romola's Angel, that Romola knew certain secrets

concerning her godfather, Bernardo del Nero, which, if disclosed, might

save the Republic from peril. Camilla's voice rose louder and higher as

she narrated her vision, and ended by exhorting Romola to obey the

command of her Angel, and separate herself from the enemy of God.

Romola's impetuosity was that of a massive nature, and, except in

moments when she was deeply stirred, her manner was calm and

self-controlled. She had a constitutional disgust for the shallow

excitability of women like Camilla, whose faculties seemed all wrought

up into fantasies, leaving nothing for emotion and thought. The

exhortation was not yet ended when she started up and attempted to

wrench her arm from Camilla's tightening grasp. It was of no use. The

prophetess kept her hold like a crab, and, only incited to more eager

exhortation by Romola's resistance, was carried beyond her own intention

into a shrill statement of other visions which were to corroborate this.

Christ himself had appeared to her and ordered her to send his commands

to certain citizens in office that they should throw Bernardo del Nero

from the window of the Palazzo Vecchio. Fra Girolamo himself knew of

it, and had not dared this time to say that the vision was not of Divine

authority.

"And since then," said Camilla, in her excited treble, straining upward

with wild eyes towards Romola's face, "the Blessed Infant has come to me

and laid a wafer of sweetness on my tongue in token of his pleasure that

I had done his will."

"Let me go!" said Romola, in a deep voice of anger. "God grant you are

mad! else you are detestably wicked!"

The violence of her effort to be free was too strong for Camilla now.

She wrenched away her arm and rushed out of the room, not pausing till

she had hurriedly gone far along the street, and found herself close to

the church of the Badia. She had but to pass behind the curtain under

the old stone arch, and she would find a sanctuary shut in from the

noise and hurry of the street, where all objects and all uses suggested

the thought of an eternal peace subsisting in the midst of turmoil.

She turned in, and sinking down on the step of the altar in front of

Filippino Lippi's serene Virgin appearing to Saint Bernard, she waited

in hope that the inward tumult which agitated her would by-and-by

subside.

The thought which pressed on her the most acutely was that Camilla could

allege Savonarola's countenance of her wicked folly. Romola did not for

a moment believe that he had sanctioned the throwing of Bernardo del

Nero from the window as a Divine suggestion; she felt certain that there

was falsehood or mistake in that allegation. Savonarola had become more

and more severe in his views of resistance to malcontents; but the ideas

of strict law and order were fundamental to all his political teaching.

Still, since he knew the possibly fatal effects of visions like

Camilla's, since he had a marked distrust of such spirit-seeing women,

and kept aloof from them as much as possible, why, with his readiness to

denounce wrong from the pulpit, did he not publicly denounce these

pretended revelations which brought new darkness instead of light across

the conception of a Supreme Will? Why? The answer came with painful

clearness: he was fettered inwardly by the consciousness that such

revelations were not, in their basis, distinctly separable from his own

visions; he was fettered outwardly by the foreseen consequence of

raising a cry against himself even among members of his own party, as

one who would suppress all Divine inspiration of which he himself was

not the vehicle--he or his confidential and supplementary seer of

visions, Fra Salvestro.

Romola, kneeling with buried face on the altar-step, was enduring one of

those sickening moments, when the enthusiasm which had come to her as

the only energy strong enough to make life worthy, seemed to be

inevitably bound up with vain dreams and wilful eye-shutting. Her mind

rushed back with a new attraction towards the strong worldly sense, the

dignified prudence, the untheoretic virtues of her godfather, who was to

be treated as a sort of Agag because he held that a more restricted form

of government was better than the Great Council, and because he would

not pretend to forget old ties to the banished family.

But with this last thought rose the presentiment of some plot to restore

the Medici; and then again she felt that the popular party was half

justified in its fierce suspicion. Again she felt that to keep the

Government of Florence pure, and to keep out a vicious rule, was a

sacred cause; the Frate was right there, and had carried her

understanding irrevocably with him. But at this moment the assent of

her understanding went alone; it was given unwillingly. Her heart was

recoiling from a right allied to so much narrowness; a right apparently

entailing that hard systematic judgment of men which measures them by

assents and denials quite superficial to the manhood within them. Her

affection and respect were clinging with new tenacity to her godfather,

and with him to those memories of her father which were in the same

opposition to the division of men into sheep and goats by the easy mark

of some political or religious symbol.

After all has been said that can be said about the widening influence of

ideas, it remains true that they would hardly be such strong agents

unless they were taken in a solvent of feeling. The great

world-struggle of developing thought is continually foreshadowed in the

struggle of the affections, seeking a justification for love and hope.

If Romola's intellect had been less capable of discerning the

complexities in human things, all the early loving associations of her

life would have forbidden her to accept implicitly the denunciatory

exclusiveness of Savonarola. She had simply felt that his mind had

suggested deeper and more efficacious truth to her than any other, and

the large breathing-room she found in his grand view of human duties had

made her patient towards that part of his teaching which she could not

absorb, so long as its practical effect came into collision with no

strong force in her. But now a sudden insurrection of feeling had

brought about that collision. Her indignation, once roused by Camilla's

visions, could not pause there, but ran like an illuminating fire over

all the kindred facts in Savonarola's teaching, and for the moment she

felt what was true in the scornful sarcasms she heard continually flung

against him, more keenly than she felt what was false.

But it was an illumination that made all life look ghastly to her.

Where were the beings to whom she could cling, with whom she could work

and endure, with the belief that she was working for the right? On the

side from which moral energy came lay a fanaticism from which she was

shrinking with newly-startled repulsion; on the side to which she was

drawn by affection and memory, there was the presentiment of some secret

plotting, which her judgment told her would not be unfairly called

crime. And still surmounting every other thought was the dread inspired

by Tito's hints, lest that presentiment should be converted into

knowledge, in such a way that she would be torn by irreconcilable

claims.

Calmness would not come even on the altar-steps; it would not come from

looking at the serene picture where the saint, writing in the rocky

solitude, was being visited by faces with celestial peace in them.

Romola was in the hard press of human difficulties, and that rocky

solitude was too far off. She rose from her knees that she might hasten

to her sick people in the courtyard, and by some immediate beneficent

action, revive that sense of worth in life which at this moment was

unfed by any wider faith. But when she turned round, she found herself

face to face with a man who was standing only two yards off her. The

man was Baldassarre.

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE.

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 thickset 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--

"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.

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR.

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, hesitatingly, "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,

hesitatingly, 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 who 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.

CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE.

WAITING.

The lengthening sunny days went on without bringing either what Romola

most desired or what she most dreaded. They brought no sign from

Baldassarre, and, in spite of special watch on the part of the

Government, no revelation of the suspected conspiracy. But they brought

other things which touched her closely, and bridged the phantom-crowded

space of anxiety with active sympathy in immediate trial. They brought

the spreading Plague and the Excommunication of Savonarola.

Both these events tended to arrest her incipient alienation from the

Frate, and to rivet again her attachment to the man who had opened to

her the new life of duty, and who seemed now to be worsted in the fight

for principle against profligacy. For Romola could not carry from day

to day into the abodes of pestilence and misery the sublime excitement

of a gladness that, since such anguish existed, she too existed to make

some of the anguish less bitter, without remembering that she owed this

transcendent moral life to Fra Girolamo. She could not witness the

silencing and excommunication of a man whose distinction from the great

mass of the clergy lay, not in any heretical belief, not in his

superstitions, but in the energy with which he sought to make the

Christian life a reality, without feeling herself drawn strongly to his

side.

Far on in the hot days of June the Excommunication, for some weeks

arrived from Rome, was solemnly published in the Duomo. Romola went to

witness the scene, that the resistance it inspired might invigorate that

sympathy with Savonarola which was one source of her strength. It was

in memorable contrast with the scene she had been accustomed to witness

there.

Instead of upturned citizen-faces filling the vast area under the

morning light, the youngest rising amphitheatre-wise towards the walls,

and making a garland of hope around the memories of age--instead of the

mighty voice thrilling all hearts with the sense of great things,

visible and invisible, to be struggled for--there were the bare walls at

evening made more sombre by the glimmer of tapers; there was the black

and grey flock of monks and secular clergy with bent, unexpectant faces;

there was the occasional tinkling of little bells in the pauses of a

monotonous voice reading a sentence which had already been long hanging

up in the churches; and at last there was the extinction of the tapers,

and the slow, shuffling tread of monkish feet departing in the dim

silence.

Romola's ardour on the side of the Frate was doubly strengthened by the

gleeful triumph she saw in hard and coarse faces, and by the

fear-stricken confusion in the faces and speech of many among his

strongly-attached friends. The question where the duty of obedience

ends, and the duty of resistance begins, could in no case be an easy

one; but it was made overwhelmingly difficult by the belief that the

Church was--not a compromise of parties to secure a more or less

approximate justice in the appropriation of funds, but--a living

organism, instinct with Divine power to bless and to curse. To most of

the pious Florentines, who had hitherto felt no doubt in their adherence

to the Frate, that belief in the Divine potency of the Church was not an

embraced opinion, it was an inalienable impression, like the concavity

of the blue firmament; and the boldness of Savonarola's written

arguments that the Excommunication was unjust, and that, being unjust,

it was not valid, only made them tremble the more, as a defiance cast at

a mystic image, against whose subtle immeasurable power there was

neither weapon nor defence.

But Romola, whose mind had not been allowed to draw its early

nourishment from the traditional associations of the Christian community

in which her father had lived a life apart, felt her relation to the

Church only through Savonarola; his moral force had been the only

authority to which she had bowed; and in his excommunication she only

saw the menace of hostile vice: on one side she saw a man whose life was

devoted to the ends of public virtue and spiritual purity, and on the

other the assault of alarmed selfishness, headed by a lustful, greedy,

lying, and murderous old man, once called Rodrigo Borgia, and now lifted

to the pinnacle of infamy as Pope Alexander the Sixth. The finer shades

of fact which soften the edge of such antitheses are not apt to be seen

except by neutrals, who are not distressed to discern some folly in

martyrs and some judiciousness in the men who burnt them. But Romola

required a strength that neutrality could not give; and this

Excommunication, which simplified and ennobled the resistant position of

Savonarola by bringing into prominence its wider relations, seemed to

come to her like a rescue from the threatening isolation of criticism

and doubt. The Frate was now withdrawn from that smaller antagonism

against Florentine enemies into which he continually fell in the

unchecked excitement of the pulpit, and presented himself simply as

appealing to the Christian world against a vicious exercise of

ecclesiastical power. He was a standard-bearer leaping into the breach.

Life never seems so clear and easy as when the heart is beating faster

at the sight of some generous self-risking deed. We feel no doubt then

what is the highest prize the soul can win; we almost believe in our own

power to attain it. By a new current of such enthusiasm Romola was

helped through these difficult summer days. She had ventured on no

words to Tito that would apprise him of her late interview with

Baldassarre, and the revelation he had made to her. What would such

agitating, difficult words win from him? No admission of the truth;

nothing, probably, but a cool sarcasm about her sympathy with his

assassin. Baldassarre was evidently helpless: the thing to be feared

was, not that he should injure Tito, but that Tito, coming upon his

traces, should carry out some new scheme for ridding himself of the

injured man who was a haunting dread to him. Romola felt that she could

do nothing decisive until she had seen Baldassarre again, and learned

the full truth about that "other wife"--learned whether she were the

wife to whom Tito was first bound.

The possibilities about that other wife, which involved the worst wound

to her hereditary pride, mingled themselves as a newly-embittering

suspicion with the earliest memories of her illusory love, eating away

the lingering associations of tenderness with the past image of her

husband; and her irresistible belief in the rest of Baldassarre's

revelation made her shrink from Tito with a horror which would perhaps

have urged some passionate speech in spite of herself if he had not been

more than usually absent from home. Like many of the wealthier citizens

in that time of pestilence, he spent the intervals of business chiefly

in the country: the agreeable Melema was welcome at many villas, and

since Romola had refused to leave the city, he had no need to provide a

country residence of his own.

But at last, in the later days of July, the alleviation of those public

troubles which had absorbed her activity and much of her thought, left

Romola to a less counteracted sense of her personal lot. The Plague had

almost disappeared, and the position of Savonarola was made more hopeful

by a favourable magistracy, who were writing urgent vindicatory letters

to Rome on his behalf, entreating the withdrawal of the Excommunication.

Romola's healthy and vigorous frame was undergoing the reaction of

languor inevitable after continuous excitement and over-exertion; but

her mental restlessness would not allow her to remain at home without

peremptory occupation, except during the sultry hours. In the cool of

the morning and evening she walked out constantly, varying her direction

as much as possible, with the vague hope that if Baldassarre were still

alive she might encounter him. Perhaps some illness had brought a new

paralysis of memory, and he had forgotten where she lived--forgotten

even her existence. That was her most sanguine explanation of his

non-appearance. The explanation she felt to be most probable was, that

he had died of the Plague.

CHAPTER FIFTY SIX.

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 clutched

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! 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! 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 him."

"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 dreamlike 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, pre-eminently 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 of 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 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.

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN.

WHY TITO WAS SAFE.

Tito had good reasons for saying that he was safe. In the last three

months, during which he had foreseen the discovery of the Medicean

conspirators as a probable event, he had had plenty of time to provide

himself with resources. He had been strengthening his influence at Rome

and at Milan, by being the medium of secret information and indirect

measures against the Frate and the popular party; he had cultivated more

assiduously than ever the regard of this party, by showing subtle

evidence that his political convictions were entirely on their side; and

all the while, instead of withdrawing his agency from the Mediceans, he

had sought to be more actively employed and exclusively trusted by them.

It was easy to him to keep up this triple game. The principle of

duplicity admitted by the Mediceans on their own behalf deprived them of

any standard by which they could measure the trustworthiness of a

colleague who had not, like themselves, hereditary interests, alliances,

and prejudices, which were intensely Medicean. In their minds, to

deceive the opposite party was fair stratagem; to deceive their own

party was a baseness to which they felt no temptation; and, in using

Tito's facile ability, they were not keenly awake to the fact that the

absence of traditional attachments which made him a convenient agent was

also the absence of what among themselves was the chief guarantee of

mutual honour. Again, the Roman and Milanese friends of the

aristocratic party, or Arrabbiati, who were the bitterest enemies of

Savonarola, carried on a system of underhand correspondence and

espionage, in which the deepest hypocrisy was the best service, and

demanded the heaviest pay; so that to suspect an agent because he played

a part strongly would have been an absurd want of logic. On the other

hand, the Piagnoni of the popular party, who had the directness that

belongs to energetic conviction, were the more inclined to credit Tito

with sincerity in his political adhesion to them, because he affected no

religious sympathies.

By virtue of these conditions, the last three months had been a time of

flattering success to Tito. The result he most cared for was the

securing of a future position for himself at Rome or at Milan; for he

had a growing determination, when the favourable moment should come, to

quit Florence for one of those great capitals where life was easier, and

the rewards of talent and learning were more splendid. At present, the

scale dipped in favour of Milan; and if within the year he could render

certain services to Duke Ludovico Sforza, he had the prospect of a place

at the Milanese court which outweighed the advantages of Rome.

The revelation of the Medicean conspiracy, then, had been a subject of

forethought to Tito; but he had not been able to foresee the mode in

which it would be brought about. The arrest of Lamberto dell' Antella

with a tell-tale letter on his person, and a bitter rancour against the

Medici in his heart, was an incalculable event. It was not possible, in

spite of the careful pretexts with which his agency had been guarded,

that Tito should escape implication: he had never expected this in case

of any wide discovery concerning the Medicean plots. But his quick mind

had soon traced out the course that would secure his own safety with the

fewest unpleasant concomitants. It is agreeable to keep a whole skin;

but the skin still remains an organ sensitive to the atmosphere.

His reckoning had not deceived him. That night, before he returned

home, he had secured the three results for which he most cared: he was

to be freed from all proceedings against him on account of complicity

with the Mediceans; he was to retain his secretaryship for another year,

unless he previously resigned it; and, lastly, the price by which he had

obtained these guarantees was to be kept as a State secret. The price

would have been thought heavy by most men; and Tito himself would rather

not have paid it.

He had applied himself first to win the mind of Francesco Valori, who

was not only one of the Ten under whom he immediately held his

secretaryship, but one of the special council appointed to investigate

the evidence of the plot. Francesco Valori, as we have seen, was the

head of the Piagnoni, a man with certain fine qualities that were not

incompatible with violent partisanship, with an arrogant temper that

alienated his friends, nor with bitter personal animosities--one of the

bitterest being directed against Bernardo del Nero. To him, in a brief

private interview, after obtaining a pledge of secrecy, Tito avowed his

own agency for the Mediceans--an agency induced by motives about which

he was very frank, declaring at the same time that he had always

believed their efforts futile, and that he sincerely preferred the

maintenance of the popular government; affected to confide to Valori, as

a secret, his own personal dislike for Bernardo del Nero; and, after

this preparation, came to the important statement that there was another

Medicean plot, of which, if he obtained certain conditions from the

government, he could, by a journey to Siena and into Romagna, where

Piero de' Medici was again trying to gather forces, obtain documentary

evidence to lay before the council. To this end it was essential that

his character as a Medicean agent should be unshaken for all Mediceans,

and hence the fact that he had been a source of information to the

authorities must be wrapped in profound secrecy. Still, some odour of

the facts might escape in spite of precaution, and before Tito could

incur the unpleasant consequences of acting against his friends, he must

be assured of immunity from any prosecution as a Medicean, and from

deprivation of office for a year to come.

These propositions did not sound in the ear of Francesco Valori

precisely as they sound to us. Valori's mind was not intensely bent on

the estimation of Tito's conduct; and it \_was\_ intensely bent on

procuring an extreme sentence against the five prisoners. There were

sure to be immense efforts to save them; and it was to be wished (on

public grounds) that the evidence against them should be of the

strongest, so as to alarm all well-affected men at the dangers of

clemency. The character of legal proceedings at that time implied that

evidence was one of those desirable things which could only be come at

by foul means. To catch a few people and torture them into confessing

everybody's guilt was one step towards justice; and it was not always

easy to see the next, unless a traitor turned up. Lamberto dell'

Antella had been tortured in aid of his previous willingness to tell

more than he knew; nevertheless, additional and stronger facts were

desirable, especially against Bernardo del Nero, who, so far as appeared

hitherto, had simply refrained from betraying the late plot after having

tried in vain to discourage it; for the welfare of Florence demanded

that the guilt of Bernardo del Nero should be put in the strongest

light. So Francesco Valori zealously believed; and perhaps he was not

himself aware that the strength of his zeal was determined by his

hatred. He decided that Tito's proposition ought to be accepted, laid

it before his colleagues without disclosing Tito's name, and won them

over to his opinion. Late in the day, Tito was admitted to an audience

of the Special Council, and produced a deep sensation among them by

revealing another plot for insuring the mastery of Florence to Piero de'

Medici, which was to have been carried into execution in the middle of

this very month of August. Documentary evidence on this subject would

do more than anything else to make the right course clear. He received

a commission to start for Siena by break of day; and, besides this, he

carried away with him from the council-chamber a written guarantee of

his immunity and of his retention of office.

Among the twenty Florentines who bent their grave eyes on Tito, as he

stood gracefully before them, speaking of startling things with easy

periphrasis, and with that apparently unaffected admission of being

actuated by motives short of the highest, which is often the intensest

affectation, there were several whose minds were not too entirely

preoccupied to pass a new judgment on him in these new circumstances;

they silently concluded that this ingenious and serviceable Greek was in

future rather to be used for public needs than for private intimacy.

Unprincipled men were useful, enabling those who had more scruples to

keep their hands tolerably clean in a world where there was much dirty

work to be done. Indeed, it was not clear to respectable Florentine

brains, unless they held the Frate's extravagant belief in a possible

purity and loftiness to be striven for on this earth, how life was to be

carried on in any department without human instruments whom it would not

be unbecoming to kick or to spit upon in the act of handing them their

wages. Some of these very men who passed a tacit judgment on Tito were

shortly to be engaged in a memorable transaction that could by no means

have been carried through without the use of an unscrupulousness as

decided as his; but, as their own bright poet Pulci had said for them,

it is one thing to love the fruits of treachery, and another thing to

love traitors--

"Il tradimento a molti piace assai,

Ma il traditore a gnun non piacque mal."

The same society has had a gibbet for the murderer and a gibbet for the

martyr, an execrating hiss for a dastardly act, and as loud a hiss for

many a word of generous truthfulness or just insight: a mixed condition

of things which is the sign, not of hopeless confusion, but of

struggling order.

For Tito himself, he was not unaware that he had sunk a little in the

estimate, of the men who had accepted his services. He had that degree

of self-contemplation which necessarily accompanies the habit of acting

on well-considered reasons, of whatever quality; and if he could have

chosen, he would have declined to see himself disapproved by men of the

world. He had never meant to be disapproved; he had meant always to

conduct himself so ably that if he acted in opposition to the standard

of other men they should not be aware of it; and the barrier between

himself and Romola had been raised by the impossibility of such

concealment with her. He shrank from condemnatory judgments as from a

climate to which he could not adapt himself But things were not so

plastic in the hands of cleverness as could be wished, and events had

turned out inconveniently. He had really no rancour against Messer

Bernardo del Nero: he had a personal liking for Lorenzo Tornabuoni and

Giannozzo Pucci. He had served them very ably, and in such a way that

if their party had been winners he would have merited high reward; but

was he to relinquish all the agreeable fruits of life because their

party had failed? His proffer of a little additional proof against them

would probably have no influence on their fate; in fact, he felt

convinced they would escape any extreme consequences; but if he had not

given it, his own fortunes, which made a promising fabric, would have

been utterly ruined. And what motive could any man really have, except

his own interest? Florentines whose passions were engaged in their

petty and precarious political schemes might have no self-interest

separable from family pride and tenacity in old hatreds and attachments;

a modern simpleton who swallowed whole one of the old systems of

philosophy, and took the indigestion it occasioned for the signs of a

divine afflux or the voice of an inward monitor, might see his interest

in a form of self-conceit which he called self-rewarding virtue;

fanatics who believed in the coming Scourge and Renovation might see

their own interest in a future palm-branch and white robe: but no man of

clear intellect allowed his course to be determined by such puerile

impulses or questionable inward fumes. Did not Pontanus, poet and

philosopher of unrivalled Latinity, make the finest possible oration at

Naples to welcome the French king, who had come to dethrone the learned

orator's royal friend and patron? and still Pontanus held up his head

and prospered. Men did not really care about these things, except when

their personal spleen was touched. It was weakness only that was

despised; power of any sort carried its immunity; and no man, unless by

very rare good fortune, could mount high in the world without incurring

a few unpleasant necessities which laid him open to enmity, and perhaps

to a little hissing, when enmity wanted a pretext.

It was a faint prognostic of that hissing, gathered by Tito from certain

indications when he was before the council, which gave his present

conduct the character of an epoch to him, and made him dwell on it with

argumentative vindication. It was not that he was taking a deeper step

in wrong-doing, for it was not possible that he should feel any tie to

the Mediceans to be stronger than the tie to his father; but his conduct

to his father had been hidden by successful lying: his present act did

not admit of total concealment--in its very nature it was a revelation.

And Tito winced under his new liability to disesteem.

Well! a little patience, and in another year, or perhaps in half a year,

he might turn his back on these hard, eager Florentines, with their

futile quarrels and sinking fortunes. His brilliant success at Florence

had had some ugly flaws in it: he had fallen in love with the wrong

woman, and Baldassarre had come back under incalculable circumstances.

But as Tito galloped with a loose rein towards Siena, he saw a future

before him in which he would no longer be haunted by those mistakes. He

had much money safe out of Florence already; he was in the fresh

ripeness of eight-and-twenty; he was conscious of well-tried skill.

Could he not strip himself of the past, as of rehearsal clothing, and

throw away the old bundle, to robe himself for the real scene?

It did not enter into Tito's meditations on the future, that, on issuing

from the council-chamber and descending the stairs, he had brushed

against a man whose face he had not stayed to recognise in the

lamplight. The man was Ser Ceccone--also willing to serve the State by

giving information against unsuccessful employers.

CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT.

A FINAL UNDERSTANDING.

Tito soon returned from Siena, but almost immediately set out on another

journey, from which he did not return till the seventeenth of August.

Nearly a fortnight had passed since the arrest of the accused, and still

they were in prison, still their fate was uncertain. Romola had felt

during this interval as if all cares were suspended for her, other than

watching the fluctuating probabilities concerning that fate. Sometimes

they seemed strongly in favour of the prisoners; for the chances of

effective interest on their behalf were heightened by delay, and an

indefinite prospect of delay was opened by the reluctance of all persons

in authority to incur the odium attendant on any decision. On the one

side there was a loud cry that the Republic was in danger, and that

lenity to the prisoners would be the signal of attack for all its

enemies; on the other, there was a certainty that a sentence of death

and confiscation of property passed on five citizens of distinguished

name, would entail the rancorous hatred of their relatives on all who

were conspicuously instrumental to such a sentence.

The final judgment properly lay with the Eight, who presided over the

administration of criminal justice; and the sentence depended on a

majority of six votes. But the Eight shrank from their onerous

responsibility, and asked in this exceptional case to have it shared by

the Signoria (or the Gonfaloniere and the eight Priors). The Signoria

in its turn shrugged its shoulders, and proposed the appeal to the Great

Council. For, according to a law passed by the earnest persuasion of

Savonarola nearly three years before, whenever a citizen was condemned

to death by the fatal six votes (called the \_set fave\_ or \_six beans\_,

beans being in more senses than one the political pulse of Florence), he

had the right of appealing from that sentence to the Great Council.

But in this stage of the business, the friends of the accused resisted

the appeal, determined chiefly by the wish to gain delay; and, in fact,

strict legality required that sentence should have been passed prior to

the appeal. Their resistance prevailed, and a middle course was taken;

the sentence was referred to a large assembly convened on the

seventeenth, consisting of all the higher magistracies, the smaller

council or Senate of Eighty, and a select number of citizens.

On this day Romola, with anxiety heightened by the possibility that

before its close her godfather's fate might be decided, had obtained

leave to see him for the second time, but only in the presence of

witnesses. She had returned to the Via de' Bardi in company with her

cousin Brigida, still ignorant whether the council had come to any

decisive issue; and Monna Brigida had gone out again to await the

momentous news at the house of a friend belonging to one of the

magistracies, that she might bring back authentic tidings as soon as

they were to be had.

Romola had sunk on the first seat in the bright saloon, too much

agitated, too sick at heart, to care about her place, or be conscious of

discordance in the objects that surrounded her. She sat with her back

to the door, resting her head on her hands. It seemed a long while

since Monna Brigida had gone, and Romola was expecting her return. But

when the door opened she knew it was not Monna Brigida who entered.

Since she had parted from Tito on that memorable night, she had had no

external proof to warrant her belief that he had won his safety by

treachery; on the contrary, she had had evidence that he was still

trusted by the Mediceans, and was believed by them to be accomplishing

certain errands of theirs in Romagna, under cover of fulfilling a

commission of the government. For the obscurity in which the evidence

concerning the conspirators was shrouded allowed it to be understood

that Tito had escaped any implication.

But Romola's suspicion was not to be dissipated: her horror of his

conduct towards Baldassarre projected itself over every conception of

his acts; it was as if she had seen him committing a murder, and had had

a diseased impression ever after that his hands were covered with fresh

blood.

As she heard his step on the stone floor, a chill shudder passed through

her; she could not turn round, she could not rise to give any greeting.

He did not speak, but after an instant's pause took a seat on the other

side of the table just opposite to her. Then she raised her eyes and

looked at him; but she was mute. He did not show any irritation, but

said, coolly--

"This meeting corresponds with our parting, Romola. But I understand

that it is a moment of terrible suspense. I am come, however, if you

will listen to me, to bring you the relief of hope."

She started, and altered her position, but looked at him dubiously.

"It will not be unwelcome to you to hear--even though it is I who tell

it--that the council is prorogued till the twenty-first. The Eight have

been frightened at last into passing a sentence of condemnation, but the

demand has now been made on behalf of the condemned for the Appeal to

the Great Council."

Romola's face lost its dubious expression; she asked eagerly--

"And when is it to be made?"

"It has not yet been granted; but it \_may\_ be granted. The Special

Council is to meet again on the twenty-first to deliberate whether the

Appeal shall be allowed or not. In the meantime there is an interval of

three days, in which chances may occur in favour of the prisoners--in

which interest may be used on their behalf."

Romola started from her seat. The colour had risen to her face like a

visible thought, and her hands trembled. In that moment her feeling

towards Tito was forgotten.

"Possibly," said Tito, also rising, "your own intention may have

anticipated what I was going to say. You are thinking of the Frate."

"I am," said Romola, looking at him with surprise. "Has he done

anything? Is there anything to tell me?"

"Only this. It was Messer Francesco Valori's bitterness and violence

which chiefly determined the course of things in the council to-day.

Half the men who gave in their opinion against the prisoners were

frightened into it, and there are numerous friends of Fra Girolamo both

in this Special Council and out of it who are strongly opposed to the

sentence of death--Piero Guicciardini, for example, who is one member of

the Signoria that made the stoutest resistance; and there is Giovan

Battista Ridolfi, who, Piagnone as he is, will not lightly forgive the

death of his brother Niccolo."

"But how can the Appeal be denied," said Romola, indignantly, "when it

is the law--when it was one of the chief glories of the popular

government to have passed the law?"

"They call this an exceptional case. Of course there are ingenious

arguments, but there is much more of loud bluster about the danger of

the Republic. But, you see, no opposition could prevent the assembly

from being prorogued, and a certain powerful influence rightly applied

during the next three days might determine the wavering courage of those

who desire that the Appeal should be granted, and might even give a

check to the headlong enmity of Francesco Valori. It happens to have

come to my knowledge that the Frate has so far interfered as to send a

message to him in favour of Lorenzo Tornabuoni. I know you can

sometimes have access to the Frate: it might at all events be worth

while to use your privilege now."

"It is true," said Romola, with an air of abstraction. "I cannot

believe that the Frate would approve denying the Appeal."

"I heard it said by more than one person in the court of the Palazzo,

before I came away, that it would be to the everlasting discredit of Fra

Girolamo if he allowed a government which is almost entirely made up of

his party, to deny the Appeal, without entering his protest, when he has

been boasting in his books and sermons that it was he who got the law

passed. [Note 1.] But between ourselves, with all respect for your

Frate's ability, my Romola, he has got into the practice of preaching

that form of human sacrifices called killing tyrants and wicked

malcontents, which some of his followers are likely to think

inconsistent with lenity in the present case."

"I know, I know," said Romola, with a look and tone of pain. "But he is

driven into those excesses of speech. It used to be different. I

\_will\_ ask for an interview. I cannot rest without it. I trust in the

greatness of his heart."

She was not looking at Tito; her eyes were bent with a vague gaze

towards the ground, and she had no distinct consciousness that the words

she heard came from her husband.

"Better lose no time, then," said Tito, with unmixed suavity, moving his

cap round in his hands as if he were about to put it on and depart.

"And now, Romola, you will perhaps be able to see, in spite of

prejudice, that my wishes go with yours in this matter. You will not

regard the misfortune of my safety as an offence."

Something like an electric shock passed through Romola: it was the full

consciousness of her husband's presence returning to her. She looked at

him without speaking.

"At least," he added, in a slightly harder tone, "you will endeavour to

base our intercourse on some other reasonings than that because an evil

deed is possible, \_I\_ have done it. Am I alone to be beyond the pale of

your extensive charity?"

The feeling which had been driven back from Romola's lips a fortnight

before rose again with the gathered force of a tidal wave. She spoke

with a decision which told him that she was careless of consequences.

"It is too late, Tito. There is no killing the suspicion that deceit

has once begotten. And now I know everything. I know who that old man

was: he was your father, to whom you owe everything--to whom you owe

more than if you had been his own child. By the side of that, it is a

small thing that you broke my trust and my father's. As long as you

deny the truth about that old man, there is a horror rising between us:

the law that should make us one can never be obeyed. I too am a human

being. I have a soul of my own that abhors your actions. Our union is

a pretence--as if a perpetual lie could be a sacred marriage."

Tito did not answer immediately. When he did speak it was with a

calculated caution, that was stimulated by alarm.

"And you mean to carry out that independence by quitting me, I presume?"

"I desire to quit you," said Romola, impetuously.

"And supposing I do not submit to part with what the law gives me some

security for retaining? You will then, of course, proclaim your reasons

in the ear of all Florence. You will bring forward your mad assassin,

who is doubtless ready to obey your call, and you will tell the world

that you believe his testimony because he is so rational as to desire to

assassinate me. You will first inform the Signoria that I am a Medicean

conspirator, and then you will inform the Mediceans that I have betrayed

them, and in both cases you will offer the excellent proof that you

believe me capable in general of everything bad. It will certainly be a

striking position for a wife to adopt. And if, on such evidence, you

succeed in holding me up to infamy, you will have surpassed all the

heroines of the Greek drama."

He paused a moment, but she stood mute. He went on with the sense of

mastery.

"I believe you have no other grievance against me--except that I have

failed in fulfilling some lofty indefinite conditions on which you gave

me your wifely affection, so that, by withdrawing it, you have gradually

reduced me to the careful supply of your wants as a fair Piagnone of

high condition and liberal charities. I think your success in gibbeting

me is not certain. But doubtless you would begin by winning the ear of

Messer Bernardo del Nero?"

"Why do I speak of anything?" cried Romola, in anguish, sinking on her

chair again. "It is hateful in me to be thinking of myself."

She did not notice when Tito left the room, or know how long it was

before the door opened to admit Monna Brigida. But in that instant she

started up and said--

"Cousin, we must go to San Marco directly. I must see my confessor, Fra

Salvestro."

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note 1. The most recent, and in some respects the best, biographer of

Savonarola, Signor Villari, endeavours to show that the Law of Appeal

ultimately enacted, being wider than the law originally contemplated by

Savonarola, was a source of bitter annoyance to him, as a contrivance of

the aristocratic party for attaching to the measures of the popular

government the injurious results of licence. But in taking this view

the estimable biographer lost sight of the fact that, not only in his

sermons, but in a deliberately prepared book (the \_Compendium

Revelationum\_) written long after the Appeal had become law, Savonarola

enumerates among the benefits secured to Florence, "\_the Appeal from the

Six Votes, advocated by me, for the greater security of the citizens\_."

CHAPTER FIFTY NINE.

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 over-taxed 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 the

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, lot 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 he 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 farther 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.

CHAPTER SIXTY.

THE SCAFFOLD.

Three days later the moon that was just surmounting the buildings of the

piazza in front of the Old Palace within the hour of midnight, did not

make the usual broad lights and shadows on the pavement. Not a

hand's-breadth of pavement was to be seen, but only the heads of an

eager struggling multitude. And instead of that background of silence

in which the pattering footsteps and buzzing voices, the lute-thrumming

or rapid scampering of the many night wanderers of Florence stood out in

obtrusive distinctness, there was the background of a roar from mingled

shouts and imprecations, tramplings and pushings, and accidental

clashing of weapons, across which nothing was distinguishable but a

darting shriek, or the heavy dropping toll of a bell.

Almost all who could call themselves the public of Florence were awake

at that hour, and either enclosed within the limits of that piazza, or

struggling to enter it. Within the palace were still assembled in the

council-chamber all the chief magistracies, the eighty members of the

senate, and the other select citizens who had been in hot debate through

long hours of daylight and torchlight whether the Appeal should be

granted or whether the sentence of death should be executed on the

prisoners forthwith, to forestall the dangerous chances of delay. And

the debate had been so much like fierce quarrel that the noise from the

council-chamber had reached the crowd outside. Only within the last

hour had the question been decided: the Signoria had remained divided,

four of them standing out resolutely for the Appeal in spite of the

strong argument that if they did not give way their houses should be

sacked, until Francesco Valori, in brief and furious speech, made the

determination of his party more ominously distinct by declaring that if

the Signoria would not defend the liberties of the Florentine people by

executing those five perfidious citizens, there would not be wanting

others who would take that cause in hand to the peril of all who opposed

it. The Florentine Cato triumphed. When the votes were counted again,

the four obstinate white beans no longer appeared; the whole nine were

of the fatal affirmative black, deciding the death of the five prisoners

without delay--deciding also, only tacitly and with much more delay, the

death of Francesco Valori.

And now, while the judicial Eight were gone to the Bargello to prepare

for the execution, the five condemned men were being led barefoot and in

irons through the midst of the council. It was their friends who had

contrived this: would not Florentines be moved by the visible

association of such cruel ignominy with two venerable men like Bernardo

del Nero and Niccolo Ridolfi, who had taken their bias long before the

new order of things had come to make Mediceanism retrograde--with two

brilliant popular young men like Tornabuoni and Pucci, whose absence

would be felt as a haunting vacancy wherever there was a meeting of

chief Florentines? It was useless: such pity as could be awakened now

was of that hopeless sort which leads not to rescue, but to the tardier

action of revenge.

While this scene was passing upstairs Romola stood below against one of

the massive pillars in the court of the palace, expecting the moment

when her godfather would appear, on his way to execution. By the use of

strong interest she had gained permission to visit him in the evening of

this day, and remain with him until the result of the council should be

determined. And now she was waiting with his confessor to follow the

guard that would lead him to the Bargello. Her heart was bent on

clinging to the presence of the childless old man to the last moment, as

her father would have done; and she had overpowered all remonstrances.

Giovan Battista Ridolfi, a disciple of Savonarola, who was going in

bitterness to behold the death of his elder brother Niccolo, had

promised that she should be guarded, and now stood by her side.

Tito, too, was in the palace; but Romola had not seen him. Since the

evening of the seventeenth they had avoided each other, and Tito only

knew by inference from the report of the Frate's neutrality that her

pleading had failed. He was now surrounded with official and other

personages, both Florentine and foreign, who had been awaiting the issue

of the long-protracted council, maintaining, except when he was directly

addressed, the subdued air and grave silence of a man whom actual events

are placing in a painful state of strife between public and private

feeling. When an allusion was made to his wife in relation to those

events, he implied that, owing to the violent excitement of her mind,

the mere fact of his continuing to hold office under a government

concerned in her godfather's condemnation, roused in her a diseased

hostility towards him; so that for her sake he felt it best not to

approach her.

"Ah, the old Bardi blood!" said Cennini, with a shrug. "I shall not be

surprised if this business shakes \_her\_ loose from the Frate, as well as

some others I could name."

"It is excusable in a woman, who is doubtless beautiful, since she is

the wife of Messer Tito," said a young French envoy, smiling and bowing

to Tito, "to think that her affections must overrule the good of the

State, and that nobody is to be beheaded who is anybody's cousin; but

such a view is not to be encouraged in the male population. It seems to

me your Florentine polity is much weakened by it."

"That is true," said Niccolo Macchiavelli; "but where personal ties are

strong, the hostilities they raise must be taken due account of. Many

of these half-way severities are mere hot-headed blundering. The only

safe blows to be inflicted on men and parties are the blows that are too

heavy to be avenged."

"Niccolo," said Cennini, "there is a clever wickedness in thy talk

sometimes that makes me mistrust thy pleasant young face as if it were a

mask of Satan."

"Not at all, my good Domenico," said Macchiavelli, smiling, and laying

his hand on the elder's shoulder. "Satan was a blunderer, an introducer

of \_novita\_, who made a stupendous failure. If he had succeeded, we

should all have been worshipping him, and his portrait would have been

more flattered."

"Well, well," said Cennini, "I say not thy doctrine is not too clever

for Satan: I only say it is wicked enough for him."

"I tell you," said Macchiavelli, "my doctrine is the doctrine of all men

who seek an end a little farther off than their own noses. Ask our

Frate, our prophet, how his universal renovation is to be brought about:

he will tell you, first, by getting a free and pure government; and

since it appears that this cannot be done by making all Florentines love

each other, it must be done by cutting off every head that happens to be

obstinately in the way. Only if a man incurs odium by sanctioning a

severity that is not thorough enough to be final, he commits a blunder.

And something like that blunder, I suspect, the Frate has committed. It

was an occasion on which he might have won some lustre by exerting

himself to maintain the Appeal; instead of that, he has lost lustre, and

has gained no strength."

Before any one else could speak, there came the expected announcement

that the prisoners were about to leave the council-chamber; and the

majority of those who were present hurried towards the door, intent on

securing the freest passage to the Bargello in the rear of the

prisoners' guard; for the scene of the execution was one that drew alike

those who were moved by the deepest passions and those who were moved by

the coldest curiosity.

Tito was one of those who remained behind. He had a native repugnance

to sights of death and pain, and five days ago whenever he had thought

of this execution as a possibility he had hoped that it would not take

place, and that the utmost sentence would be exile: his own safety

demanded no more. But now he felt that it would be a welcome guarantee

of his security when he had learned that Bernardo del Nero's head was

off the shoulders. The new knowledge and new attitude towards him

disclosed by Romola on the day of his return, had given him a new dread

of the power she possessed to make his position insecure. If any act of

hers only succeeded in making him an object of suspicion and odium, he

foresaw not only frustration, but frustration under unpleasant

circumstances. Her belief in Baldassarre had clearly determined her

wavering feelings against further submission, and if her godfather lived

she would win him to share her belief without much trouble. Romola

seemed more than ever an unmanageable fact in his destiny. But if

Bernardo del Nero were dead, the difficulties that would beset her in

placing herself in opposition to her husband would probably be

insurmountable to her shrinking pride. Therefore Tito had felt easier

when he knew that the Eight had gone to the Bargello to order the

instant erection of the scaffold. Four other men--his intimates and

confederates--were to die, besides Bernardo del Nero. But a man's own

safety is a god that sometimes makes very grim demands. Tito felt them

to be grim: even in the pursuit of what was agreeable, this paradoxical

life forced upon him the desire for what was disagreeable. But he had

had other experience of this sort, and as he heard through the open

doorway the shuffle of many feet and the clanking of metal on the

stairs, he was able to answer the questions of the young French envoy

without showing signs of any other feeling than that of sad resignation

to State necessities.

Those sounds fell on Romola as if her power of hearing had been exalted

along with every other sensibility of her nature. She needed no arm to

support her; she shed no tears. She felt that intensity of life which

seems to transcend both grief and joy--in which the mind seems to itself

akin to elder forces that wrought out existence before the birth of

pleasure and pain. Since her godfather's fate had been decided, the

previous struggle of feeling in her had given way to an identification

of herself with him in these supreme moments: she was inwardly asserting

for him that, if he suffered the punishment of treason, he did not

deserve the name of traitor; he was the victim to a collision between

two kinds of faithfulness. It was not given him to die for the noblest

cause, and yet he died because of his nobleness. He might have been a

meaner man and found it easier not to incur this guilt. Romola was

feeling the full force of that sympathy with the individual lot that is

continually opposing itself to the formulae by which actions and parties

are judged. She was treading the way with her second father to the

scaffold, and nerving herself to defy ignominy by the consciousness that

it was not deserved.

The way was fenced in by three hundred armed men, who had been placed as

a guard by the orders of Francesco Valori, for among the apparent

contradictions that belonged to this event, not the least striking was

the alleged alarm on the one hand at the popular rage against the

conspirators, and the alleged alarm on the other lest there should be an

attempt to rescue them in the midst of a hostile crowd. When they had

arrived within the court of the Bargello, Romola was allowed to approach

Bernardo with his confessor for a moment of farewell. Many eyes were

bent on them even in that struggle of an agitated throng, as the aged

man, forgetting that his hands were bound with irons, lifted them

towards the golden head that was bent towards him, and then, checking

that movement, leaned to kiss her. She seized the fettered hands that

were hung down again, and kissed them as if they had been sacred things.

"My poor Romola," said Bernardo, in a low voice, "I have only to die,

but thou hast to live--and I shall not be there to help thee."

"Yes," said Romola, hurriedly, "you \_will\_ help me--always--because I

shall remember you."

She was taken away and conducted up the flight of steps that led to the

loggia surrounding the grand old court. She took her place there,

determined to look till the moment when her godfather laid his head on

the block. Now while the prisoners were allowed a brief interval with

their confessor, the spectators were pressing into court until the crowd

became dense around the black scaffold, and the torches fixed in iron

rings against the pillars threw a varying startling light at one moment

on passionless stone carvings, at another on some pale face agitated

with suppressed rage or suppressed grief--the face of one among the many

near relatives of the condemned, who were presently to receive their

dead and carry them home.

Romola's face looked like a marble image against the dark arch as she

stood watching for the moment when her godfather would appear at the

foot of the scaffold. He was to suffer first, and Battista Ridolfi, who

was by her side, had promised to take her away through a door behind

them when she would have seen the last look of the man who alone in all

the world had shared her pitying love for her father. And still, in the

background of her thought, there was the possibility striving to be a

hope, that some rescue might yet come, something that would keep that

scaffold unstained by blood.

For a long while there was constant movement, lights flickering, heads

swaying to and fro, confused voices within the court, rushing waves of

sound through the entrance from without. It seemed to Romola as if she

were in the midst of a storm-troubled sea, caring nothing about the

storm, caring only to hold out a signal till the eyes that looked for it

could seek it no more.

Suddenly there was stillness, and the very tapers seemed to tremble into

quiet. The executioner was ready on the scaffold, and Bernardo del Nero

was seen ascending it with a slow firm step. Romola made no visible

movement, uttered not even a suppressed sound: she stood more firmly,

caring for \_his\_ firmness. She saw him pause, saw the white head kept

erect, while he said, in a voice distinctly audible--

"It is but a short space of life that my fellow-citizens have taken from

me."

She perceived that he was gazing slowly round him as he spoke. She felt

that his eyes were resting on her, and that she was stretching out her

arms towards him. Then she saw no more till--a long while after, as it

seemed--a voice said, "My daughter, all is peace now. I can conduct you

to your house."

She uncovered her head and saw her godfather's confessor standing by

her, in a room where there were other grave men talking in subdued

tones.

"I am ready," she said, starting up. "Let us lose no time."

She thought all clinging was at an end for her: all her strength now

should be given to escape from a grasp under which she shuddered.

CHAPTER SIXTY ONE.

DRIFTING AWAY.

On the eighth day from that memorable night Romola was standing on the

brink of the Mediterranean, watching the gentle summer pulse of the sea

just above what was then the little fishing village of Viareggio.

Again she had fled from Florence, and this time no arresting voice had

called her back. Again she wore the grey religious dress; and this

time, in her heart-sickness, she did not care that it was a disguise. A

new rebellion had risen within her, a new despair. Why should she care

about wearing one badge more than another, or about being called by her

own name? She despaired of finding any consistent duty belonging to

that name. What force was there to create for her that supremely

hallowed motive which men call duty, but which can have no inward

constraining existence save through some form of believing love?

The bonds of all strong affection were snapped. In her marriage, the

highest bond of all, she had ceased to see the mystic union which is its

own guarantee of indissolubleness, had ceased even to see the obligation

of a voluntary pledge: had she not proved that the things to which she

had pledged herself were impossible? The impulse to set herself free

had risen again with overmastering force; yet the freedom could only be

an exchange of calamity. There is no compensation for the woman who

feels that the chief relation of her life has been no more than a

mistake. She has lost her crown. The deepest secret of human

blessedness has half whispered itself to her, and then for ever passed

her by.

And now Romola's best support under that supreme woman's sorrow had

slipped away from her. The vision of any great purpose, any end of

existence which could ennoble endurance and exalt the common deeds of a

dusty life with divine ardours, was utterly eclipsed for her now by the

sense of a confusion in human things which made all effort a mere

dragging at tangled threads; all fellowship, either for resistance or

advocacy, mere unfairness and exclusiveness. What, after all, was the

man who had represented for her the highest heroism: the heroism not of

hard, self-contained endurance, but of willing, self-offering love?

What was the cause he was struggling for? Romola had lost her trust in

Savonarola, had lost that fervour of admiration which had made her

unmindful of his aberrations, and attentive only to the grand curve of

his orbit. And now that her keen feeling for her godfather had thrown

her into antagonism with the Frate, she saw all the repulsive and

inconsistent details in his teaching with a painful lucidity which

exaggerated their proportions. In the bitterness of her disappointment

she said that his striving after the renovation of the Church and the

world was a striving after a mere name which told no more than the title

of a book: a name that had come to mean practically the measures that

would strengthen his own position in Florence; nay, often questionable

deeds and words, for the sake of saving his influence from suffering by

his own errors. And that political reform which had once made a new

interest in her life seemed now to reduce itself to narrow devices for

the safety of Florence, in contemptible contradiction with the

alternating professions of blind trust in the Divine care.

It was inevitable that she should judge the Frate unfairly on a question

of individual suffering, at which she looked with the eyes of personal

tenderness, and \_he\_ with the eyes of theoretic conviction. In that

declaration of his, that the cause of his party was the cause of God's

kingdom, she heard only the ring of egoism. Perhaps such words have

rarely been uttered without that meaner ring in them; yet they are the

implicit formula of all energetic belief. And if such energetic belief,

pursuing a grand and remote end, is often in danger of becoming a

demon-worship, in which the votary lets his son and daughter pass

through the fire with a readiness that hardly looks like sacrifice;

tender fellow-feeling for the nearest has its danger too, and is apt to

be timid and sceptical towards the larger aims without which life cannot

rise into religion. In this way poor Romola was being blinded by her

tears.

No one who has ever known what it is thus to lose faith in a fellow-man

whom he has profoundly loved and reverenced, will lightly say that the

shock can leave the faith in the Invisible Goodness unshaken. With the

sinking of high human trust, the dignity of life sinks too; we cease to

believe in our own better self, since that also is part of the common

nature which is degraded in our thought; and all the finer impulses of

the soul are dulled. Romola felt even the springs of her once active

pity drying up, and leaving her to barren egoistic complaining. Had not

\_she\_ had her sorrows too? And few had cared for her, while she had

cared for many. She had done enough; she had striven after the

impossible, and was weary of this stifling crowded life. She longed for

that repose in mere sensation which she had sometimes dreamed of in the

sultry afternoons of her early girlhood, when she had fancied herself

floating naiad-like in the waters.

The clear waves seemed to invite her: she wished she could lie down to

sleep on them and pass from sleep into death. But Romola could not

directly seek death; the fulness of young life in her forbade that. She

could only wish that death would come.

At the spot where she had paused there was a deep bend in the shore, and

a small boat with a sail was moored there. In her longing to glide over

the waters that were getting golden with the level sun-rays, she thought

of a story which had been one of the things she had loved to dwell on in

Boccaccio, when her father fell asleep and she glided from her stool to

sit on the floor and read the `Decamerone.' It was the story of that

fair Gostanza who in her lovelorn-ness desired to live no longer, but

not having the courage to attack her young life, had put herself into a

boat and pushed off to sea; then, lying down in the boat, had wrapt her

mantle round her head, hoping to be wrecked, so that her fear would be

helpless to flee from death. The memory had remained a mere thought in

Romola's mind, without budding into any distinct wish; but now, as she

paused again in her walking to and fro, she saw gliding black against

the red gold another boat with one man in it, making towards the bend

where the first and smaller boat was moored. Walking on again, she at

length saw the man land, pull his boat ashore and begin to unload

something from it. He was perhaps the owner of the smaller boat also:

he would be going away soon, and her opportunity would be gone with

him--her opportunity of buying that smaller boat. She had not yet

admitted to herself that she meant to use it, but she felt a sudden

eagerness to secure the possibility of using it, which disclosed the

half-unconscious growth of a thought into a desire.

"Is that little boat yours also?" she said to the fisherman, who had

looked up, a little startled by the tall grey figure, and had made a

reverence to this holy Sister wandering thus mysteriously in the evening

solitude.

It \_was\_ his boat; an old one, hardly seaworthy, yet worth repairing to

any man who would buy it. By the blessing of San Antonio, whose chapel

was in the village yonder, his fishing had prospered, and he had now a

better boat, which had once been Gianni's who died. But he had not yet

sold the old one. Romola asked him how much it was worth, and then,

while he was busy, thrust the price into a little satchel lying on the

ground and containing the remnant of his dinner. After that, she

watched him furling his sail and asked him how he should set it if he

wanted to go out to sea, and then pacing up and down again, waited to

see him depart.

The imagination of herself gliding away in that boat on the darkening

waters was growing more and more into a longing, as the thought of a

cool brook in sultriness becomes a painful thirst. To be freed from the

burden of choice when all motive was bruised, to commit herself,

sleeping, to destiny which would either bring death or else new

necessities that might rouse a new life in her!--it was a thought that

beckoned her the more because the soft evening air made her long to rest

in the still solitude, instead of going back to the noise and heat of

the village.

At last the slow fisherman had gathered up all his movables and was

walking away. Soon the gold was shrinking and getting duskier in sea

and sky, and there was no living thing in sight, no sound but the

lulling monotony of the lapping waves. In this sea there was no tide

that would help to carry her away if she waited for its ebb; but Romola

thought the breeze from the land was rising a little. She got into the

boat, unfurled the sail, and fastened it as she had learned in that

first brief lesson. She saw that it caught the light breeze, and this

was all she cared for. Then she loosed the boat from its moorings, and

tried to urge it with an oar, till she was far out from the land, till

the sea was dark even to the west, and the stars were disclosing

themselves like a palpitating life over the wide heavens. Resting at

last, she threw back her cowl, and, taking off the kerchief underneath,

which confined her hair, she doubled them both under her head for a

pillow on one of the boat's ribs. The fair head was still very young

and could bear a hard pillow.

And so she lay, with the soft night air breathing on her while she

glided on the water and watched the deepening quiet of the sky. She was

alone now: she had freed herself from all claims, she had freed herself

even from that burden of choice which presses with heavier and heavier

weight when claims have loosed their guiding hold.

Had she found anything like the dream of her girlhood? No. Memories

hung upon her like the weight of broken wings that could never be

lifted--memories of human sympathy which even in its pains leaves a

thirst that the Great Mother has no milk to still. Romola felt orphaned

in those wide spaces of sea and sky. She read no message of love for

her in that far-off symbolic writing of the heavens, and with a great

sob she wished that she might be gliding into death.

She drew the cowl over her head again and covered her face, choosing

darkness rather than the light of the stars, which seemed to her like

the hard light of eyes that looked at her without seeing her. Presently

she felt that she was in the grave, but not resting there: she was

touching the hands of the beloved dead beside her, and trying to wake

them.

CHAPTER SIXTY TWO.

THE BENEDICTION.

About ten o'clock on the morning of the twenty-seventh of February the

currents of passengers along the Florentine streets set decidedly

towards San Marco. It was the last morning of the Carnival, and every

one knew there was a second Bonfire of Vanities being prepared in front

of the Old Palace; but at this hour it was evident that the centre of

popular interest lay elsewhere.

The Piazza di San Marco was filled by a multitude who showed no other

movement than that which proceeded from the pressure of new-comers

trying to force their way forward from all the openings: but the front

ranks were already close-serried and resisted the pressure. Those ranks

were ranged around a semicircular barrier in front of the church, and

within this barrier were already assembling the Dominican Brethren of

San Marco.

But the temporary wooden pulpit erected over the church-door was still

empty. It was presently to be entered by the man whom the Pope's

command had banished from the pulpit of the Duomo, whom the other

ecclesiastics of Florence had been forbidden to consort with, whom the

citizens had been forbidden to hear on pain of excommunication. This

man had said, "A wicked, unbelieving Pope who has gained the pontifical

chair by bribery is not Christ's Vicar. His curses are broken swords:

he grasps a hilt without a blade. His commands are contrary to the

Christian life: it is lawful to disobey them--nay, \_it is not lawful to

obey them\_." And the people still flocked to hear him as he preached in

his own church of San Marco, though the Pope was hanging terrible

threats over Florence if it did not renounce the pestilential schismatic

and send him to Rome to be "converted"--still, as on this very morning,

accepted the Communion from his excommunicated hands. For how if this

Frate had really more command over the Divine lightnings than that

official successor of Saint Peter? It was a momentous question, which

for the mass of citizens could never be decided by the Frate's ultimate

test, namely, what was and what was not accordant with the highest

spiritual law. No: in such a case as this, if God had chosen the Frate

as his prophet to rebuke the High Priest who carried the mystic raiment

unworthily, he would attest his choice by some unmistakable sign. As

long as the belief in the Prophet carried no threat of outward calamity,

but rather the confident hope of exceptional safety, no sign was needed:

his preaching was a music to which the people felt themselves marching

along the way they wished to go; but now that belief meant an immediate

blow to their commerce, the shaking of their position among the Italian

States, and an interdict on their city, there inevitably came the

question, "What miracle showest thou?" Slowly at first, then faster and

faster, that fatal demand had been swelling in Savonarola's ear,

provoking a response, outwardly in the declaration that at the fitting

time the miracle would come; inwardly in the faith--not unwavering, for

what faith is so?--that if the need for miracle became urgent, the work

he had before him was too great for the Divine power to leave it

halting. His faith wavered, but not his speech: it is the lot of every

man who has to speak for the satisfaction of the crowd, that he must

often speak in virtue of yesterday's faith, hoping it will come back

to-morrow.

It was in preparation for a scene which was really a response to the

popular impatience for some supernatural guarantee of the Prophet's

mission, that the wooden pulpit had been erected above the church-door.

But while the ordinary Frati in black mantles were entering and

arranging themselves, the faces of the multitude were not yet eagerly

directed towards the pulpit: it was felt that Savonarola would not

appear just yet, and there was some interest in singling out the various

monks, some of them belonging to high Florentine families, many of them

having fathers, brothers, or cousins among the artisans and shopkeepers

who made the majority of the crowd. It was not till the tale of monks

was complete, not till they had fluttered their books and had begun to

chant, that people said to each other, "Fra Girolamo must be coming

now."

That expectation rather than any spell from the accustomed wail of

psalmody was what made silence and expectation seem to spread like a

paling solemn light over the multitude of upturned faces, all now

directed towards the empty pulpit.

The next instant the pulpit was no longer empty. A figure covered from

head to foot in black cowl and mantle had entered it, and was kneeling

with bent head and with face turned away. It seemed a weary time to the

eager people while the black figure knelt and the monks chanted. But

the stillness was not broken, for the Frate's audiences with Heaven were

yet charged with electric awe for that mixed multitude, so that those

who had already the will to stone him felt their arms unnerved.

At last there was a vibration among the multitude, each seeming to give

his neighbour a momentary aspen-like touch, as when men who have been

watching for something in the heavens see the expected presence silently

disclosing itself. The Frate had risen, turned towards the people, and

partly pushed back his cowl. The monotonous wail of psalmody had

ceased, and to those who stood near the pulpit, it was as if the sounds

which had just been filling their ears had suddenly merged themselves in

the force of Savonarola's flashing glance, as he looked round him in the

silence. Then he stretched out his hands, which, in their exquisite

delicacy, seemed transfigured from an animal organ for grasping into

vehicles of sensibility too acute to need any gross contact: hands that

came like an appealing speech from that part of his soul which was

masked by his strong passionate face, written on now with deeper lines

about the mouth and brow than are made by forty-four years of ordinary

life.

At the first stretching out of the hands some of the crowd in the front

ranks fell on their knees, and here and there a devout disciple farther

off; but the great majority stood firm, some resisting the impulse to

kneel before this excommunicated man (might not a great judgment fall

upon him even in this act of blessing?)--others jarred with scorn and

hatred of the ambitious deceiver who was getting up this new comedy,

before which, nevertheless, they felt themselves impotent, as before the

triumph of a fashion.

But then came the voice, clear and low at first, uttering the words of

absolution--"\_Misereatur vestri\_"--and more fell on their knees: and as

it rose higher and yet clearer, the erect heads became fewer and fewer,

till, at the words "\_Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus\_" it rose to a

masculine cry, as if protesting its power to bless under the clutch of a

demon that wanted to stifle it: it rang like a trumpet to the

extremities of the Piazza, and under it every head was bowed.

After the utterance of that blessing, Savonarola himself fell on his

knees and hid his face in temporary exhaustion. Those great jets of

emotion were a necessary part of his life; he himself had said to the

people long ago, "Without preaching I cannot live." But it was a life

that shattered him.

In a few minutes more, some had risen to their feet, but a larger number

remained kneeling, and all faces were intently watching him. He had

taken into his hands a crystal vessel, containing the consecrated Host,

and was about to address the people.

"You remember, my children, three days ago I besought you, when I should

hold this Sacrament in my hand in the face of you all, to pray fervently

to the Most High that if this work of mine does not come from Him, He

will send a fire and consume me, that I may vanish into the eternal

darkness away from His light which I have hidden with my falsity. Again

I beseech you to make that prayer, and to make it \_now\_."

It was a breathless moment: perhaps no man really prayed, if some in a

spirit of devout obedience made the effort to pray. Every consciousness

was chiefly possessed by the sense that Savonarola was praying, in a

voice not loud, but distinctly audible in the wide stillness.

"Lord, if I have not wrought in sincerity of soul, if my word cometh not

from Thee, strike me in this, moment with Thy thunder, and let the fires

of Thy wrath enclose me."

He ceased to speak, and stood motionless, with the consecrated Mystery

in his hand, with eyes uplifted, and a quivering excitement in his whole

aspect. Every one else was motionless and silent too, while the

sunlight, which for the last quarter of an hour had here and there been

piercing the greyness, made fitful streaks across the convent wall,

causing some awe-stricken spectators to start timidly. But soon there

was a wider parting, and with a gentle quickness, like a smile, a stream

of brightness poured itself on the crystal vase, and then spread itself

over Savonarola's face with mild glorification.

An instantaneous shout rang through the Piazza, "Behold the answer!"

The warm radiance thrilled through Savonarola's frame, and so did the

shout. It was his last moment of untroubled triumph, and in its

rapturous confidence he felt carried to a grander scene yet to come,

before an audience that would represent all Christendom, in whose

presence he should again be sealed as the messenger of the supreme

righteousness, and feel himself full charged with Divine strength. It

was but a moment that expanded itself in that prevision. While the

shout was still ringing in his ears he turned away within the church,

feeling the strain too great for him to tear it longer.

But when the Frate had disappeared, and the sunlight seemed no longer to

have anything special in its illumination, but was spreading itself

impartially over all things clean and unclean, there began, along with

the general movement of the crowd, a confusion of voices in which

certain strong discords and varying scales of laughter made it evident

that, in the previous silence and universal kneeling, hostility and

scorn had only submitted unwillingly to a momentary spell.

"It seems to me the plaudits are giving way to criticism," said Tito,

who had been watching the scene attentively from an upper loggia in one

of the houses opposite the church. "Nevertheless it was a striking

moment, eh, Messer Pietro? Fra Girolamo is a man to make one understand

that there was a time when the monk's frock was a symbol of power over

men's minds rather than over the keys of women's cupboards."

"Assuredly," said Pietro Cennini. "And until I have seen proof that Fra

Girolamo has much less faith in God's judgments than the common run of

men, instead of having considerably more, I shall not believe that he

would brave Heaven in this way if his soul were laden with a conscious

lie."

CHAPTER SIXTY THREE.

RIPENING SCHEMES.

A month after that Carnival, one morning near the end of March, Tito

descended the marble steps of the Old Palace, bound on a pregnant errand

to San Marco. For some reason, he did not choose to take the direct

road, which was but a slightly-bent line from the Old Palace; he chose

rather to make a circuit by the Piazza di Santa Croce, where the people

would be pouring out of the church after the early sermon.

It was in the grand church of Santa Croce that the daily Lenten sermon

had of late had the largest audience. For Savonarola's voice had ceased

to be heard even in his own church of San Marco, a hostile Signoria

having imposed silence on him in obedience to a new letter from the

Pope, threatening the city with an immediate interdict if this "wretched

worm" and "monstrous idol" were not forbidden to preach, and sent to

demand pardon at Rome. And next to hearing Fra Girolamo himself, the

most exciting Lenten occupation was to hear him argued against and

vilified. This excitement was to be had in Santa Croce, where the

Franciscan appointed to preach the Quaresimal sermons had offered to

clench his arguments by walking through the fire with Fra Girolamo. Had

not that schismatical Dominican said, that his prophetic doctrine would

be proved by a miracle at the fitting time? Here, then, was the fitting

time. Let Savonarola walk through the fire, and if he came out unhurt,

the Divine origin of his doctrine would be demonstrated; but if the fire

consumed him, his falsity would be manifest; and that he might have no

excuse for evading the test, the Franciscan declared himself willing to

be a victim to this high logic, and to be burned for the sake of

securing the necessary minor premiss.

Savonarola, according to his habit, had taken he notice of these pulpit

attacks. But it happened that the zealous preacher of Santa Croce was

no other than the Fra Francesco di Puglia, who at Prato the year before

had been engaged in a like challenge with Savonarola's fervent follower

Fra Domenico, but had been called home by his superiors while the heat

was simply oratorical. Honest Fra Domenico, then, who was preaching

Lenten sermons to the women in the Via del Cocomero, no sooner heard of

this new challenge, than he took up the gauntlet for his master, and

declared himself ready to walk through the fire with Fra Francesco.

Already the people were beginning to take a strong interest in what

seemed to them a short and easy method of argument (for those who were

to be convinced), when Savonarola, keenly alive to the dangers that lay

in the mere discussion of the case, commanded Fra Domenico to withdraw

his acceptance of the challenge and secede from the affair. The

Franciscan declared himself content: he had not directed his challenge

to any subaltern, but to Fra Girolamo himself.

After that, the popular interest in the Lenten sermons had flagged a

little. But this morning, when Tito entered the Piazza di Santa Croce,

he found, as he expected, that the people were pouring from the church

in large numbers. Instead of dispersing, many of them concentrated

themselves towards a particular spot near the entrance of the Franciscan

monastery, and Tito took the same direction, threading the crowd with a

careless and leisurely air, but keeping careful watch on that monastic

entrance, as if he expected some object of interest to issue from it.

It was no such expectation that occupied the crowd. The object they

were caring about was already visible to them in the shape of a large

placard, affixed by order of the Signoria, and covered with very legible

official handwriting. But curiosity was somewhat balked by the fact

that the manuscript was chiefly in Latin, and though nearly every man

knew beforehand approximately what the placard contained, he had an

appetite for more exact knowledge, which gave him an irritating sense of

his neighbour's ignorance in not being able to interpret the learned

tongue. For that aural acquaintance with Latin phrases which the

unlearned might pick up from pulpit quotations constantly interpreted by

the preacher could help them little when they saw written Latin; the

spelling even of the modern language being in an unorganised and

scrambling condition for the mass of people who could read and write,

[Note] while the majority of those assembled nearest to the placard were

not in the dangerous predicament of possessing that little knowledge.

"It's the Frate's doctrines that he's to prove by being burned," said

that large public character Goro, who happened to be among the foremost

gazers. "The Signoria has taken it in hand, and the writing is to let

us know. It's what the Padre has been telling us about in his sermon."

"Nay, Goro," said a sleek shopkeeper, compassionately, "thou hast got

thy legs into twisted hose there. The Frate has to prove his doctrines

by \_not\_ being burned: he is to walk through the fire, and come out on

the other side sound and whole."

"Yes, yes," said a young sculptor, who wore his white-streaked cap and

tunic with a jaunty air. "But Fra Girolamo objects to walking through

the fire. Being sound and whole already, he sees no reason why he

should walk through the fire to come out in just the same condition. He

leaves such odds and ends of work to Fra Domenico."

"Then I say he flinches like a coward," said Goro, in a wheezy treble.

"Suffocation! that was what he did at the Carnival. He had us all in

the Piazza to see the lightning strike him, and nothing came of it."

"Stop that bleating," said a tall shoemaker, who had stepped in to hear

part of the sermon, with bunches of slippers hanging over his shoulders.

"It seems to me, friend, that you are about as wise as a calf with

water on its brain. The Frate will flinch from nothing: he'll say

nothing beforehand, perhaps, but when the moment comes he'll walk

through the fire without asking any grey-frock to keep him company. But

I would give a shoestring to know what this Latin all is."

"There's so much of it," said the shopkeeper, "else I'm pretty good at

guessing. Is there no scholar to be seen?" he added, with a slight

expression of disgust.

There was a general turning of heads, which caused the talkers to descry

Tito approaching in their rear.

"Here is one," said the young sculptor, smiling and raising his cap.

"It is the secretary of the Ten: he is going to the convent, doubtless;

make way for him," said the shopkeeper, also doffing, though that mark

of respect was rarely shown by Florentines except to the highest

officials. The exceptional reverence was really exacted by the

splendour and grace of Tito's appearance, which made his black mantle,

with its gold fibula, look like a regal robe, and his ordinary black

velvet cap like an entirely exceptional head-dress. The hardening of

his cheeks and mouth, which was the chief change in his face since he

came to Florence, seemed to a superficial glance only to give his beauty

a more masculine character. He raised his own cap immediately and

said--

"Thanks, my friend, I merely wished, as you did, to see what is at the

foot of this placard--ah, it is as I expected. I had been informed that

the government permits any one who will, to subscribe his name as a

candidate to enter the fire--which is an act of liberality worthy of the

magnificent Signoria--reserving of course the right to make a selection.

And doubtless many believers will be eager to subscribe their names.

For what is it to enter the fire, to one whose faith is firm? A man is

afraid of the fire, because he believes it will burn him; but if he

believes the contrary?"--here Tito lifted his shoulders and made an

oratorical pause--"for which reason I have never been one to disbelieve

the Frate, when he has said that he would enter the fire to prove his

doctrine. For in his place, if you believed the fire would not burn

you, which of you, my friends, would not enter it as readily as you

would walk along the dry bed of the Mugnone?"

As Tito looked round him during this appeal, there was a change in some

of his audience very much like the change in an eager dog when he is

invited to smell something pungent. Since the question of burning was

becoming practical, it was not every one who would rashly commit himself

to any general view of the relation between faith and fire. The scene

might have been too much for a gravity less under command than Tito's.

"Then, Messer Segretario," said the young sculptor, "it seems to me Fra

Francesco is the greater hero, for he offers to enter the fire for the

truth, though he is sure the fire will burn him."

"I do not deny it," said Tito, blandly. "But if it turns out that Fra

Francesco is mistaken, he will have been burned for the wrong side, and

the Church has never reckoned such victims to be martyrs. We must

suspend our judgment until the trial has really taken place."

"It is true, Messer Segretario," said the shopkeeper, with subdued

impatience. "But will you favour us by interpreting the Latin?"

"Assuredly," said Tito. "It does but express the conclusions or

doctrines which the Frate specially teaches, and which the trial by fire

is to prove true or false. They are doubtless familiar to you. First,

that Florence--"

"Let us have the Latin bit by bit, and then tell us what it means," said

the shoemaker, who had been a frequent hearer of Fra Girolamo.

"Willingly," said Tito, smiling. "You will then judge if I give you the

right meaning."

"Yes, yes; that's fair," said Goro.

"\_Ecclesia Dei indiget renovatione\_; that is, the Church of God needs

purifying or regenerating."

"It is true," said several voices at once.

"That means, the priests ought to lead better lives; there needs no

miracle to prove that. That's what the Frate has always been saying,"

said the shoemaker.

"\_Flagellabitur\_," Tito went on. "That is, it will be scourged.

\_Renovabitur\_: it will be purified. \_Florentia quoque post flagellam

renovabitur et prosperabitur\_: Florence also, after the scourging, shall

be purified and shall prosper."

"That means we are to get Pisa again," said the shopkeeper.

"And get the wool from England as we used to do, I should hope," said an

elderly man, in an old-fashioned berretta, who had been silent till now.

"There's been scourging enough with the sinking of the trade."

At this moment, a tall personage, surmounted by a red feather, issued

from the door of the convent, and exchanged an indifferent glance with

Tito; who, tossing his becchetto carelessly over his left shoulder,

turned to his reading again, while the bystanders, with more timidity

than respect, shrank to make a passage for Messer Dolfo Spini.

"\_Infideles convertentur ad Christum\_," Tito went on. "That is, the

infidels shall be converted to Christ."

"Those are the Turks and the Moors. Well, I've nothing to say against

that," said the shopkeeper, dispassionately.

"\_Haec autem omnia erunt temporibus nostris\_: and all these things shall

happen in our times."

"Why, what use would they be else?" said Goro.

"\_Excommunicato nuper lata contra Reverendum Patrem nostrum Fratrem

Hieronymum nulla est\_: the excommunication lately pronounced against our

reverend father, Fra Girolamo, is null. \_Non observantes eam non

peccant\_: those who disregard it are not committing a sin."

"I shall know better what to say to that when we have had the Trial by

Fire," said the shopkeeper.

"Which doubtless will clear up everything," said Tito. "That is all the

Latin--all the conclusions that are to be proved true or false by the

trial. The rest you can perceive is simply a proclamation of the

Signoria in good Tuscan, calling on such as are eager to walk through

the fire, to come to the Palazzo and subscribe their names. Can I serve

you further? If not--"

Tito, as he turned away, raised his cap and bent slightly, with so easy

an air that the movement seemed a natural prompting of deference.

He quickened his pace as he left the Piazza, and after two or three

turnings he paused in a quiet street before a door at which he gave a

light and peculiar knock. It was opened by a young woman whom he

chucked under the chin as he asked her if the Padrone was within, and he

then passed, without further ceremony, through another door which stood

ajar on his right-hand. It admitted him into a handsome but untidy

room, where Dolfo Spini sat playing with a fine stag-hound which

alternately snuffed at a basket of pups and licked his hands with that,

affectionate disregard of her master's morals sometimes held to be one

of the most agreeable attributes of her sex. He just looked up as Tito

entered, but continued his play, simply from that disposition to

persistence in some irrelevant action, by which slow-witted sensual

people seem to be continually counteracting their own purposes. Tito

was patient.

"A handsome \_bracca\_ that," he said, quietly, standing with his thumbs

in his belt. Presently he added, in that cool liquid tone which seemed

mild, but compelled attention, "When you have finished such caresses as

cannot possibly be deferred, my Dolfo, we will talk of business, if you

please. My time, which I could wish to be eternity at your service, is

not entirely my own this morning."

"Down, Mischief, down!" said Spini, with sudden roughness.

"Malediction!" he added, still more gruffly, pushing the dog aside;

then, starting from his seat, he stood close to Tito, and put a hand on

his shoulder as he spoke.

"I hope your sharp wits see all the ins and outs of this business, my

fine necromancer, for it seems to me no clearer than the bottom of a

sack."

"What is your difficulty, my cavalier?"

"These accursed Frati Minori at Santa Croce. They are drawing back now.

Fra Francesco himself seems afraid of sticking to his challenge; talks

of the Prophet being likely to use magic to get up a false miracle--

thinks he himself might be dragged into the fire and burned, and the

Prophet might come out whole by magic, and the Church be none the

better. And then, after all our talking, there's not so much as a

blessed lay brother who will offer himself to pair with that pious sheep

Fra Domenico."

"It is the peculiar stupidity of the tonsured skull that prevents them

from seeing of how little consequence it is whether they are burned or

not," said Tito. "Have you sworn well to them that they shall be in no

danger of entering the fire?"

"No," said Spini, looking puzzled; "because one of them will be obliged

to go in with Fra Domenico, who thinks it a thousand years till the

fagots are ready."

"Not at all. Fra Domenico himself is not likely to go in. I have told

you before, my Dolfo, only your powerful mind is not to be impressed

without more repetition than suffices for the vulgar--I have told you

that now you have got the Signoria to take up this affair and prevent it

from being hushed up by Fra Girolamo, nothing is necessary but that on a

given day the fuel should be prepared in the Piazza, and the people got

together with the expectation of seeing something prodigious. If, after

that, the Prophet quits the Piazza without any appearance of a miracle

on his side, he is ruined with the people: they will be ready to pelt

him out of the city, the Signoria will find it easy to banish him from

the territory, and his Holiness may do as he likes with him. Therefore,

my Alcibiades, swear to the Franciscans that their grey-frocks shall not

come within singeing distance of the fire."

Spini rubbed the back of his head with one hand, and tapped his sword

against his leg with the other, to stimulate his power of seeing these

intangible combinations.

"But," he said presently, looking up again, "unless we fall on him in

the Piazza, when the people are in a rage, and make an end of him and

his lies then and there, Valori and the Salviati and the Albizzi will

take up arms and raise a fight for him. I know that was talked of when

there was the hubbub on Ascension Sunday. And the people may turn round

again: there may be a story raised of the French king coming again, or

some other cursed chance in the hypocrite's favour. The city will never

be safe till he's out of it."

"He \_will\_ be out of it before long, without your giving yourself any

further trouble than this little comedy of the Trial by Fire. The wine

and the sun will make vinegar without any shouting to help them, as your

Florentine sages would say. You will have the satisfaction of

delivering your city from an incubus by an able stratagem, instead of

risking blunders with sword-thrusts."

"But suppose he \_did\_ get magic and the devil to help him, and walk

through the fire after all?" said Spini, with a grimace intended to hide

a certain shyness in trenching on this speculative ground. "How do you

know there's nothing in those things? Plenty of scholars believe in

them, and this Frate is bad enough for anything."

"Oh, of course there are such things," said Tito, with a shrug: "but I

have particular reasons for knowing that the Frate is not on such terms

with the devil as can give him any confidence in this affair. The only

magic he relies on is his own ability."

"Ability!" said Spini. "Do you call it ability to be setting Florence

at loggerheads with the Pope and all the powers of Italy--all to keep

beckoning at the French king who never comes? You may call him able,

but I call him a hypocrite, who wants to be master of everybody, and get

himself made Pope."

"You judge with your usual penetration, my captain, but our opinions do

not clash. The Frate, wanting to be master, and to carry out his

projects against the Pope, requires the lever of a foreign power, and

requires Florence as a fulcrum. I used to think him a narrow-minded

bigot, but now, I think him a shrewd ambitious man who knows what he is

aiming at, and directs his aim as skilfully as you direct a ball when

you are playing at \_maglio\_."

"Yes, yes," said Spini, cordially, "I can aim a ball."

"It is true," said Tito, with bland gravity; "and I should not have

troubled you with my trivial remark on the Frate's ability, but that you

may see how this will heighten the credit of your success against him at

Rome and at Milan, which is sure to serve you in good stead when the

city comes to change its policy."

"Well, thou art a good little demon, and shalt have good pay," said

Spini, patronisingly; whereupon he thought it only natural that the

useful Greek adventurer should smile with gratification as he said--

"Of course, any advantage to me depends entirely on your--"

"We shall have our supper at my palace to-night," interrupted Spini,

with a significant nod and an affectionate pat on Tito's shoulder, "and

I shall expound the new scheme to them all."

"Pardon, my magnificent patron," said Tito; "the scheme has been the

same from the first--it has never varied except in your memory. Are you

sure you have fast hold of it now?"

Spini rehearsed.

"One thing more," he said, as Tito was hastening away. "There is that

sharp-nosed notary, Ser Ceccone; he has been handy of late. Tell me,

you who can see a man wink when you're behind him, do you think I may go

on making use of him?"

Tito dared not say "No." He knew his companion too well to trust him

with advice when all Spini's vanity and self-interest were not engaged

in concealing the adviser.

"Doubtless," he answered, promptly. "I have nothing to say against

Ceccone."

That suggestion of the notary's intimate access to Spini caused Tito a

passing twinge, interrupting his amused satisfaction in the success with

which he made a tool of the man who fancied himself a patron. For he

had been rather afraid of Ser Ceccone. Tito's nature made him

peculiarly alive to circumstances that might be turned to his

disadvantage; his memory was much haunted by such possibilities,

stimulating him to contrivances by which he might ward them off. And it

was not likely that he should forget that October morning more than a

year ago, when Romola had appeared suddenly before him at the door of

Nello's shop, and had compelled him to declare his certainty that Fra

Girolamo was not going outside the gates. The fact that Ser Ceccone had

been a witness of that scene, together with Tito's perception that for

some reason or other he was an object of dislike to the notary, had

received a new importance from the recent turn of events. For after

having been implicated in the Medicean plots, and having found it

advisable in consequence to retire into the country for some time, Ser

Ceccone had of late, since his reappearance in the city, attached

himself to the Arrabbiati, and cultivated the patronage of Dolfo Spini.

Now that captain of the Compagnacci was much given, when in the company

of intimates, to confidential narrative about his own doings, and if Ser

Ceccone's powers of combination were sharpened by enmity, he might

gather some knowledge which he could use against Tito with very

unpleasant results.

It would be pitiable to be balked in well-conducted schemes by an

insignificant notary; to be lamed by the sting of an insect whom he had

offended unawares. "But," Tito said to himself, "the man's dislike to

me can be nothing deeper than the ill-humour of a dinnerless dog; I

shall conquer it if I can make him prosperous." And he had been very

glad of an opportunity which had presented itself of providing the

notary with a temporary post as an extra \_cancelliere\_ or registering

secretary under the Ten, believing that with this sop and the

expectation of more, the waspish cur must be quite cured of the

disposition to bite him.

But perfect scheming demands omniscience, and the notary's envy had been

stimulated into hatred by causes of which Tito knew nothing. That

evening when Tito, returning from his critical audience with the Special

Council, had brushed by Ser Ceccone on the stairs, the notary, who had

only just returned from Pistoja, and learned the arrest of the

conspirators, was bound on an errand which bore a humble resemblance to

Tito's. He also, without giving up a show of popular zeal, had been

putting in the Medicean lottery. He also had been privy to the

unexecuted plot, and was willing to tell what he knew, but knew much

less to tell. He also would have been willing to go on treacherous

errands, but a more eligible agent had forestalled him. His

propositions were received coldly; the council, he was told, was already

in possession of the needed information, and since he had been thus busy

in sedition, it would be well for him to retire out of the way of

mischief, otherwise the government might be obliged to take note of him.

Ser Ceccone wanted no evidence to make him attribute his failure to

Tito, and his spite was the more bitter because the nature of the case

compelled him to hold his peace about it. Nor was this the whole of his

grudge against the flourishing Melema. On issuing from his

hiding-place, and attaching himself to the Arrabbiati, he had earned

some pay as one of the spies who reported information on Florentine

affairs to the Milanese court; but his pay had been small,

notwithstanding his pains to write full letters, and he had lately been

apprised that his news was seldom more than a late and imperfect edition

of what was known already. Now Ser Ceccone had no positive knowledge

that Tito had an underhand connection with the Arrabbiati and the Court

of Milan, but he had a suspicion of which he chewed the cud with as

strong a sense of flavour as if it had been a certainty.

This fine-grown vigorous hatred could swallow the feeble opiate of

Tito's favours, and be as lively as ever after it. Why should Ser

Ceccone like Melema any the better for doing him favours? Doubtless the

suave secretary had his own ends to serve; and what right had he to the

superior position which made it possible for him to show favour? But

since he had tuned his voice to flattery, Ser Ceccone would pitch his in

the same key, and it remained to be seen who would win at the game of

outwitting.

To have a mind well oiled with that sort of argument which prevents any

claim from grasping it, seems eminently, convenient sometimes; only the

oil becomes objectionable when we find it anointing other minds on which

we want to establish a hold.

Tito, however, not being quite omniscient, felt now no more than a

passing twinge of uneasiness at the suggestion of Ser Ceccone's power to

hurt him. It was only for a little while that he cared greatly about

keeping clear of suspicions and hostility. He was now playing his final

game in Florence, and the skill he was conscious of applying gave him a

pleasure in it even apart from the expected winnings. The errand on

which he was bent to San Marco was a stroke in which he felt so much

confidence that he had already given notice to the Ten of his desire to

resign his office at an indefinite period within the next month or two,

and had obtained permission to make that resignation suddenly, if his

affairs needed it, with the understanding that Niccolo Macchiavelli was

to be his provisional substitute, if not his successor. He was acting

on hypothetic grounds, but this was the sort of action that had the

keenest interest for his diplomatic mind. From a combination of general

knowledge concerning Savonarola's purposes with diligently observed

details he had framed a conjecture which he was about to verify by this

visit to San Marco. If he proved to be right, his game would be won,

and he might soon turn his back on Florence. He looked eagerly towards

that consummation, for many circumstances besides his own weariness of

the place told him that it was time for him to be gone.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note. The old diarists throw in their consonants with a regard rather

to quantity than position, well typified by the \_Ragnolo Braghiello\_

(Agnolo Gabriello) of Boccaccio's Ferondo.

CHAPTER SIXTY FOUR.

THE PROPHET IN HIS CELL.

Tito's visit to San Marco had been announced beforehand, and he was at

once conducted by Fra Niccolo, Savonarola's secretary, up the spiral

staircase into the long corridors lined with cells--corridors where Fra

Angelico's frescoes, delicate as the rainbow on the melting cloud,

startled the unaccustomed eye here and there, as if they had been sudden

reflections cast from an ethereal world, where the Madonna sat crowned

in her radiant glory, and the Divine infant looked forth with perpetual

promise.

It was an hour of relaxation in the monastery, and most of the cells

were empty. The light through the narrow windows looked in on nothing

but bare walls, and the hard pallet and the crucifix. And even behind

that door at the end of a long corridor, in the inner cell opening from

an antechamber where the Prior usually sat at his desk or received

private visitors, the high jet of light fell on only one more object

that looked quite as common a monastic sight as the bare walls and hard

pallet. It was but the back of a figure in the long white Dominican

tunic and scapulary, kneeling with bowed head before a crucifix. It

might have been any ordinary Fra Girolamo, who had nothing worse to

confess than thinking of wrong things when he was singing \_in coro\_, or

feeling a spiteful joy when Fra Benedetto dropped the ink over his own

miniatures in the breviary he was illuminating--who had no higher

thought than that of climbing safely into Paradise up the narrow ladder

of prayer, fasting, and obedience. But under this particular white

tunic there was a heart beating with a consciousness inconceivable to

the average monk, and perhaps hard to be conceived by any man who has

not arrived at self-knowledge through a tumultuous inner life: a

consciousness in which irrevocable errors and lapses from veracity were

so entwined with noble purposes and sincere beliefs, in which

self-justifying expediency was so inwoven with the tissue of a great

work which the whole being seemed as unable to abandon as the body was

unable to abandon glowing and trembling before the objects of hope and

fear, that it was perhaps impossible, whatever course might be adopted,

for the conscience to find perfect repose.

Savonarola was not only in the attitude of prayer, there were Latin

words of prayer on his lips; and yet he was not praying. He had entered

his cell, had fallen on his knees, and burst into words of supplication,

seeking in this way for an influx of calmness which would be a warrant

to him that the resolutions urged on him by crowding thoughts and

passions were not wresting him away from the Divine support; but the

previsions and impulses which had been at work within him for the last

hour were too imperious; and while he pressed his hands against his

face, and while his lips were uttering audibly. "\_Cor mundum crea in

me\_" his mind was still filled with the images of the snare his enemies

had prepared for him, was still busy with the arguments by which he

could justify himself against their taunts and accusations.

And it was not only against his opponents that Savonarola had to defend

himself. This morning he had had new proof that his friends and

followers were as much inclined to urge on the Trial by Fire as his

enemies: desiring and tacitly expecting that he himself would at last

accept the challenge and evoke the long-expected miracle which was to

dissipate doubt and triumph over malignity. Had he not said that God

would declare himself at the fitting time? And to the understanding of

plain Florentines, eager to get party questions settled, it seemed that

no time could be more fitting than this. Certainly, if Fra Domenico

walked through the fire unhurt, \_that\_ would be a miracle, and the faith

and ardour of that good brother were felt to be a cheering augury; but

Savonarola was acutely conscious that the secret longing of his

followers to see him accept the challenge had not been dissipated by any

reasons he had given for his refusal.

Yet it was impossible to him to satisfy them; and with bitter distress

he saw now that it was impossible for him any longer to resist the

prosecution of the trial in Fra Domenico's case. Not that Savonarola

had uttered and written a falsity when he declared his belief in a

future supernatural attestation of his work; but his mind was so

constituted that while it was easy for him to believe in a miracle

which, being distant and undefined, was screened behind the strong

reasons he saw for its occurrence, and yet easier for him to have a

belief in inward miracles such as his own prophetic inspiration and

divinely-wrought intuitions; it was at the same time insurmountably

difficult to him to believe in the probability of a miracle which, like

this of being carried unhurt through the fire, pressed in all its

details on his imagination and involved a demand not only for belief but

for exceptional action.

Savonarola's nature was one of those in which opposing tendencies

co-exist in almost equal strength: the passionate sensibility which,

impatient of definite thought, floods every idea with emotion and tends

towards contemplative ecstasy, alternated in him with a keen perception

of outward facts and a vigorous practical judgment of men and things.

And in this case of the Trial by Fire, the latter characteristics were

stimulated into unusual activity by an acute physical sensitiveness

which gives overpowering force to the conception of pain and destruction

as a necessary sequence of facts which have already been causes of pain

in our experience. The promptitude with which men will consent to touch

red-hot iron with a wet finger is not to be measured by their theoretic

acceptance of the impossibility that the iron will burn them: practical

belief depends on what is most strongly represented in the mind at a

given moment. And with the Frate's constitution, when the Trial by Fire

was urged on his imagination as an immediate demand, it was impossible

for him to believe that he or any other man could walk through the

flames unhurt--impossible for him to believe that even if he resolved to

offer himself, he would not shrink at the last moment.

But the Florentines were not likely to make these fine distinctions. To

the common run of mankind it has always seemed a proof of mental vigour

to find moral questions easy, and judge conduct according to concise

alternatives. And nothing was likely to seem plainer than that a man

who at one time declared that God would not leave him without the

guarantee of a miracle, and yet drew back when it was proposed to test

his declaration, had said what he did not believe. Were not Fra

Domenico and Fra Mariano, and scores of Piagnoni besides, ready to enter

the fire? What was the cause of their superior courage, if it was not

their superior faith? Savonarola could not have explained his conduct

satisfactorily to his friends, even if he had been able to explain it

thoroughly to himself. And he was not. Our naked feelings make haste

to clothe themselves in propositions which lie at hand among our store

of opinions, and to give a true account of what passes within us

something else is necessary besides sincerity, even when sincerity is

unmixed. In these very moments, when Savonarola was kneeling in audible

prayer, he had ceased to hear the words on his lips. They were drowned

by argumentative voices within him that shaped their reasons more and

more for an outward audience.

"To appeal to heaven for a miracle by a rash acceptance of a challenge,

which is a mere snare prepared for me by ignoble foes, would be a

tempting of God, and the appeal would not be responded to. Let the

Pope's legate come, let the ambassadors of all the great Powers come and

promise that the calling of a General Council and the reform of the

Church shall hang on the miracle, and I will enter the flames, trusting

that God will not withhold His seal from that great work. Until then I

reserve myself for higher duties which are directly laid upon me: it is

not permitted to me to leap from the chariot for the sake of wrestling

with every loud vaunter. But Fra Domenico's invincible, zeal to enter

into the trial may be the sign of a Divine vocation, may be a pledge

that the miracle--"

But no! when Savonarola brought his mind close to the threatened scene

in the Piazza, and imagined a human body entering the fire, his belief

recoiled again. It was not an event that his imagination could simply

see: he felt it with shuddering vibrations to the extremities of his

sensitive fingers. The miracle could not be. Nay, the trial itself was

not to happen: he was warranted in doing all in his power to hinder it.

The fuel might be got ready in the Piazza, the people might be

assembled, the preparatory formalities might be gone through: all this

was perhaps inevitable now, and he could no longer resist it without

bringing dishonour on himself? Yes, and therefore on the cause of God.

But it was not really intended that the Franciscan should enter the

fire, and while \_he\_ hung back there would be the means of preventing

Fra Domenico's entrance. At the very worst, if Fra Domenico were

compelled to enter, he should carry the consecrated Host with him, and

with that Mystery in his hand, there might be a warrant for expecting

that the ordinary effects of fire would be stayed; or, more probably,

this demand would be resisted, and might thus be a final obstacle to the

trial.

But these intentions could not be avowed: he must appear frankly to

await the trial, and to trust in its issue. That dissidence between

inward reality and outward seeming was not the Christian simplicity

after which he had striven through years of his youth and prime, and

which he had preached as a chief fruit of the Divine life. In the

stress and heat of the day, with cheeks burning, with shouts ringing in

the ears, who is so blest as to remember the yearnings he had in the

cool and silent morning and know that he has not belied them?

"O God, it is for the sake of the people--because they are blind--

because their faith depends on me. If I put on sackcloth and cast

myself among the ashes, who will take up the standard and head the

battle? Have I not been led by a way which I knew not to the work that

lies before me?"

The conflict was one that could not end, and in the effort at prayerful

pleading the uneasy mind laved its smart continually in thoughts of the

greatness of that task which there was no man else to fulfil if he

forsook it. It was not a thing of everyday that a man should be

inspired with the vision and the daring that made a sacred rebel.

Even the words of prayer had died away. He continued, to kneel, but his

mind was filled with the images of results to be felt through all

Europe; and the sense of immediate difficulties was being lost in the

glow of that vision, when the knocking at the door announced the

expected visit.

Savonarola drew on his mantle before he left his cell, as was his custom

when he received visitors; and with that immediate response to any

appeal from without which belongs to a power-loving nature accustomed to

make its power felt by speech, he met Tito with a glance as

self-possessed and strong as if he had risen from resolution instead of

conflict.

Tito did not kneel, but simply made a greeting of profound deference,

which Savonarola received quietly without any sacerdotal words, and then

desiring him to be seated, said at once--

"Your business is something of weight, my son, that could not be

conveyed through others?"

"Assuredly, father, else I should not have presumed to ask it. I will

not trespass on your time by any proem. I gathered from a remark of

Messer Domenico Mazzinghi that you might be glad to make use of the next

special courier who is sent to France with despatches from the Ten. I

must entreat you to pardon me if I have been too officious; but inasmuch

as Messer Domenico is at this moment away at his villa, I wished to

apprise you that a courier carrying important letters is about to depart

for Lyons at daybreak to-morrow."

The muscles of Fra Girolamo's face were eminently under command, as must

be the case with all men whose personality is powerful, and in

deliberate speech he was habitually cautious, confiding his intentions

to none without necessity. But under any strong mental stimulus, his

eyes were liable to a dilatation and added brilliancy that no strength

of will could control. He looked steadily at Tito, and did not answer

immediately, as if he had to consider whether the information he had

just heard met any purpose of his.

Tito, whose glance never seemed observant, but rarely let anything

escape it, had expected precisely that dilatation and flash of

Savonarola's eyes which he had noted on other occasions. He saw it, and

then immediately busied himself in adjusting his gold fibula, which had

got wrong; seeming to imply that he awaited an answer patiently.

The fact was that Savonarola had expected to receive this intimation

from Domenico Mazzinghi, one of the Ten, an ardent disciple of his whom

he had already employed to write a private letter to the Florentine

ambassador in France, to prepare the way for a letter to the French king

himself in Savonarola's handwriting, which now lay ready in the desk at

his side. It was a letter calling on the king to assist in summoning a

General Council, that might reform the abuses of the Church, and begin

by deposing Pope Alexander, who was not rightfully Pope, being a vicious

unbeliever, elected by corruption and governing by simony.

This fact was not what Tito knew, but what his constructive talent,

guided by subtle indications, had led him to guess and hope.

"It is true, my son," said Savonarola, quietly,--"it is true I have

letters which I would gladly send by safe conveyance under cover to our

ambassador. Our community of San Marco, as you know, has affairs in

France, being, amongst other things, responsible for a debt to that

singularly wise and experienced Frenchman, Signor Philippe de Comines,

on the library of the Medici, which we purchased; but I apprehend that

Domenico Mazzinghi himself may return to the city before evening, and I

should gain more time for preparation of the letters if I waited to

deposit them in his hands."

"Assuredly, reverend father, that might be better on all grounds, except

one, namely, that if anything occurred to hinder Messer Domenico's

return, the despatch of the letters would require either that I should

come to San Marco again at a late hour, or that you should send them to

me by your secretary; and I am aware that you wish to guard against the

false inferences which might be drawn from a too frequent communication

between yourself and any officer of the government." In throwing out

this difficulty Tito felt that the more unwillingness the Frate showed

to trust him, the more certain he would be of his conjecture.

Savonarola was silent; but while he kept his mouth firm, a slight glow

rose in his face with the suppressed excitement that was growing within

him. It would be a critical moment--that in which he delivered the

letter out of his own hands.

"It is most probable that Messer Domenico will return in time," said

Tito, affecting to consider the Frate's determination settled, and

rising from his chair as he spoke. "With your permission, I will take

my leave, father, not to trespass on your time when my errand is done;

but as I may not be favoured with another interview, I venture to

confide to you--what is not yet known to others, except to the

magnificent Ten--that I contemplate resigning my secretaryship, and

leaving Florence shortly. Am I presuming too much on your interest in

stating what relates chiefly to myself?"

"Speak on, my son," said the Frate; "I desire to know your prospects."

"I find, then, that I have mistaken my real vocation in forsaking the

career of pure letters, for which I was brought up. The politics of

Florence, father, are worthy to occupy the greatest mind--to occupy

yours--when a man is in a position to execute his own ideas; but when,

like me, he can only hope to be the mere instrument of changing schemes,

he requires to be animated by the minor attachments of a born

Florentine: also, my wife's unhappy alienation from a Florentine

residence since the painful events of August naturally influences me. I

wish to join her."

Savonarola inclined his head approvingly.

"I intend, then, soon to leave Florence, to visit the chief courts of

Europe, and to widen my acquaintance with the men of letters in the

various universities. I shall go first to the court of Hungary, where

scholars are eminently welcome; and I shall probably start in a week or

ten days. I have not concealed from you, father, that I am no religious

enthusiast; I have not my wife's ardour; but religious enthusiasm, as I

conceive, is not necessary in order to appreciate the grandeur and

justice of your views concerning the government of nations and the

Church. And if you condescend to intrust me with any commission that

will further the relations you wish to establish, I shall feel honoured.

May I now take my leave?"

"Stay, my son. When you depart from Florence I will send a letter to

your wife, of whose spiritual welfare I would fain be assured, for she

left me in anger. As for the letters to France, such as I have ready--"

Savonarola rose and turned to his desk as he spoke. He took from it a

letter on which Tito could see, but not read, an address in the Frate's

own minute and exquisite handwriting, still to be seen covering the

margins of his Bibles. He took a large sheet of paper, enclosed the

letter, and sealed it.

"Pardon me, father," said Tito, before Savonarola had time to speak,

"unless it were your decided wish, I would rather not incur the

responsibility of carrying away the letter. Messer Domenico Mazzinghi

will doubtless return, or, if not, Fra Niccolo can convey it to me at

the second hour of the evening, when I shall place the other despatches

in the courier's hands."

"At present, my son," said the Frate, waiving that point, "I wish you to

address this packet to our ambassador in your own handwriting, which is

preferable to my secretary's."

Tito sat down to write the address while the Frate stood by him with

folded arms, the glow mounting in his cheek, and his lip at last

quivering. Tito rose and was about to move away, when Savonarola said

abruptly--"Take it, my son. There is no use in waiting. It does not

please me that Fra Niccolo should have needless errands to the Palazzo."

As Tito took the letter, Savonarola stood in suppressed excitement that

forbade further speech. There seems to be a subtle emanation from

passionate natures like his, making their mental states tell immediately

on others; when they are absent-minded and inwardly excited there is

silence in the air.

Tito made a deep reverence and went out with the letter under his

mantle.

The letter was duly delivered to the courier and carried out of

Florence. But before that happened another messenger, privately

employed by Tito, had conveyed information in cipher, which was carried

by a series of relays to armed agents of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan,

on the watch for the very purpose of intercepting despatches on the

borders of the Milanese territory.

CHAPTER SIXTY FIVE.

THE TRIAL BY FIRE.

Little more than a week after, on the seventh of April, the great Piazza

della Signoria presented a stranger spectacle even than the famous

Bonfire of Vanities. And a greater multitude had assembled to see it

than had ever before tried to find place for themselves in the wide

Piazza, even on the day of San Giovanni.

It was near mid-day, and since the early morning there had been a

gradual swarming of the people at every coign of vantage or disadvantage

offered by the facades and roofs of the houses, and such spaces of the

pavement as were free to the public. Men were seated on iron rods that

made a sharp angle with the rising wall, were clutching slim pillars

with arms and legs, were astride on the necks of the rough statuary that

here and there surmounted the entrances of the grander houses, were

finding a palm's-breadth of seat on a bit of architrave, and a footing

on the rough projections of the rustic stonework, while they clutched

the strong iron rings or staples driven into the walls beside them.

For they were come to see a Miracle: cramped limbs and abraded flesh

seemed slight inconveniences with that prospect close at hand. It is

the ordinary lot of mankind to hear of miracles, and more or less to

believe in them; but now the Florentines were going to see one. At the

very least they would see half a miracle; for if the monk did not come

whole out of the fire, they would see him enter it, and infer that he

was burned in the middle.

There could be no reasonable doubt, it seemed, that the fire would be

kindled, and that the monks would enter it. For there, before their

eyes, was the long platform, eight feet broad, and twenty yards long,

with a grove of fuel heaped up terribly, great branches of dry oak as a

foundation, crackling thorns above, and well-anointed tow and rags,

known to make fine flames in Florentine illuminations. The platform

began at the corner of the marble terrace in front of the Old Palace,

close to Marzocco, the stone lion, whose aged visage looked frowningly

along the grove of fuel that stretched obliquely across the Piazza.

Besides that, there were three large bodies of armed men: five hundred

hired soldiers of the Signoria stationed before the palace; five hundred

Compagnacci under Dolfo Spini, far-off on the opposite side of the

Piazza; and three hundred armed citizens of another sort, under Marco

Salviati, Savonarola's friend, in front of Orgagna's Loggia, where the

Franciscans and Dominicans were to be placed with their champions.

Here had been much expense of money and labour, and high dignities were

concerned. There could be no reasonable doubt that something great was

about to happen; and it would certainly be a great thing if the two

monks were simply burned, for in that case too God would have spoken,

and said very plainly that Fra Girolamo was not His prophet.

And there was not much longer to wait, for it was now near mid-day.

Half the monks were already at their post, and that half of the Loggia

that lies towards the Palace was already filled with grey mantles; but

the other half, divided off by boards, was still empty of everything

except a small altar. The Franciscans had entered and taken their

places in silence. But now, at the other side of the Piazza was heard

loud chanting from two hundred voices, and there was general

satisfaction, if not in the chanting, at least in the evidence that the

Dominicans were come. That loud chanting repetition of the prayer, "Let

God arise, and let His enemies be scattered," was unpleasantly

suggestive to some impartial ears of a desire to vaunt confidence and

excite dismay; and so was the flame-coloured velvet cope in which Fra

Domenico was arrayed as he headed the procession, cross in hand, his

simple mind really exalted with faith, and with the genuine intention to

enter the flames for the glory of God and Fra Girolamo. Behind him came

Savonarola in the white vestment of a priest, carrying in his hands a

vessel containing the consecrated Host. He, too, was chanting loudly;

he, too, looked firm and confident, and as all eyes were turned eagerly

on him, either in anxiety, curiosity, or malignity, from the moment when

he entered the Piazza till he mounted the steps of the Loggia and

deposited the Sacrament on the altar, there was an intensifying flash

and energy in his countenance responding to that scrutiny.

We are so made, almost all of us, that the false seeming which we have

thought of with painful shrinking when beforehand in our solitude it has

urged itself on us as a necessity, will possess our muscles and move our

lips as if nothing but that were easy when once we have come under the

stimulus of expectant eyes and ears. And the strength of that stimulus

to Savonarola can hardly be measured by the experience of ordinary

lives. Perhaps no man has ever had a mighty influence over his fellows

without having the innate need to dominate, and this need usually

becomes the more imperious in proportion as the complications of life

make Self inseparable from a purpose which is not selfish. In this way

it came to pass that on the day of the Trial by Fire, the doubleness

which is the pressing temptation in every public career, whether of

priest, orator, or statesman, was more strongly defined in Savonarola's

consciousness as the acting of a part, than at any other period in his

life. He was struggling not against impending martyrdom, but against

impending ruin.

Therefore he looked and acted as if he were thoroughly confident, when

all the while foreboding was pressing with leaden weight on his heart,

not only because of the probable issues of this trial, but because of

another event already past--an event which was spreading a sunny

satisfaction through the mind of a man who was looking down at the

passion-worn prophet from a window of the Old Palace. It was a common

turning-point towards which those widely-sundered lives had been

converging, that two evenings ago the news had come that the Florentine

courier of the Ten had been arrested and robbed of all his despatches,

so that Savonarola's letter was already in the hands of the Duke of

Milan, and would soon be in the hands of the Pope, not only heightening

rage, but giving a new justification to extreme measures. There was no

malignity in Tito Melema's satisfaction: it was the mild

self-gratulation of a man who has won a game that has employed

hypothetic skill, not a game that has stirred the muscles and heated the

blood. Of course that bundle of desires and contrivances called human

nature, when moulded into the form of a plain-featured Frate

Predicatore, more or less of an impostor, could not be a pathetic object

to a brilliant-minded scholar who understood everything. Yet this

tonsured Girolamo with the high nose and large under lip was an

immensely clever Frate, mixing with his absurd superstitions or

fabrications very remarkable notions about government: no babbler, but a

man who could keep his secrets. Tito had no more spite against him than

against Saint Dominic. On the contrary, Fra Girolamo's existence had

been highly convenient to Tito Melema, furnishing him with that round of

the ladder from which he was about to leap on to a new and smooth

footing very much to his heart's content. And everything now was in

forward preparation for that leap: let one more sun rise and set, and

Tito hoped to quit Florence. He had been so industrious that he felt at

full leisure to amuse himself with to-day's comedy, which the

thick-headed Dolfo Spini could never have brought about but for him.

Not yet did the loud chanting cease, but rather swelled to a deafening

roar, being taken up in all parts of the Piazza by the Piagnoni, who

carried their little red crosses as a badge, and, most of them, chanted

the prayer for the confusion of God's enemies with the expectation of an

answer to be given through the medium of a more signal personage than

Fra Domenico. This good Frate in his flame-coloured cope was now

kneeling before the little altar on which the Sacrament was deposited,

awaiting his summons.

On the Franciscan side of the Loggia there was no chanting and no

flame-colour: only silence and greyness. But there was this

counterbalancing difference, that the Franciscans had two champions: a

certain Fra Giuliano was to pair with Fra Domenico, while the original

champion, Fra Francesco, confined his challenge to Savonarola.

"Surely," thought the men perched uneasily on the rods and pillars, "all

must be ready now. This chanting might stop, and we should see better

when the Frati are moving towards the platform."

But the Frati were not to be seen moving yet. Pale Franciscan faces

were looking uneasily over the boarding at that flame-coloured cope. It

had an evil look and might be enchanted, so that a false miracle would

be wrought by magic. Your monk may come whole out of the fire, and yet

it may be the work of the devil.

And now there was passing to and fro between the Loggia and the marble

terrace of the Palazzo, and the roar of chanting became a little

quieter, for every one at a distance was beginning to watch more

eagerly. But it soon appeared that the new movement was not a

beginning, but an obstacle to beginning. The dignified Florentines

appointed to preside over this affair as moderators on each side, went

in and out of the Palace, and there was much debate with the

Franciscans. But at last it was clear that Fra Domenico, conspicuous in

his flame-colour, was being fetched towards the Palace. Probably the

fire had already been kindled--it was difficult to see at a distance--

and the miracle was going to begin.

Not at all. The flame-coloured cope disappeared within the Palace; then

another Dominican was fetched away; and for a long while everything went

on as before--the tiresome chanting, which was not miraculous, and Fra

Girolamo in his white vestment standing just in the same place. But at

last something happened: Fra Domenico was seen coming out of the Palace

again, and returning to his brethren. He had changed all his clothes

with a brother monk, but he was guarded on each flank by a Franciscan,

lest coming into the vicinity of Savonarola he should be enchanted

again.

"Ah, then," thought the distant spectators, a little less conscious of

cramped limbs and hunger, "Fra Domenico is not going to enter the fire.

It is Fra Girolamo who offers himself after all. We shall see him move

presently, and if he comes out of the flames we shall have a fine view

of him!"

But Fra Girolamo did not move, except with the ordinary action

accompanying speech. The speech was bold and firm, perhaps somewhat

ironically remonstrant, like that of Elijah to the priests of Baal,

demanding the cessation of these trivial delays. But speech is the most

irritating kind of argument for those who are out of hearing, cramped in

the limbs, and empty in the stomach. And what need was there for

speech? If the miracle did not begin, it could be no one's fault but

Fra Girolamo's, who might put an end to all difficulties by offering

himself now the fire was ready, as he had been forward enough to do when

there was no fuel in sight.

More movement to and fro, more discussion; and the afternoon seemed to

be slipping away all the faster because the clouds had gathered, and

changed the light on everything, and sent a chill through the

spectators, hungry in mind and body.

\_Now\_ it was the crucifix which Fra Domenico wanted to carry into the

fire and must not be allowed to profane in that manner. After some

little resistance Savonarola gave way to this objection, and thus had

the advantage of making one more concession; but he immediately placed

in Fra Domenico's hands the vessel containing the consecrated Host. The

idea that the presence of the sacred Mystery might in the worst

extremity avert the ordinary effects of fire hovered in his mind as a

possibility; but the issue on which he counted was of a more positive

kind. In taking up the Host he said quietly, as if he were only doing

what had been presupposed from the first--

"Since they are not willing that you should enter with the crucifix, my

brother, enter simply with the Sacrament."

New horror in the Franciscans; new firmness in Savonarola. "It was

impious presumption to carry the Sacrament into the fire: if it were

burned the scandal would be great in the minds of the weak and

ignorant."

"Not at all: even if it were burned, the Accidents only would be

consumed, the Substance would remain." Here was a question that might

be argued till set of sun and remain as elastic as ever; and no one

could propose settling it by proceeding to the trial, since it was

essentially a preliminary question. It was only necessary that both

sides should remain firm--that the Franciscans should persist in not

permitting the Host to be carried into the fire, and that Fra Domenico

should persist in refusing to enter without it.

Meanwhile the clouds were getting darker, the air chiller. Even the

chanting was missed now it had given way to inaudible argument; and the

confused sounds of talk from all points of the Piazza, showing that

expectation was everywhere relaxing, contributed to the irritating

presentiment that nothing decisive would be done. Here and there a

dropping shout was heard; then, more frequent shouts in a rising scale

of scorn.

"Light the fire and drive them in!"

"Let us have a smell of roast--we want our dinner!"

"Come Prophet, let us know whether anything is to happen before the

twenty-four hours are over!"

"Yes, yes, what's your last vision?"

"Oh, he's got a dozen in his inside; they're the small change for a

miracle!"

"Ola, Frate, where are you? Never mind wasting the fuel!"

Still the same movement to and fro between the Loggia and the Palace;

still the same debate, slow and unintelligible to the multitude as the

colloquies of insects that touch antennas to no other apparent effect

than that of going and coming. But an interpretation was not long

wanting to unheard debates in which Fra Girolamo was constantly a

speaker: it was he who was hindering the trial; everybody was appealing

to him now, and he was hanging back.

Soon the shouts ceased to be distinguishable, and were lost in an uproar

not simply of voices, but of clashing metal and trampling feet. The

suggestions of the irritated people had stimulated old impulses in Dolfo

Spini and his band of Compagnacci; it seemed an opportunity not to be

lost for putting an end to Florentine difficulties by getting possession

of the arch-hypocrite's person; and there was a vigorous rush of the

armed men towards the Loggia, thrusting the people aside, or driving

them on to the file of soldiery stationed in front of the Palace. At

this movement, everything was suspended both with monks and embarrassed

magistrates except the palpitating watch to see what would come of the

struggle.

But the Loggia was well guarded by the band under the brave Salviati;

the soldiers of the Signoria assisted in the repulse; and the trampling

and rushing were all backward again towards the Tetto de' Pisani, when

the blackness of the heavens seemed to intensify in this moment of utter

confusion; and the rain, which had already been felt in scattered drops,

began to fall with rapidly growing violence, wetting the fuel, and

running in streams off the platform, wetting the weary hungry people to

the skin, and driving every man's disgust and rage inwards to ferment

there in the damp darkness.

Everybody knew now that the Trial by Fire was not to happen. The

Signoria was doubtless glad of the rain, as an obvious reason, better

than any pretext, for declaring that both parties might go home. It was

the issue which Savonarola had expected and desired; yet it would be an

ill description of what he felt to say that he was glad. As that rain

fell, and plashed on the edge of the Loggia, and sent spray over the

altar and all garments and faces, the Frate knew that the demand for him

to enter the fire was at an end. But he knew too, with a certainty as

irresistible as the damp chill that had taken possession of his frame,

that the design of his enemies was fulfilled, and that his honour was

not saved. He knew that he should have to make his way to San Marco

again through the enraged crowd, and that the hearts of many friends who

would once have defended him with their lives would now be turned

against him.

When the rain had ceased he asked for a guard from the Signoria, and it

was given him. Had he said that he was willing to die for the work of

his life? Yes, and he had not spoken falsely. But to die in

dishonour--held up to scorn as a hypocrite and a false prophet? "O God!

\_that\_ is not martyrdom! It is the blotting out of a life that has been

a protest against wrong. Let me die because of the worth that is in me,

not because of my weakness."

The rain had ceased, and the light from the breaking clouds fell on

Savonarola as he left the Loggia in the midst of his guard, walking as

he had come, with the Sacrament in his hand. But there seemed no glory

in the light that fell on him now, no smile of heaven: it was only that

light which shines on, patiently and impartially, justifying or

condemning by simply showing all things in the slow history of their

ripening. He heard no blessing, no tones of pity, but only taunts and

threats. He knew this was a foretaste of coming bitterness; yet his

courage mounted under all moral attack, and he showed no sign of dismay.

"Well parried, Frate!" said Tito, as Savonarola descended the steps of

the Loggia. "But I fear your career at Florence is ended. What say

you, my Niccolo?"

"It is a pity his falsehoods were not all of a wise sort," said

Macchiavelli, with a melancholy shrug. "With the times so much on his

side as they are about Church affairs, he might have done something

great."

CHAPTER SIXTY SIX.

A MASQUE OF THE FURIES.

The next day was Palm Sunday, or Olive Sunday, as it was chiefly called

in the olive-growing Valdarno; and the morning sun shone with a more

delicious clearness for the yesterday's rain. Once more Savonarola

mounted the pulpit in San Marco, and saw a flock around him whose faith

in him was still unshaken; and this morning in calm and sad sincerity he

declared himself ready to die: in front of all visions he saw his own

doom. Once more he uttered the benediction, and saw the faces of men

and women lifted towards him in venerating love. Then he descended the

steps of the pulpit and turned away from that sight for ever.

For before the sun had set Florence was in an uproar. The passions

which had been roused the day before had been smouldering through that

quiet morning, and had now burst out again with a fury not unassisted by

design, and not without official connivance. The uproar had begun at

the Duomo in an attempt of some Compagnacci to hinder the evening

sermon, which the Piagnoni had assembled to hear. But no sooner had

men's blood mounted and the disturbances had become an affray than the

cry arose, "To San Marco! the fire to San Marco!"

And long before the daylight had died, both the church and convent were

being besieged by an enraged and continually increasing multitude. Not

without resistance. For the monks, long conscious of growing hostility

without, had arms within their walls, and some of them fought as

vigorously in their long white tunics as if they had been Knights

Templars. Even the command of Savonarola could not prevail against the

impulse to self-defence in arms that were still muscular under the

Dominican serge. There were laymen too who had not chosen to depart,

and some of them fought fiercely: there was firing from the high altar

close by the great crucifix, there was pouring of stones and hot embers

from the convent roof, there was close fighting with swords in the

cloisters. Notwithstanding the force of the assailants, the attack

lasted till deep night.

The demonstrations of the Government had all been against the convent;

early in the attack guards had been sent for, not to disperse the

assailants, but to command all within the convent to lay down their

arms, all laymen to depart from it, and Savonarola himself to quit the

Florentine territory within twelve hours. Had Savonarola quitted the

convent then, he could hardly have escaped being torn to pieces; he was

willing to go, but his friends hindered him. It was felt to be a great

risk even for some laymen of high name to depart by the garden wall, but

among those who had chosen to do so was Francesco Valori, who hoped to

raise rescue from without.

And now when it was deep night--when the struggle could hardly have

lasted much longer, and the Compagnacci might soon have carried their

swords into the library, where Savonarola was praying with the Brethren

who had either not taken up arms or had laid them down at his command--

there came a second body of guards, commissioned by the Signoria to

demand the persons of Fra Girolamo and his two coadjutors, Fra Domenico

and Fra Salvestro.

Loud was the roar of triumphant hate when the light of lanterns showed

the Frate issuing from the door of the convent with a guard who promised

him no other safety than that of the prison. The struggle now was, who

should get first in the stream that rushed up the narrow street to see

the Prophet carried back in ignominy to the Piazza where he had braved

it yesterday--who should be in the best place for reaching his ear with

insult, nay, if possible, for smiting him and kicking him. This was not

difficult for some of the armed Compagnacci who were not prevented from

mixing themselves with the guards.

When Savonarola felt himself dragged and pushed along in the midst of

that hooting multitude; when lanterns were lifted to show him deriding

faces; when he felt himself spit upon, smitten and kicked with grossest

words of insult, it seemed to him that the worst bitterness of life was

past. If men judged him guilty, and were bent on having his blood, it

was only death that awaited him. But the worst drop of bitterness can

never be wrung on to our lips from without: the lowest depth of

resignation is not to be found in martyrdom; it is only to be found when

we have covered our heads in silence and felt, "I am not worthy to be a

martyr; the Truth shall prosper, but not by me."

But that brief imperfect triumph of insulting the Frate, who had soon

disappeared under the doorway of the Old Palace, was only like the taste

of blood to the tiger. Were there not the houses of the hypocrite's

friends to be sacked? Already one-half of the armed multitude, too much

in the rear to share greatly in the siege of the convent, had been

employed in the more profitable work of attacking rich houses, not with

planless desire for plunder, but with that discriminating selection of

such as belonged to chief Piagnoni, which showed that the riot was under

guidance, and that the rabble with clubs and staves was well officered

by sword-girt Compagnacci. Was there not--next criminal after the

Frate--the ambitious Francesco Valori, suspected of wanting with the

Frate's help to make himself a Doge or Gonfaloniere for life? And the

grey-haired man who, eight months ago, had lifted his arm and his voice

in such ferocious demand for justice on five of his fellow-citizens,

only escaped from San Marco to experience what \_others\_ called justice--

to see his house surrounded by an angry, greedy multitude, to see his

wife shot dead with an arrow, and to be himself murdered, as he was on

his way to answer a summons to the Palazzo, by the swords of men named

Ridolfi and Tornabuoni.

In this way that Masque of the Furies, called Riot, was played on in

Florence through the hours of night and early morning.

But the chief director was not visible: he had his reasons for issuing

his orders from a private retreat, being of rather too high a name to

let his red feather be seen waving amongst all the work that was to be

done before the dawn. The retreat was the same house and the same room

in a quiet street between Santa Croce and San Marco, where we have seen

Tito paying a secret visit to Dolfo Spini. Here the Captain of the

Compagnacci sat through this memorable night, receiving visitors who

came and went, and went and came, some of them in the guise of armed

Compagnacci, others dressed obscurely and without visible arms. There

was abundant wine on the table, with drinking-cups for chance comers and

though Spini was on his guard against excessive drinking, he took enough

from time to time to heighten the excitement produced by the news that

was being brought to him continually.

Among the obscurely-dressed visitors Ser Ceccone was one of the most

frequent, and as the hours advanced towards the morning twilight he had

remained as Spini's constant companion, together with Francesco Cei, who

was then in rather careless hiding in Florence, expecting to have his

banishment revoked when the Frate's fall had been accomplished.

The tapers had burnt themselves into low shapeless masses, and holes in

the shutters were just marked by a sombre outward light, when Spini, who

had started from his seat and walked up and down with an angry flush on

his face at some talk that had been going forward with those two

unmilitary companions, burst out--

"The devil spit him! he shall pay for it, though. Ha, ha! the claws

shall be down on him when he little thinks of them. So \_he\_ was to be

the great man after all! He's been pretending to chuck everything

towards my cap, as if I were a blind beggarman, and all the while he's

been winking and filling his own scarsella. I should like to hang skins

about him and set my hounds on him! And he's got that fine ruby of

mine, I was fool enough to give him yesterday. Malediction! And he was

laughing at me in his sleeve two years ago, and spoiling the best plan

that ever was laid. I was a fool for trusting myself with a rascal who

had long-twisted contrivances that nobody could see to the end of but

himself."

"A Greek, too, who dropped into Florence with gems packed about him,"

said Francesco Cei, who had a slight smile of amusement on his face at

Spini's fuming. "You did \_not\_ choose your confidant very wisely, my

Dolfo."

"He's a cursed deal cleverer than you, Francesco, and handsomer too,"

said Spini, turning on his associate with a general desire to worry

anything that presented itself.

"I humbly conceive," said Ser Ceccone, "that Messer Francesco's poetic

genius will outweigh--"

"Yes, yes, rub your hands! I hate that notary's trick of yours,"

interrupted Spini, whose patronage consisted largely in this sort of

frankness. "But there comes Taddeo, or somebody: now's the time! What

news, eh?" he went on, as two Compagnacci entered with heated looks.

"Bad!" said one. "The people have made up their minds they were going

to have the sacking of Soderini's house, and now they have been balked

we shall have them turning on us, if we don't take care. I suspect

there are some Mediceans buzzing about among them, and we may see them

attacking your palace over the bridge before long, unless we can find a

bait for them another way."

"I have it!" said Spini, and seizing Taddeo by the belt he drew him

aside to give him directions, while the other went on telling Cei how

the Signoria had interfered about Soderini's house.

"Ecco!" exclaimed Spini, presently, giving Taddeo a slight push towards

the door. "Go, and make quick work."

CHAPTER SIXTY SEVEN.

WAITING BY THE RIVER.

About the time when the two Compagnacci went on their errand, there was

another man who, on the opposite side of the Arno, was also going out

into the chill grey twilight. His errand, apparently, could have no

relation to theirs; he was making his way to the brink of the river at a

spot which, though within the city walls, was overlooked by no

dwellings, and which only seemed the more shrouded and lonely for the

warehouses and granaries which at some little distance backward turned

their shoulders to the river. There was a sloping width of long grass

and rushes made all the more dank by broad gutters which here and there

emptied themselves into the Arno.

The gutters and the loneliness were the attraction that drew this man to

come and sit down among the grass, and bend over the waters that ran

swiftly in the channelled slope at his side. For he had once had a

large piece of bread brought to him by one of those friendly runlets,

and more than once a raw carrot and apple-parings. It was worth while

to wait for such chances in a place where there was no one to see, and

often in his restless wakefulness he came to watch here before daybreak;

it might save him for one day the need of that silent begging which

consisted in sitting on a church-step by the wayside out beyond the

Porta San Frediano.

For Baldassarre hated begging so much that he would perhaps have chosen

to die rather than make even that silent appeal, but for one reason that

made him desire to live. It was no longer a hope; it was only that

possibility which clings to every idea that has taken complete

possession of the mind: the sort of possibility that makes a woman watch

on a headland for the ship which held something dear, though all her

neighbours are certain that the ship was a wreck long years ago. After

he had come out of the convent hospital, where the monks of San Miniato

had taken care of him as long as he was helpless; after he had watched

in vain for the Wife who was to help him, and had begun to think that

she was dead of the pestilence that seemed to fill all the space since

the night he parted from her, he had been unable to conceive any way in

which sacred vengeance could satisfy itself through his arm. His knife

was gone, and he was too feeble in body to win another by work, too

feeble in mind, even if he had had the knife, to contrive that it should

serve its one purpose. He was a shattered, bewildered, lonely old man;

yet he desired to live: \_he\_ waited for something of which he had no

distinct vision--something dim, formless--that startled him, and made

strong pulsations within him, like that unknown thing which we look for

when we start from sleep, though no voice or touch has waked us.

Baldassarre desired to live; and therefore he crept out in the grey

light, and seated himself in the long grass, and watched the waters that

had a faint promise in them.

Meanwhile the Compagnacci were busy at their work. The formidable bands

of armed men, left to do their will with very little interference from

an embarrassed if not conniving Signoria, had parted into two masses,

but both were soon making their way by different roads towards the Arno.

The smaller mass was making for the Ponte Rubaconte, the larger for the

Ponte Vecchio; but in both the same words had passed from mouth to mouth

as a signal, and almost every man of the multitude knew that he was

going to the Via de' Bardi to sack a house there. If he knew no other

reason, could he demand a better?

The armed Compagnacci knew something more, for a brief word of command

flies quickly, and the leaders of the two streams of rabble had a

perfect understanding that they would meet before a certain house a

little towards the eastern end of the Via de' Bardi, where the master

would probably be in bed, and be surprised in his morning sleep.

But the master of that house was neither sleeping nor in bed; he had not

been in bed that night. For Tito's anxiety to quit Florence had been

stimulated by the events of the previous day: investigations would

follow in which appeals might be made to him delaying his departure: and

in all delay he had an uneasy sense that there was danger. Falsehood

had prospered and waxed strong; but it had nourished the twin life,

Fear. He no longer wore his armour, he was no longer afraid of

Baldassarre; but from the corpse of that dead fear a spirit had risen--

the undying \_habit\_ of fear. He felt he should not be safe till he was

out of this fierce, turbid Florence; and now he was ready to go. Maso

was to deliver up his house to the new tenant; his horses and mules were

awaiting him in San Gallo; Tessa and the children had been lodged for

the night in the Borgo outside the gate, and would be dressed in

readiness to mount the mules and join him. He descended the stone steps

into the courtyard, he passed through the great doorway, not the same

Tito, but nearly as brilliant as on the day when he had first entered

that house and made the mistake of falling in love with Romola. The

mistake was remedied now: the old life was cast off, and was soon to be

far behind him.

He turned with rapid steps towards the Piazza dei Mozzi, intending to

pass over the Ponte Rubaconte; but as he went along certain sounds came

upon his ears that made him turn round and walk yet more quickly in the

opposite direction. Was the mob coming into Oltrarno? It was a

vexation, for he would have preferred the more private road. He must

how go by the Ponte Vecchio; and unpleasant sensations made him draw his

mantle close round him, and walk at his utmost speed. There was no one

to see him in that grey twilight. But before he reached the end of the

Via de' Bardi, like sounds fell on his ear again, and this time they

were much louder and nearer. Could he have been deceived before? The

mob must be coming over the Ponte Vecchio. Again he turned, from an

impulse of fear that was stronger than reflection; but it was only to be

assured that the mob was actually entering the street from the opposite

end. He chose not to go back to his house: after all they would not

attack \_him\_. Still, he had some valuables about him; and all things

except reason and order are possible with a mob. But necessity does the

work of courage. He went on towards the Ponte Vecchio, the rush and the

trampling and the confused voices getting so loud before him that he had

ceased to hear them behind.

For he had reached the end of the street, and the crowd pouring from the

bridge met him at the turning and hemmed in his way. He had not time to

wonder at a sudden shout before he felt himself surrounded, not, in the

first instance, by an unarmed rabble, but by armed Compagnacci; the next

sensation was that his cap fell off, and that he was thrust violently

forward amongst the rabble, along the narrow passage of the bridge.

Then he distinguished the shouts, "Piagnone! Medicean! Piagnone!

Throw him over the bridge!"

His mantle was being torn off him with strong pulls that would have

throttled him if the fibula had not given way. Then his scarsella was

snatched at; but all the while he was being hustled and dragged; and the

snatch failed--his scarsella still hung at his side. Shouting, yelling,

half motiveless execration rang stunningly in his ears, spreading even

amongst those who had not yet seen him, and only knew there was a man to

be reviled. Tito's horrible dread was that he should be struck down or

trampled on before he reached the open arches that surmount the centre

of the bridge. There was one hope for him, that they might throw him

over before they had wounded him or beaten the strength out of him; and

his whole soul was absorbed in that one hope and its obverse terror.

Yes--they \_were\_ at the arches. In that moment Tito, with bloodless

face and eyes dilated, had one of the self-preserving inspirations that

come in extremity. With a sudden desperate effort he mastered the clasp

of his belt, and flung belt and scarsella forward towards a yard of

clear space against the parapet, crying in a ringing voice--

"There are diamonds! there is gold!"

In the instant the hold on him was relaxed, and there was a rush towards

the scarsella. He threw himself on the parapet with a desperate leap,

and the next moment plunged--plunged with a great plash into the dark

river far below.

It was his chance of salvation; and it was a good chance. His life had

been saved once before by his fine swimming, and as he rose to the

surface again after his long dive he had a sense of deliverance. He

struck out with all the energy of his strong prime, and the current

helped him. If he could only swim beyond the Ponte alla Carrara he

might land in a remote part of the city, and even yet reach San Gallo.

Life was still before him. And the idiot mob, shouting and bellowing on

the bridge there, would think he was drowned.

They did think so. Peering over the parapet along the dark stream, they

could not see afar off the moving blackness of the floating hair, and

the velvet tunic-sleeves.

It was only from the other way that a pale olive face could be seen

looking white above the dark water: a face not easy even for the

indifferent to forget, with its square forehead, the long low arch of

the eyebrows, and the long lustrous agate-like eyes. Onward the face

went on the dark current, with inflated quivering nostrils, with the

blue veins distended on the temples. One bridge was passed--the bridge

of Santa Trinita. Should he risk landing now rather than trust to his

strength? No. He heard, or fancied he heard, yells and cries pursuing

him. Terror pressed him most from the side of his fellow-men: he was

less afraid of indefinite chances, and he swam on, panting and

straining. He was not so fresh as he would have been if he had passed

the night in sleep.

Yet the next bridge--the last bridge--was passed. He was conscious of

it; but in the tumult of his blood, he could only feel vaguely that he

was safe and might land. But where? The current was having its way

with him: he hardly knew where he was: exhaustion was bringing on the

dreamy state that precedes unconsciousness.

But now there were eyes that discerned him--aged eyes, strong for the

distance. Baldassarre, looking up blankly from the search in the runlet

that brought him nothing, had seen a white object coming along the

broader stream. Could that be any fortunate chance for \_him\_? He

looked and looked till the object gathered form: then he leaned forward

with a start as he sat among the rank green stems, and his eyes seemed

to be filled with a new light. Yet he only watched--motionless.

Something was being brought to him.

The next instant a man's body was cast violently on the grass two yards

from him, and he started forward like a panther, clutching the velvet

tunic as he fell forward on the body and flashed a look in the man's

face.

Dead--was he dead? The eyes were rigid. But no, it could not be--

Justice had brought him. Men looked dead sometimes, and yet the life

came back into them. Baldassarre did not feel feeble in that moment.

He knew just what he could do. He got his large fingers within the neck

of the tunic and held them there, kneeling on one knee beside the body

and watching the face. There was a fierce hope in his heart, but it was

mixed with trembling. In his eyes there was only fierceness: all the

slow-burning remnant of life within him seemed to have leaped into

flame.

Rigid--rigid still. Those eyes with the half-fallen lids were locked

against vengeance. \_Could\_ it be that he was dead? There was nothing

to measure the time: it seemed long enough for hope to freeze into

despair.

Surely at last the eyelids were quivering: the eyes were no longer

rigid, There was a vibrating light in them: they opened wide.

"Ah, yes! You see me--you know me!"

Tito knew him; but he did not know whether it was life or death that had

brought him into the presence of his injured father. It might be

death--and death might mean this chill gloom with the face of the

hideous past hanging over him for ever.

But now Baldassarre's only dread was, lest the young limbs should escape

him. He pressed his knuckles against the round throat, and knelt upon

the chest with all the force of his aged frame. Let death come now!

Again he kept his watch on the face. And when the eyes were rigid

again, he dared not trust them. He would never lose his hold till some

one came and found them. Justice would send some witness, and then he,

Baldassarre, would declare that he had killed this traitor, to whom he

had once been a father. They would perhaps believe him now, and then he

would be content with the struggle of justice on earth--then he would

desire to die with his hold on this body, and follow the traitor to hell

that he might clutch him there.

And so he knelt, and so he pressed his knuckles against the round

throat, without trusting to the seeming death, till the light got strong

and he could kneel no longer. Then he sat on the body, still clutching

the neck of the tunic. But the hours went on, and no witness came. No

eyes descried afar off the two human bodies among the tall grass by the

riverside. Florence was busy with greater affairs, and the preparation

of a deeper tragedy.

Not long after those two bodies were lying in the grass, Savonarola was

being tortured, and crying out in his agony, "I will confess!"

It was not until the sun was westward that a waggon drawn by a mild grey

ox came to the edge of the grassy margin, and as the man who led it was

leaning to gather up the round stones that lay heaped in readiness to be

carried away, he detected some startling object in the grass. The aged

man had fallen forward, and his dead clutch was on the garment of the

other. It was not possible to separate them: nay, it was better to put

them into the waggon and carry them as they were into the great Piazza,

that notice might be given to the Eight.

As the waggon entered the frequented streets there was a growing crowd

escorting it with its strange burden. No one knew the bodies for a long

while, for the aged face had fallen forward, half hiding the younger.

But before they had been moved out of sight, they had been recognised.

"I know that old man," Piero di Cosimo had testified. "I painted his

likeness once. He is the prisoner who clutched Melema on the steps of

the Duomo."

"He is perhaps the same old man who appeared at supper in my gardens,"

said Bernardo Rucellai, one of the Eight. "I had forgotten him. I

thought he had died in prison. But there is no knowing the truth now."

Who shall put his finger on the work of justice, and say, "It is there"?

Justice is like the Kingdom of God--it is not without us as a fact, it

is within us as a great yearning.

CHAPTER SIXTY EIGHT.

ROMOLA'S WAKING.

Romola in her boat passed from dreaming into long deep sleep, and then

again from deep sleep into busy dreaming, till at last she felt herself

stretching out her arms in the court of the Bargello, where the

flickering flames of the tapers seemed to get stronger and stronger till

the dark scene was blotted out with light. Her eyes opened and she saw

it was the light of morning. Her boat was lying still in a little

creek; on her right-hand lay the speckless sapphire-blue of the

Mediterranean; on her left one of those scenes which were and still are

repeated again and again like a sweet rhythm, on the shores of that

loveliest sea.

In a deep curve of the mountains lay a breadth of green land, curtained

by gentle tree-shadowed slopes leaning towards the rocky heights. Up

these slopes might be seen here and there, gleaming between the

tree-tops, a pathway leading to a little irregular mass of building that

seemed to have clambered in a hasty way up the mountain-side, and taken

a difficult stand there for the sake of showing the tall belfry as a

sight of beauty to the scattered and clustered houses of the village

below. The rays of the newly-risen sun fell obliquely on the westward

horn of this crescent-shaped nook: all else lay in dewy shadow. No

sound came across the stillness; the very waters seemed to have curved

themselves there for rest.

The delicious sun-rays fell on Romola and thrilled her gently like a

caress. She lay motionless, hardly watching the scene; rather, feeling

simply the presence of peace and beauty. While we are still in our

youth there can always come, in our early waking, moments when mere

passive existence is itself a Lethe, when the exquisiteness of subtle

indefinite sensation creates a bliss which is without memory and without

desire. As the soft warmth penetrated Romola's young limbs, as her eyes

rested on this sequestered luxuriance, it seemed that the agitating past

had glided away like that dark scene in the Bargello, and that the

afternoon dreams of her girlhood had really come back to her. For a

minute or two the oblivion was untroubled; she did not even think that

she could rest here for ever, she only felt that she rested. Then she

became distinctly conscious that she was lying in the boat which had

been bearing her over the waters all through the night. Instead of

bringing her to death, it had been the gently lulling cradle of a new

life. And in spite of her evening despair she was glad that the morning

had come to her again: glad to think that she was resting in the

familiar sunlight rather than in the unknown regions of death. \_Could\_

she not rest here? No sound from Florence would reach her. Already

oblivion was troubled; from behind the golden haze were piercing domes

and towers and walls, parted by a river and enclosed by the green hills.

She rose from her reclining posture and sat up in the boat, willing, if

she could, to resist the rush of thoughts that urged themselves along

with the conjecture how far the boat had carried her. Why need she

mind? This was a sheltered nook where there were simple villagers who

would not harm her. For a little while, at least, she might rest and

resolve on nothing. Presently she would go and get some bread and milk,

and then she would nestle in the green quiet, and feel that there was a

pause in her life. She turned to watch the crescent-shaped valley, that

she might get back the soothing sense of peace and beauty which she had

felt in her first waking.

She had not been in this attitude of contemplation more than a few

minutes when across the stillness there came a piercing cry; not a brief

cry, but continuous and more and more intense. Romola felt sure it was

the cry of a little child in distress that no one came to help. She

started up and put one foot on the side of the boat ready to leap on to

the beach; but she paused there and listened: the mother of the child

must be near, the cry must soon cease. But it went on, and drew Romola

so irresistibly, seeming the more piteous to her for the sense of peace

which had preceded it, that she jumped on to the beach and walked many

paces before she knew what direction she would take. The cry, she

thought, came from some rough garden growth many yards on her

right-hand, where she saw a half-ruined hovel. She climbed over a low

broken stone fence, and made her way across patches of weedy green crops

and ripe but neglected corn. The cry grew plainer, and convinced that

she was right she hastened towards the hovel; but even in that hurried

walk she felt an oppressive change in the air as she left the sea

behind. Was there some taint lurking amongst the green luxuriance that

had seemed such an inviting shelter from the heat of the coming day?

She could see the opening into the hovel now, and the cry was darting

through her like a pain. The next moment her foot was within the

doorway, but the sight she beheld in the sombre light arrested her with

a shock of awe and horror. On the straw, with which the floor was

scattered, lay three dead bodies, one of a tall man, one of a girl about

eight years old, and one of a young woman whose long black hair was

being clutched and pulled by a living child--the child that was sending

forth the piercing cry. Romola's experience in the haunts of death and

disease made thought and action prompt: she lifted the little living

child, and in trying to soothe it on her bosom, still bent to look at

the bodies and see if they were really dead. The strongly marked type

of race in their features, and their peculiar garb, made her conjecture

that they were Spanish or Portuguese Jews, who had perhaps been put

ashore and abandoned there by rapacious sailors, to whom their property

remained as a prey. Such things were happening continually to Jews

compelled to abandon their homes by the Inquisition: the cruelty of

greed thrust them from the sea, and the cruelty of superstition thrust

them back to it.

"But, surely," thought Romola, "I shall find some woman in the village

whose mother's heart will not let her refuse to tend this helpless

child--if the real mother is indeed dead."

This doubt remained, because while the man and girl looked emaciated and

also showed signs of having been long dead, the woman seemed to have

been hardier, and had not quite lost the robustness of her form.

Romola, kneeling, was about to lay her hand on the heart; but as she

lifted the piece of yellow woollen drapery that lay across the bosom,

she saw the purple spots which marked the familiar pestilence. Then it

struck her that if the villagers knew of this, she might have more

difficulty than she had expected in getting help from them; they would

perhaps shrink from her with that child in her arms. But she had money

to offer them, and they would not refuse to give her some goat's milk in

exchange for it.

She set out at once towards the village, her mind filled now with the

effort to soothe the little dark creature, and with wondering how she

should win some woman to be good to it. She could not help hoping a

little in a certain awe she had observed herself to inspire, when she

appeared, unknown and unexpected, in her religious dress. As she passed

across a breadth of cultivated ground, she noticed, with wonder, that

little patches of corn mingled with the other crops had been left to

over-ripeness untouched by the sickle, and that golden apples and dark

figs lay rotting on the weedy earth. There were grassy spaces within

sight, but no cow, or sheep, or goat. The stillness began to have

something fearful in it to Romola; she hurried along towards the

thickest cluster of houses, where there would be the most life to appeal

to on behalf of the helpless life she carried in her arms. But she had

picked up two figs, and bit little pieces from the sweet pulp to still

the child with.

She entered between two lines of dwellings. It was time that villagers

should have been stirring long ago, but not a soul was in sight. The

air was becoming more and more oppressive, laden, it seemed, with some

horrible impurity. There was a door open; she looked in, and saw grim

emptiness. Another open door; and through that she saw a man lying dead

with all his garments on, his head lying athwart a spade handle, and an

earthenware cruse in his hand, as if he had fallen suddenly.

Romola felt horror taking possession of her. Was she in a village of

the unburied dead? She wanted to listen if there were any faint sound,

but the child cried out afresh when she ceased to feed it, and the cry

filled her ears. At last she saw a figure crawling slowly out of a

house, and soon sinking back in a sitting posture against the wall. She

hastened towards the figure; it was a young woman in fevered anguish,

and she, too, held a pitcher in her hand. As Romola approached her she

did not start; the one need was too absorbing for any other idea to

impress itself on her.

"Water! get me water!" she said, with a moaning utterance.

Romola stooped to take the pitcher, and said gently in her ear, "You

shall have water; can you point towards the well?"

The hand was lifted towards the more distant end of the little street,

and Romola set off at once with as much speed as she could use under the

difficulty of carrying the pitcher as well as feeding the child. But

the little one was getting more content as the morsels of sweet pulp

were repeated, and ceased to distress her with its cry, so that she

could give a less distracted attention to the objects around her.

The well lay twenty yards or more beyond the end of the street, and as

Romola was approaching it her eyes were directed to the opposite green

slope immediately below the church. High up, on a patch of grass

between the trees, she had descried a cow and a couple of goats, and she

tried to trace a line of path that would lead her close to that cheering

sight, when once she had done her errand to the well. Occupied in this

way, she was not aware that she was very near the well, and that some

one approaching it on the other side had fixed a pair of astonished eyes

upon her.

Romola certainly presented a sight which, at, that moment and in that

place, could hardly have been seen without some pausing and palpitation.

With her gaze fixed intently on the distant slope, the long lines of

her thick grey garment giving a gliding character to her rapid walk, her

hair rolling backward and illuminated on the left side by the sun-rays,

the little olive baby on her right arm now looking out with jet-black

eyes, she might well startle that youth of fifteen, accustomed to swing

the censer in the presence of a Madonna less fair and marvellous than

this.

"She carries a pitcher in her hand--to fetch water for the sick. It is

the Holy Mother, come to take care of the people who have the

pestilence."

It was a sight of awe: she would, perhaps, be angry with those who

fetched water for themselves only. The youth flung down his vessel in

terror, and Romola, aware now of some one near her, saw the black and

white figure fly as if for dear life towards the slope she had just been

contemplating. But remembering the parched sufferer, she half-filled

her pitcher quickly and hastened back.

Entering the house to look for a small cup, she saw salt meat and meal:

there were no signs of want in the dwelling. With nimble movement she

seated baby on the ground, and lifted a cup of water to the sufferer,

who drank eagerly and then closed her eyes and leaned her head backward,

seeming to give herself up to the sense of relief. Presently she opened

her eyes, and, looking at Romola, said languidly--

"Who are you?"

"I came over the sea," said Romola, "I only came this morning. Are all

the people dead in these houses?"

"I think they are all ill now--all that are not dead. My father and my

sister lie dead upstairs, and there is no one to bury them: and soon I

shall die."

"Not so, I hope," said Romola. "I am come to take care of you. I am

used to the pestilence; I am not afraid. But there must be some left

who are not ill. I saw a youth running towards the mountain when I went

to the well."

"I cannot tell. When the pestilence came, a great many people went

away, and drove off the cows and goats. Give me more water!"

Romola, suspecting that if she followed the direction of the youth's

flight, she should find some men and women who were still healthy and

able, determined to seek them out at once, that she might at least win

them to take care of the child, and leave her free to come back and see

how many living needed help, and how many dead needed burial. She

trusted to her powers of persuasion to conquer the aid of the timorous,

when once she knew what was to be done.

Promising the sick woman to come back to her, she lifted the dark

bantling again, and set off towards the slope. She felt no burden of

choice on her now, no longing for death. She was thinking how she would

go to the other sufferers, as she had gone to that fevered woman.

But, with the child on her arm, it was not so easy to her as usual to

walk up a slope, and it seemed a long while before the winding path took

her near the cow and the goats. She was beginning herself to feel faint

from heat, hunger, and thirst, and as she reached a double turning, she

paused to consider whether she would not wait near the cow, which some

one was likely to come and milk soon, rather than toil up to the church

before she had taken any rest. Raising her eyes to measure the steep

distance, she saw peeping between the boughs, not more than five yards

off, a broad round face, watching her attentively, and lower down the

black skirt of a priest's garment, and a hand grasping a bucket. She

stood mutely observing, and the face, too, remained motionless. Romola

had often witnessed the overpowering force of dread in cases of

pestilence, and she was cautious.

Raising her voice in a tone of gentle pleading, she said, "I came over

the sea. I am hungry, and so is the child. Will you not give us some

milk?"

Romola had divined part of the truth, but she had not divined that

preoccupation of the priest's mind which charged her words with a

strange significance. Only a little while ago, the young acolyte had

brought word to the Padre that he had seen the Holy Mother with the

Babe, fetching water for the sick: she was as tall as the cypresses, and

had a light about her head, and she looked up at the church. The

pievano [parish priest] had not listened with entire belief: he had been

more than fifty years in the world without having any vision of the

Madonna, and he thought the boy might have misinterpreted the unexpected

appearance of a villager. But he had been made uneasy, and before

venturing to come down and milk his cow, he had repeated many Aves. The

pievano's conscience tormented him a little: he trembled at the

pestilence, but he also trembled at the thought of the mild-faced

Mother, conscious that that Invisible Mercy might demand something more

of him than prayers and "Hails." In this state of mind--unable to

banish the image the boy had raised of the Mother with the glory about

her tending the sick--the pievano had come down to milk his cow, and had

suddenly caught sight of Romola pausing at the parted way. Her pleading

words, with their strange refinement of tone and accent, instead of

being explanatory, had a preternatural sound for him. Yet he did not

quite believe he saw the Holy Mother: he was in a state of alarmed

hesitation. If anything miraculous were happening, he felt there was no

strong presumption that the miracle would be in his favour. He dared

not run away; he dared not advance.

"Come down," said Romola, after a pause. "Do not fear. Fear rather to

deny food to the hungry when they ask you."

A moment after, the boughs were parted, and the complete figure of a

thickset priest with a broad, harmless face, his black frock much worn

and soiled, stood, bucket in hand, looking at her timidly, and still

keeping aloof as he took the path towards the cow in silence.

Romola followed him and watched him without speaking again, as he seated

himself against the tethered cow, and, when he had nervously drawn some

milk, gave it to her in a brass cup he carried with him in the bucket.

As Romola put the cup to the lips of the eager child, and afterwards

drank some milk herself, the Padre observed her from his wooden stool

with a timidity that changed its character a little. He recognised the

Hebrew baby, he was certain that he had a substantial woman before him;

but there was still something strange and unaccountable in Romola's

presence in this spot, and the Padre had a presentiment that things were

going to change with him. Moreover, that Hebrew baby was terribly

associated with the dread of pestilence.

Nevertheless, when Romola smiled at the little one sucking its own milky

lips, and stretched out the brass cup again, saying, "Give us more, good

father," he obeyed less nervously than before.

Romola on her side was not unobservant; and when the second supply of

milk had been drunk, she looked down at the round-headed man, and said

with mild decision--

"And now tell me, father, how this pestilence came, and why you let your

people die without the sacraments; and lie unburied. For I am come over

the sea to help those who are left alive--and you, too, will help them

now."

He told her the story of the pestilence: and while he was telling it,

the youth, who had fled before, had come peeping and advancing

gradually, till at last he stood and watched the scene from behind a

neighbouring bush.

Three families of Jews, twenty souls in all, had been put ashore many

weeks ago, some of them already ill of the pestilence. The villagers,

said the priest, had of course refused to give shelter to the

miscreants, otherwise than in a distant hovel, and under heaps of straw.

But when the strangers had died of the plague, and some of the people

had thrown the bodies into the sea, the sea had brought them back again

in a great storm, and everybody was smitten with terror. A grave was

dug, and the bodies were buried; but then the pestilence attacked the

Christians, and the greater number of the villagers went away over the

mountain, driving away their few cattle, and carrying provisions. The

priest had not fled; he had stayed and prayed for the people, and he had

prevailed on the youth Jacopo to stay with him; but he confessed that a

mortal terror of the plague had taken hold of him, and he had not dared

to go down into the valley.

"You will fear no longer, father," said Romola, in a tone of encouraging

authority; "you will come down with me, and we will see who is living,

and we will look for the dead to bury them. I have walked about for

months where the pestilence was, and see, I am strong. Jacopo will come

with us," she added, motioning to the peeping lad, who came slowly from

behind his defensive bush, as if invisible threads were dragging him.

"Come, Jacopo," said Romola again, smiling at him, "you will carry the

child for me. See! your arms are strong, and I am tired."

That was a dreadful proposal to Jacopo, and to the priest also; but they

were both under a peculiar influence forcing them to obey. The

suspicion that Romola was a supernatural form was dissipated, but their

minds were filled instead with the more effective sense that she was a

human being whom God had sent over the sea to command them.

"Now we will carry down the milk," said Romola, "and see if any one

wants it."

So they went all together down the slope, and that morning the sufferers

saw help come to them in their despair. There were hardly more than a

score alive in the whole valley; but all of these were comforted, most

were saved, and the dead were buried.

In this way days, weeks, and months passed with Romola till the men were

digging and sowing again, till the women smiled at her as they carried

their great vases on their heads to the well, and the Hebrew baby was a

tottering tumbling Christian, Benedetto by name, having been baptised in

the church on the mountain-side. But by that time she herself was

suffering from the fatigue and languor that must come after a continuous

strain on mind and body. She had taken for her dwelling one of the

houses abandoned by their owners, standing a little aloof from the

village street; and here on a thick heap of clean straw--a delicious bed

for those who do not dream of down--she felt glad to lie still through

most of the daylight hours, taken care of along with the little

Benedetto by a woman whom the pestilence had widowed.

Every day the Padre and Jacopo and the small flock of surviving

villagers paid their visit to this cottage to see the blessed Lady, and

to bring her of their best as an offering--honey, fresh cakes, eggs, and

polenta. It was a sight they could none of them forget, a sight they

all told of in their old age--how the sweet and sainted lady with her

fair face, her golden hair, and her brown eyes that had a blessing in

them, lay weary with her labours after she had been sent over the sea to

help them in their extremity, and how the queer little black Benedetto

used to crawl about the straw by her side and want everything that was

brought to her, and she always gave him a bit of what she took, and told

them if they loved her they must be good to Benedetto.

Many legends were afterwards told in that valley about the blessed Lady

who came over the sea, but they were legends by which all who heard

might know that in times gone by a woman had done beautiful loving deeds

there, rescuing those who were ready to perish.

CHAPTER SIXTY NINE.

HOMEWARD.

In those silent wintry hours when Romola lay resting from her weariness,

her mind, travelling back over the past, and gazing across the undefined

distance of the future, saw all objects from a new position. Her

experience since the moment of her waking in the boat had come to her

with as strong an effect as that of the fresh seal on the dissolving

wax. She had felt herself without bonds, without motive; sinking in

mere egoistic complaining that life could bring her no content; feeling

a right to say, "I am tired of life, I want to die." That thought had

sobbed within her as she fell asleep, but from the moment after her

waking when the cry had drawn her, she had not even reflected, as she

used to do in Florence, that she was glad to live because she could

lighten sorrow--she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to

share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work

which cried aloud to be done, that the reasons for living, enduring,

labouring, never took the form of argument.

The experience was like a new baptism to Romola. In Florence the

simpler relations of the human being to his fellow-men had been

complicated for her with all the special ties of marriage, the State,

and religious discipleship, and when these had disappointed her trust,

the shock seemed to have shaken her aloof from life and stunned her

sympathy. But now she said, "It was mere baseness in me to desire

death. If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help

is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only

the truer. While the strength is in my arm I will stretch it out to the

fainting; while the light visits my eyes they shall seek the forsaken."

And then the past arose with a fresh appeal to her. Her work in this

green valley was done, and the emotions that were disengaged from the

people immediately around her rushed back into the old deep channels of

use and affection. That rare possibility of self-contemplation which

comes in any complete severance from our wonted life made her judge

herself as she had never done before: the compunction which is

inseparable from a sympathetic nature keenly alive to the possible

experience of others, began to stir in her with growing force. She

questioned the justness of her own conclusions, of her own deeds: she

had been rash, arrogant, always dissatisfied that others were not good

enough, while she herself had not been true to what her soul had once

recognised as the best. She began to condemn her flight: after all, it

had been cowardly self-care; the grounds on which Savonarola had once

taken her back were truer, deeper than the grounds she had had for her

second flight. How could she feel the needs of others and not feel,

above all, the needs of the nearest?

But then came reaction against such self-reproach. The memory of her

life with Tito, of the conditions which made their real union

impossible, while their external union imposed a set of false duties on

her which were essentially the concealment and sanctioning of what her

mind revolted from, told her that flight had been her only resource.

All minds, except such as are delivered from doubt by dulness of

sensibility, must be subject to this recurring conflict where the

many-twisted conditions of life have forbidden the fulfilment of a bond.

For in strictness there is no replacing of relations: the presence of

the new does not nullify the failure and breach of the old. Life has

lost its perfection: it has been maimed; and until the wounds are quite

scarred, conscience continually casts backward, doubting glances.

Romola shrank with dread from the renewal of her proximity to Tito, and

yet she was uneasy that she had put herself out of reach of knowing what

was his fate--uneasy that the moment might yet come when he would be in

misery and need her. There was still a thread of pain within her,

testifying to those words of Fra Girolamo, that she could not cease to

be a wife. Could anything utterly cease for her that had once mingled

itself with the current of her heart's blood?

Florence, and all her life there, had come back to her like hunger; her

feelings could not go wandering after the possible and the vague: their

living fibre was fed with the memory of familiar things. And the

thought that she had divided herself from them for ever became more and

more importunate in these hours that were unfilled with action. What if

Fra Girolamo had been wrong? What if the life of Florence was a web of

inconsistencies? Was she, then, something higher, that she should shake

the dust from off her feet, and say, "This world is not good enough for

me"? If she had been really higher, she would not so easily have lost

all her trust.

Her indignant grief for her godfather had no longer complete possession

of her, and her sense of debt to Savonarola was recovering predominance.

Nothing that had come, or was to come, could do away with the fact that

there had been a great inspiration in him which had waked a new life in

her. Who, in all her experience, could demand the same gratitude from

her as he? His errors--might they not bring calamities?

She could not rest. She hardly knew whether it was her strength

returning with the budding leaves that made her active again, or whether

it was her eager longing to get nearer Florence. She did not imagine

herself daring to enter Florence, but the desire to be near enough to

learn what was happening there urged itself with a strength that

excluded all other purposes.

And one March morning the people in the valley were gathered together to

see the blessed Lady depart. Jacopo had fetched a mule for her, and was

going with her over the mountains. The Padre, too, was going with her

to the nearest town, that he might help her in learning the safest way

by which she might get to Pistoja. Her store of trinkets and money,

untouched in this valley, was abundant for her needs.

If Romola had been less drawn by the longing that was taking her away,

it would have been a hard moment for her when she walked along the

village street for the last time, while the Padre and Jacopo, with the

mule, were awaiting her near the well. Her steps were hindered by the

wailing people, who knelt and kissed her hands, then clung to her skirts

and kissed the grey folds, crying, "Ah, why will you go, when the good

season is beginning and the crops will be plentiful? Why will you go?"

"Do not be sorry," said Romola, "you are well now, and I shall remember

you. I must go and see if my own people want me."

"Ah, yes, if they have the pestilence!"

"Look at us again, Madonna!"

"Yes, yes, we will be good to the little Benedetto!"

At last Romola mounted her mule, but a vigorous screaming from Benedetto

as he saw her turn from him in this new position, was an excuse for all

the people to follow her and insist that he must ride on the mule's neck

to the foot of the slope.

The parting must come at last, but as Romola turned continually before

she passed out of sight, she saw the little flock lingering to catch the

last waving of her hand.

CHAPTER SEVENTY.

MEETING AGAIN.

On the fourteenth of April Romola was once more within the walls of

Florence. Unable to rest at Pistoja, where contradictory reports

reached her about the Trial by Fire, she had gone on to Prato; and was

beginning to think that she should be drawn on to Florence in spite of

dread, when she encountered that monk of San Spirito who had been her

godfather's confessor. From him she learned the full story of

Savonarola's arrest, and of her husband's death. This Augustinian monk

had been in the stream of people who had followed the waggon with its

awful burthen into the Piazza, and he could tell her what was generally

known in Florence--that Tito had escaped from an assaulting mob by

leaping into the Arno, but had been murdered on the bank by an old man

who had long had an enmity against him. But Romola understood the

catastrophe as no one else did. Of Savonarola the monk told her, in

that tone of unfavourable prejudice which was usual in the Black

Brethren (Frati Neri) towards the brother who showed white under his

black, that he had confessed himself a deceiver of the people.

Romola paused no longer. That evening she was in Florence, sitting in

agitated silence under the exclamations of joy and wailing, mingled with

exuberant narrative, which were poured into her ears by Monna Brigida,

who had backslided into false hair in Romola's absence, but now drew it

off again and declared she would not mind being grey, if her dear child

would stay with her.

Romola was too deeply moved by the main events which she had known

before coming to Florence, to be wrought upon by the doubtful gossiping

details added in Brigida's narrative. The tragedy of her husband's

death, of Fra Girolamo's confession of duplicity under the coercion of

torture, left her hardly any power of apprehending minor circumstances.

All the mental activity she could exert under that load of awe-stricken

grief, was absorbed by two purposes which must supersede every other; to

try and see Savonarola, and to learn what had become of Tessa and the

children.

"Tell me, cousin," she said abruptly, when Monna Brigida's tongue had

run quite away from troubles into projects of Romola's living with her,

"has anything been seen or said since Tito's death of a young woman with

two little children?"

Brigida started, rounded her eyes, and lifted up her hands.

"Cristo! no. What! was he so bad as that, my poor child? Ah, then,

that was why you went away, and left me word only that you went of your

own free will. Well, well; if I'd known that, I shouldn't have thought

you so strange and flighty. For I did say to myself, though I didn't

tell anybody else, `What was she to go away from her husband for,

leaving him to mischief, only because they cut poor Bernardo's head off?

She's got her father's temper,' I said, `that's what it is.' Well,

well; never scold me, child: Bardo \_was\_ fierce, you can't deny it. But

if you had only told me the truth, that there was a young hussey and

children, I should have understood it all. Anything seen or said of

her? No; and the less the better. They say enough of ill about him

without that. But since that was the reason you went--"

"No, dear cousin," said Romola, interrupting her earnestly, "pray do not

talk so. I wish above all things to find that young woman and her

children, and to take care of them. They are quite helpless. Say

nothing against it; that is the thing I shall do first of all."

"Well," said Monna Brigida, shrugging her shoulders and lowering her

voice with an air of puzzled discomfiture, "if that's being a Piagnone,

I've been taking peas for paternosters. Why, Fra Girolamo said as good

as that widows ought not to marry again. Step in at the door and it's a

sin and a shame, it seems; but come down the chimney and you're welcome.

\_Two\_ children--Santiddio!"

"Cousin, the poor thing has done no conscious wrong: she is ignorant of

everything. I will tell you--but not now."

Early the next morning Romola's steps were directed to the house beyond

San Ambrogio where she had once found Tessa; but it was as she had

feared: Tessa was gone. Romola conjectured that Tito had sent her away

beforehand to some spot where he had intended to join her, for she did

not believe that he would willingly part with those children. It was a

painful conjecture, because, if Tessa were out of Florence, there was

hardly a chance of finding her, and Romola pictured the childish

creature waiting and waiting at some wayside spot in wondering, helpless

misery. Those who lived near could tell her nothing except that old

deaf Lisa had gone away a week ago with her goods, but no one knew where

Tessa had gone. Romola saw no further active search open to her; for

she had no knowledge that could serve as a starting-point for inquiry,

and not only her innate reserve but a more noble sensitiveness made her

shrink from assuming an attitude of generosity in the eyes of others by

publishing Tessa's relation to Tito, along with her own desire to find

her. Many days passed in anxious inaction. Even under strong

solicitation from other thoughts Romola found her heart palpitating if

she caught sight of a pair of round brown legs, or of a short woman in

the contadina dress.

She never for a moment told herself that it was heroism or exalted

charity in her to seek these beings; she needed something that she was

bound specially to care for; she yearned to clasp the children and to

make them love her. This at least would be some sweet result, for

others as well as herself, from all her past sorrow. It appeared there

was much property of Tito's to which she had a claim; but she distrusted

the cleanness of that money, and she had determined to make it all over

to the State, except so much as was equal to the price of her father's

library. This would be enough for the modest support of Tessa and the

children. But Monna Brigida threw such planning into the background by

clamorously insisting that Romola must live with her and never forsake

her till she had seen her safe in Paradise--else why had she persuaded

her to turn Piagnone?--and if Romola wanted to rear other people's

children, she, Monna Brigida, must rear them too. Only they must be

found first.

Romola felt the full force of that innuendo. But strong feeling

unsatisfied is never without its superstition, either of hope or

despair. Romola's was the superstition of hope: \_somehow\_ she was to

find that mother and the children. And at last another direction for

active inquiry suggested itself. She learned that Tito had provided

horses and mules to await him in San Gallo; he was therefore going to

leave Florence by the gate of San Gallo, and she determined, though

without much confidence in the issue, to try and ascertain from the

gatekeepers if they had observed any one corresponding to the

description of Tessa with her children, to have passed the gates before

the morning of the ninth of April. Walking along the Via San Gallo, and

looking watchfully about her through her long widow's veil, lest she

should miss any object that might aid her, she descried Bratti

chaffering with a customer. That roaming man, she thought, might aid

her: she would not mind talking of Tessa to \_him\_. But as she put aside

her veil and crossed the street towards him, she saw something hanging

from the corner of his basket which made her heart leap with a much

stronger hope.

"Bratti, my friend," she said abruptly, "where did you get that

necklace?"

"Your servant, madonna," said Bratti, looking round at her very

deliberately, his mind not being subject to surprise. "It's a necklace

worth money, but I shall get little by it, for my heart's too tender for

a trader's; I have promised to keep it in pledge."

"Pray tell me where you got it;--from a little woman named Tessa, is it

not true?"

"Ah! if you know her," said Bratti, "and would redeem it of me at a

small profit, and give it her again, you'd be doing a charity, for she

cried at parting with it--you'd have thought she was running into a

brook. It's a small profit I'll charge you. You shall have it for a

florin, for I don't like to be hard-hearted."

"Where is she?" said Romola, giving him the money, and unclasping the

necklace from the basket in joyful agitation.

"Outside the gate there, at the other end of the Borgo, at old Sibilla

Manetti's: anybody will tell you which is the house."

Romola went along with winged feet, blessing that incident of the

Carnival which had made her learn by heart the appearance of this

necklace. Soon she was at the house she sought. The young woman and

the children were in the inner room--were to have been fetched away a

fortnight ago and more--had no money, only their clothes, to pay a poor

widow with for their food and lodging. But since madonna knew them--

Romola waited to hear no more, but opened the door.

Tessa was seated on the low bed: her crying had passed into tearless

sobs, and she was looking with sad blank eyes at the two children, who

were playing in an opposite corner--Lillo covering his head with his

skirt and roaring at Ninna to frighten her, then peeping out again to

see how she bore it. The door was a little behind Tessa, and she did

not turn round when it opened, thinking it was only the old woman:

expectation was no longer alive. Romola had thrown aside her veil and

paused a moment, holding the necklace in sight. Then she said, in that

pure voice that used to cheer her father--

"Tessa!"

Tessa started to her feet and looked round.

"See," said Romola, clasping the beads on Tessa's neck, "God has sent me

to you again."

The poor thing screamed and sobbed, and clung to the arms that fastened

the necklace. She could not speak. The two children came from their

corner, laid hold of their mother's skirts, and looked up with wide eyes

at Romola.

That day they all went home to Monna Brigida's, in the Borgo degli

Albizzi. Romola had made known, to Tessa by gentle degrees, that Naldo

could never come to her again: not because he was cruel, but because he

was dead.

"But be comforted, my Tessa," said Romola. "I am come to take care of

you always. And we have got Lillo and Ninna."

Monna Brigida's mouth twitched in the struggle between her awe of Romola

and the desire to speak unseasonably.

"Let be, for the present," she thought; "but it seems to me a thousand

years till I tell this little contadina, who seems not to know how many

fingers she's got on her hand, who Romola is. And I \_will\_ tell her

some day, else she'll never know her place. It's all very well for

Romola;--nobody will call their souls their own when she's by; but if

I'm to have this puss-faced minx living in my house she must be humble

to me."

However, Monna Brigida wanted to give the children too many sweets for

their supper, and confessed to Romola, the last thing before going to

bed, that it would be a shame not to take care of such cherubs.

"But you must give up to me a little, Romola, about their eating, and

those things. For you have never had a baby, and I had twins, only they

died as soon as they were born."

CHAPTER SEVENTY ONE.

THE CONFESSION.

When Romola brought home Tessa and the children, April was already near

its close, and the other great anxiety on her mind had been wrought to

its highest pitch by the publication in print of Fra Girolamo's Trial,

or rather of the confessions drawn from him by the sixteen Florentine

citizens commissioned to interrogate him. The appearance of this

document, issued by order of the Signoria, had called forth such strong

expressions of public suspicion and discontent, that severe measures

were immediately taken for recalling it. Of course there were copies

accidentally mislaid, and a second edition, \_not\_ by order of the

Signoria, was soon in the hands of eager readers.

Romola, who began to despair of ever speaking with Fra Girolamo, read

this evidence again and again, desiring to judge it by some clearer

light than the contradictory impressions that were taking the form of

assertions in the mouths of both partisans and enemies.

In the more devout followers of Savonarola his want of constancy under

torture, and his retraction of prophetic claims, had produced a

consternation too profound to be at once displaced as it ultimately was

by the suspicion, which soon grew into a positive datum, that any

reported words of his which were in inexplicable contradiction to their

faith in him, had not come from the lips of the prophet, but from the

falsifying pen of Ser Ceccone, that notary of evil repute, who had made

the digest of the examination. But there were obvious facts that at

once threw discredit on the printed document. Was not the list of

sixteen examiners half made up of the prophet's bitterest enemies? Was

not the notorious Dolfo Spini one of the new Eight prematurely elected,

in order to load the dice against a man whose ruin had been determined

on by the party in power? It was but a murder with slow formalities

that was being transacted in the Old Palace. The Signoria had resolved

to drive a good bargain with the Pope and the Duke of Milan, by

extinguishing the man who was as great a molestation to vicious citizens

and greedy foreign tyrants as to a corrupt clergy. The Frate had been

doomed beforehand, and the only question that was pretended to exist now

was, whether the Republic, in return for a permission to lay a tax on

ecclesiastical property, should deliver him alive into the hands of the

Pope, or whether the Pope should further concede to the Republic what

its dignity demanded--the privilege of hanging and burning its own

prophet on its own piazza.

Who, under such circumstances, would give full credit to this so-called

confession? If the Frate had denied his prophetic gift, the denial had

only been wrenched from him by the agony of torture--agony that, in his

sensitive frame, must quickly produce raving. What if these wicked

examiners declared that he had only had the torture of the rope and

pulley thrice, and only on one day, and that his confessions had been

made when he was under no bodily coercion--was that to be believed? He

had been tortured much more; he had been tortured in proportion to the

distress his confessions had created in the hearts of those who loved

him.

Other friends of Savonarola, who were less ardent partisans, did not

doubt the substantial genuineness of the confession, however it might

have been coloured by the transpositions and additions of the notary;

but they argued indignantly that there was nothing which could warrant a

condemnation to death, or even to grave punishment. It must be clear to

all impartial men that if this examination represented the only evidence

against the Frate, he would die, not for any crime, but because he had

made himself inconvenient to the Pope, to the rapacious Italian States

that wanted to dismember their Tuscan neighbour, and to those unworthy

citizens who sought to gratify their private ambition in opposition to

the common weal.

Not a shadow of political crime had been proved against him. Not one

stain had been detected on his private conduct: his fellow-monks,

including one who had formerly been his secretary for several years, and

who, with more than the average culture of his companions, had a

disposition to criticise Fra Girolamo's rule as Prior, bore testimony,

even after the shock of his retraction, to an unimpeachable purity and

consistency in his life, which had commanded their unsuspecting

veneration. The Pope himself had not been able to raise a charge of

heresy against the Frate, except on the ground of disobedience to a

mandate, and disregard of the sentence of excommunication. It was

difficult to justify that breach of discipline by argument, but there

was a moral insurgence in the minds of grave men against the Court of

Rome, which tended to confound the theoretic distinction between the

Church and churchmen, and to lighten the scandal of disobedience.

Men of ordinary morality and public spirit felt that the triumph of the

Frate's enemies was really the triumph of gross licence. And keen

Florentines like Soderini and Piero Guicciardini may well have had an

angry smile on their lips at a severity which dispensed with all law in

order to hang and burn a man in whom the seductions of a public career

had warped the strictness of his veracity; may well have remarked that

if the Frate had mixed a much deeper fraud with a zeal and ability less

inconvenient to high personages, the fraud would have been regarded as

an excellent oil for ecclesiastical and political wheels.

Nevertheless such shrewd men were forced to admit that, however poor a

figure the Florentine government made in its clumsy pretence of a

judicial warrant for what had in fact been predetermined as an act of

policy, the measures of the Pope against Savonarola were necessary

measures of self-defence. Not to try and rid himself of a man who

wanted to stir up the Powers of Europe to summon a General Council and

depose him, would have been adding ineptitude to iniquity. There was no

denying that towards Alexander the Sixth Savonarola was a rebel, and,

what was much more, a dangerous rebel. Florence had heard him say, and

had well understood what he meant, that he would not \_obey the devil\_.

It was inevitably a life and death struggle between the Frate and the

Pope; but it was less inevitable that Florence should make itself the

Pope's executioner.

Romola's ears were filled in this way with the suggestions of a faith

still ardent under its wounds, and the suggestions of worldly

discernment, judging things according to a very moderate standard of

what is possible to human nature. She could be satisfied with neither.

She brought to her long meditations over that printed document many

painful observations, registered more or less consciously through the

years of her discipleship, which whispered a presentiment that

Savonarola's retraction of his prophetic claims was not merely a

spasmodic effort to escape from torture. But, on the other hand, her

soul cried out for some explanation of his lapses which would make it

still possible for her to believe that the main striving of his life had

been pure and grand. The recent memory of the selfish discontent which

had come over her like a blighting wind along with the loss of her trust

in the man who had been for her an incarnation of the highest motives,

had produced a reaction which is known to many as a sort of faith that

has sprung up to them out of the very depths of their despair. It was

impossible, she said now, that the negative disbelieving thoughts which

had made her soul arid of all good, could be founded in the truth of

things: impossible that it had not been a living spirit, and no hollow

pretence, which had once breathed in the Frate's words, and kindled a

new life in her. Whatever falsehood there had been in him, had been a

fall and not a purpose; a gradual entanglement in which he struggled,

not a contrivance encouraged by success.

Looking at the printed confessions, she saw many sentences which bore

the stamp of bungling fabrication: they had that emphasis and repetition

in self-accusation which none but very low hypocrites use to their

fellow-men. But the fact that these sentences were in striking

opposition, not only to the character of Savonarola, but also to the

general tone of the confessions, strengthened the impression that the

rest of the text represented in the main what had really fallen from his

lips. Hardly a word was dishonourable to him except what turned on his

prophetic annunciations. He was unvarying in his statement of the ends

he had pursued for Florence, the Church, and the world; and, apart from

the mixture of falsity in that claim to special inspiration by which he

sought to gain hold of men's minds, there was no admission of having

used unworthy means. Even in this confession, and without expurgation

of the notary's malign phrases, Fra Girolamo shone forth as a man who

had sought his own glory indeed, but sought it by labouring for the very

highest end--the moral welfare of men--not by vague exhortations, but by

striving to turn beliefs into energies that would work in all the

details of life.

"Everything that I have done," said one memorable passage, which may

perhaps have had its erasures and interpolations, "I have done with the

design of being for ever famous in the present and in future ages; and

that I might win credit in Florence; and that nothing of great import

should be done without my sanction. And when I had thus established my

position in Florence, I had it in my mind to do great things in Italy

and beyond Italy, by means of those chief personages with whom I had

contracted friendship and consulted on high matters, such as this of the

General Council. And in proportion as my first efforts succeeded, I

should have adopted further measures. Above all, when the General

Council had once been brought about, I intended to rouse the princes of

Christendom, and especially those beyond the borders of Italy, to subdue

the infidels. It was not much in my thoughts to get myself made a

Cardinal or Pope, for when I should have achieved the work I had in

view, I should, without being Pope, have been the first man in the world

in the authority I should have possessed, and the reverence that would

have been paid me. If I had been made Pope, I would not have refused

the office: but it seemed to me that to be the head of that work was a

greater thing than to be Pope, because a man without virtue may be Pope;

but \_such a work as I contemplated demanded a man of excellent

virtues\_."

That blending of ambition with belief in the supremacy of goodness made

no new tone to Romola, who had been used to hear it in the voice that

rang through the Duomo. It was the habit of Savonarola's mind to

conceive great things, and to feel that he was the man to do them.

Iniquity should be brought low; the cause of justice, purity, and love

should triumph; and it should triumph by his voice, by his work, by his

blood. In moments of ecstatic contemplation, doubtless, the sense of

self melted in the sense of the Unspeakable, and in that part of his

experience lay the elements of genuine self-abasement; but in the

presence of his fellow-men for whom he was to act, pre-eminence seemed a

necessary condition of his life.

And perhaps this confession, even when it described a doubleness that

was conscious and deliberate, really implied no more than that wavering

of belief concerning his own impressions and motives which most human

beings who have not a stupid inflexibility of self-confidence must be

liable to under a marked change of external conditions. In a life where

the experience was so tumultuously mixed as it must have been in the

Prate's, what a possibility was opened for a change of self-judgment,

when, instead of eyes that venerated and knees that knelt, instead of a

great work on its way to accomplishment, and in its prosperity stamping

the agent as a chosen instrument, there came the hooting and the

spitting and the curses of the crowd; and then the hard faces of enemies

made judges; and then the horrible torture, and with the torture the

irrepressible cry, "It is true, what you would have me say: let me go:

do not torture me again: yes, yes, I am guilty. O God! Thy stroke has

reached me!"

As Romola thought of the anguish that must have followed the

confession--whether, in the subsequent solitude of the prison,

conscience retracted or confirmed the self-taxing words--that anguish

seemed to be pressing on her own heart and urging the slow bitter tears.

Every vulgar self-ignorant person in Florence was glibly pronouncing on

this man's demerits, while \_he\_ was knowing a depth of sorrow which can

only be known to the soul that has loved and sought the most perfect

thing, and beholds itself fallen.

She had not then seen--what she saw afterwards--the evidence of the

Frate's mental state after he had had thus to lay his mouth in the dust.

As the days went by, the reports of new unpublished examinations,

eliciting no change of confessions, ceased; Savonarola was left alone in

his prison and allowed pen and ink for a while, that, if he liked, he

might use his poor bruised and strained right arm to write with. He

wrote; but what he wrote was no vindication of his innocence, no protest

against the proceedings used towards him: it was a continued colloquy

with that divine purity with which he sought complete reunion; it was

the outpouring of self-abasement; it was one long cry for inward

renovation. No lingering echoes of the old vehement self-assertion,

"Look at my work, for it is good, and those who set their faces against

it are the children of the devil!" The voice of Sadness tells him, "God

placed thee in the midst of the people even as if thou hadst been one of

the excellent. In this way thou hast taught others, and hast failed to

learn thyself. Thou hast cured others: and thou thyself hast been still

diseased. Thy heart was lifted up at the beauty of thy own deeds, and

through this thou hast lost thy wisdom and art become, and shalt be to

all eternity, nothing... After so many benefits with which God has

honoured thee, thou art fallen into the depths of the sea; and after so

many gifts bestowed on thee, thou, by thy pride and vainglory, hast

scandalised all the world." And when Hope speaks and argues that the

divine love has not forsaken him, it says nothing now of a great work to

be done, but only says, "Thou art not forsaken, else why is thy heart

bowed in penitence? That too is a gift."

There is no jot of worthy evidence that from the time of his

imprisonment to the supreme moment, Savonarola thought or spoke of

himself as a martyr. The idea of martyrdom had been to him a passion

dividing the dream of the future with the triumph of beholding his work

achieved. And now, in place of both, had come a resignation which he

called by no glorifying name.

\_But therefore he may the more fitly be called a martyr by his

fellow-men to all time\_. For power rose against him not because of his

sins, but because of his greatness--not because he sought to deceive the

world, but because he sought to make it noble. And through that

greatness of his he endured a double agony: not only the reviling, and

the torture, and the death-throe, but the agony of sinking from the

vision of glorious achievement into that deep shadow where he could only

say, "I count as nothing: darkness encompasses me: yet the light I saw

was the true light."

CHAPTER SEVENTY TWO.

THE LAST SILENCE.

Romola had seemed to hear, as if they had been a cry, the words repeated

to her by many lips--the words uttered by Savonarola when he took leave

of those brethren of San Marco who had come to witness his signature of

the confession: "Pray for me, for God has withdrawn from me the spirit

of prophecy."

Those words had shaken her with new doubts as to the mode in which he

looked back at the past in moments of complete self-possession. And the

doubts were strengthened by more piteous things still, which soon

reached her ears.

The nineteenth of May had come, and by that day's sunshine there had

entered into Florence the two Papal Commissaries, charged with the

completion of Savonarola's trial. They entered amid the acclamations of

the people, calling for the death of the Frate. For now the popular cry

was, "It is the Frate's deception that has brought on all our

misfortunes; let him be burned, and all things right will be done, and

our evils will cease."

The next day it is well certified that there was fresh and fresh torture

of the shattered sensitive frame; and now, at the first sight of the

horrible implements, Savonarola, in convulsed agitation, fell on his

knees, and in brief passionate words \_retracted his confession\_,

declared that he had spoken falsely in denying his prophetic gift, and

that if he suffered, he would suffer for the truth--"The things that I

have spoken, I had them from God."

But not the less the torture was laid upon him, and when he was under it

he was asked why he had uttered those retracting words. Men were not

demons in those days, and yet nothing but concessions of guilt were held

a reason for release from torture. The answer came: "I said it that I

might seem good; tear me no more, I will tell you the truth."

There were Florentine assessors at this new trial, and those words of

twofold retraction had soon spread. They filled Romola with dismayed

uncertainty.

"But,"--it flashed across her--"there will come a moment when he may

speak. When there is no dread hanging over him but the dread of

falsehood, when they have brought him into the presence of death, when

he is lifted above the people, and looks on them for the last time, they

cannot hinder him from speaking a last decisive word. I will be there."

Three days after, on the 23rd of May 1498, there was again a long narrow

platform stretching across the great piazza, from the Palazzo Vecchio

towards the Tetta de' Pisani. But there was no grove of fuel as before:

instead of that, there was one great heap of fuel placed on the circular

area which made the termination of the long narrow platform. And above

this heap of fuel rose a gibbet with three halters on it; a gibbet

which, having two arms, still looked so much like a cross as to make

some beholders uncomfortable, though one arm had been truncated to avoid

the resemblance.

On the marble terrace of the Palazzo were three tribunals; one near the

door for the Bishop, who was to perform the ceremony of degradation on

Fra Girolamo and the two brethren who were to suffer as his followers

and accomplices; another for the Papal Commissaries, who were to

pronounce them heretics and schismatics, and deliver them over to the

secular arm; and a third, close to Marzocco, at the corner of the

terrace where the platform began, for the Gonfaloniere, and the Eight

who were to pronounce the sentence of death.

Again the Piazza was thronged with expectant faces: again there was to

be a great fire kindled. In the majority of the crowd that pressed

around the gibbet the expectation was that of ferocious hatred, or of

mere hard curiosity to behold a barbarous sight. But there were still

many spectators on the wide pavement, on the roofs, and at the windows,

who, in the midst of their bitter grief and their own endurance of

insult as hypocritical Piagnoni, were not without a lingering hope, even

at this eleventh hour, that God would interpose, by some sign, to

manifest their beloved prophet as His servant. And there were yet more

who looked forward with trembling eagerness, as Romola did, to that

final moment when Savonarola might say, "O people, I was innocent of

deceit."

Romola was at a window on the north side of the Piazza, far away from

the marble terrace where the tribunals stood; and near her, also looking

on in painful doubt concerning the man who had won his early reverence,

was a young Florentine of two-and-twenty, named Jacopo Nardi, afterwards

to deserve honour as one of the very few who, feeling Fra Girolamo's

eminence, have written about him with the simple desire to be veracious.

He had said to Romola, with respectful gentleness, when he saw the

struggle in her between her shuddering horror of the scene and her

yearning to witness what might happen in the last moment--

"Madonna, there is no need for you to look at these cruel things. I

will tell you when he comes out of the Palazzo. Trust to me; I know

what you would see."

Romola covered her face, but the hootings that seemed to make the

hideous scene still visible could not be shut out. At last her arm was

touched, and she heard the words, "He comes." She looked towards the

Palace, and could see Savonarola led out in his Dominican garb; could

see him standing before the Bishop, and being stripped of the black

mantle, the white scapulary and long white tunic, till he stood in a

close woollen under-tunic, that told of no sacred office, no rank. He

had been degraded, and cut off from the Church Militant.

The baser part of the multitude delight in degradations, apart from any

hatred; it is the satire they best understand. There was a fresh hoot

of triumph as the three degraded brethren passed on to the tribunal of

the Papal Commissaries, who were to pronounce them schismatics and

heretics. Did not the prophet look like a schismatic and heretic now?

It is easy to believe in the damnable state of a man who stands stripped

and degraded.

Then the third tribunal was passed--that of the Florentine officials who

were to pronounce sentence, and amongst whom, even at her distance,

Romola could discern the odious figure of Dolfo Spini, indued in the

grave black lucco, as one of the Eight.

Then the three figures, in their close white raiment, trod their way

along the platform, amidst yells and grating tones of insult.

"Cover your eyes, Madonna," said Jacopo Nardi; "Fra Girolamo will be the

last."

It was not long before she had to uncover them again. Savonarola was

there. He was not far off her now. He had mounted the steps; she could

see him look round on the multitude.

But in the same moment expectation died, and she only saw what he was

seeing--torches waving to kindle the fuel beneath his dead body, faces

glaring with a yet worse light; she only heard what \_he\_ was hearing--

gross jests, taunts, and curses.

The moment was past. Her face was covered again, and she only knew that

Savonarola's voice had passed into eternal silence.

EPILOGUE.

On the evening of the 22nd of May 1509, five persons, of whose history

we have known something, were seated in a handsome upper room opening on

to a loggia which, at its right-hand corner, looked all along the Borgo

Pinti, and over the city gate towards Fiesole and the solemn heights

beyond it.

At one end of the room was an archway opening into a narrow inner room,

hardly more than a recess, where the light fell from above on a small

altar covered with fair white linen. Over the altar was a picture,

discernible at the distance where the little party sat only as the small

full-length portrait of a Dominican Brother. For it was shaded from the

light above by overhanging branches and wreaths of flowers, and the

fresh tapers below it were unlit. But it seemed that the decoration of

the altar and its recess was not complete. For part of the floor was

strewn with a confusion of flowers and green boughs, and among them sat

a delicate blue-eyed girl of thirteen, tossing her long light-brown hair

out of her eyes, as she made selections for the wreaths she was weaving,

or looked up at her mother's work in the same kind, and told her how to

do it with a little air of instruction.

For that mother was not very clever at weaving flowers or at any other

work. Tessa's fingers had not become more adroit with the years--only

very much fatter. She got on slowly and turned her head about a good

deal, and asked Ninna's opinion with much deference; for Tessa never

ceased to be astonished at the wisdom of her children. She still wore

her contadina gown: it was only broader than the old one; and there was

the silver pin in her rough curly brown hair, and round her neck the

memorable necklace, with a red cord under it, that ended mysteriously in

her bosom. Her rounded face wore even a more perfect look of childish

content than in her younger days: everybody was so good in the world,

Tessa thought; even Monna Brigida never found fault with her now, and

did little else than sleep, which was an amiable practice in everybody,

and one that Tessa liked for herself.

Monna Brigida was asleep at this moment, in a straight-backed arm-chair,

a couple of yards off. Her hair, parting backward under her black hood,

had that soft whiteness which is not like snow or anything else, but is

simply the lovely whiteness of aged hair. Her chin had sunk on her

bosom, and her hands rested on the elbow of her chair. She had not been

weaving flowers or doing anything else: she had only been looking on as

usual, and as usual had fallen asleep.

The other two figures were seated farther off, at the wide doorway that

opened on to the loggia. Lillo sat on the ground with his back against

the angle of the door-post, and his long legs stretched out, while he

held a large book open on his knee, and occasionally made a dash with

his hand at an inquisitive fly, with an air of interest stronger than

that excited by the finely-printed copy of Petrarch which he kept open

at one place, as if he were learning something by heart.

Romola sat nearly opposite Lillo, but she was not observing him. Her

hands were crossed on her lap and her eyes were fixed absently on the

distant mountains: she was evidently unconscious of anything around her.

An eager life had left its marks upon her: the finely-moulded cheek had

sunk a little, the golden crown was less massive; but there was a

placidity in Romola's face which had never belonged to it in youth. It

is but once that we can know our worst sorrows, and Romola had known

them while life was new.

Absorbed in this way, she was not at first aware that Lillo had ceased

to look at his book, and was watching her with a slightly impatient air,

which meant that he wanted to talk to her, but was not quite sure

whether she would like that entertainment just now. But persevering

looks make themselves felt at last. Romola did presently turn away her

eyes from the distance and met Lillo's impatient dark gaze with a

brighter and brighter smile. He shuffled along the floor, still keeping

the book on his lap, till he got close to her and lodged his chin on her

knee.

"What is it, Lillo?" said Romola, pulling his hair back from his brow.

Lillo was a handsome lad, but his features were turning out to be more

massive and less regular than his father's. The blood of the Tuscan

peasant was in his veins.

"Mamma. Romola, what am I to be?" he said, well contented that there

was a prospect of talking till it would be too late to con "Spirto

gentil" any longer.

"What should you like to be, Lillo? You might be a scholar. My father

was a scholar, you know, and taught me a great deal. That is the reason

why I can teach you."

"Yes," said Lillo, rather hesitatingly. "But he is old and blind in the

picture. Did he get a great deal of glory?"

"Not much, Lillo. The world was not always very kind to him, and he saw

meaner men than himself put into higher places, because they could

flatter and say what was false. And then his dear son thought it right

to leave him and become a monk; and after that, my father, being blind

and lonely, felt unable to do the things that would have made his

learning of greater use to men, so that he might still have lived in his

works after he was in his grave."

"I should not like that sort of life," said Lillo. "I should like to be

something that would make me a great man, and very happy besides--

something that would not hinder me from having a good deal of pleasure."

"That is not easy, my Lillo. It is only a poor sort of happiness that

could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We

can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a

great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the

world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so

much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what

we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is

good. There are so many things wrong and difficult in the world, that

no man can be great--he can hardly keep himself from wickedness--unless

he gives up thinking much about pleasure or rewards, and gets strength

to endure what is hard and painful. My father had the greatness that

belongs to integrity; he chose poverty and obscurity rather than

falsehood. And there was Fra Girolamo--you know why I keep to-morrow

sacred: \_he\_ had the greatness which belongs to a life spent in

struggling against powerful wrong, and in trying to raise men to the

highest deeds they are capable of. And so, my Lillo, if you mean to act

nobly and seek to know the best things God has put within reach of men,

you must learn to fix your mind on that end, and not on what will happen

to you because of it. And remember, if you were to choose something

lower, and make it the rule of your life to seek your own pleasure and

escape from what is disagreeable, calamity might come just the same; and

it would be calamity falling on a base mind, which, is the one form of

sorrow that has no balm in it, and that may well make a man say,--`It

would have been better for me if I had never been born,' I will tell you

something, Lillo."

Romola paused for a moment. She had taken Lillo's cheeks between her

hands, and his young eyes were meeting hers.

"There was a man to whom I was very near, so that I could see a great

deal of his life, who made almost every one fond of him, for he was

young, and clever, and beautiful, and his manners to all were gentle and

kind, I believe, when I first knew him, he never thought of anything

cruel or base. But because he tried to slip away from everything that

was unpleasant, and cared for nothing else so much as his own safety, he

came at last to commit some of the basest deeds--such as make men

infamous. He denied his father, and left him to misery; he betrayed

every trust that was reposed in him, that he might keep himself safe and

get rich and prosperous. Yet calamity overtook him."

Again Romola paused. Her voice was unsteady, and Lillo was looking up

at her with awed wonder.

"Another time, my Lillo--I will tell you another time. See, there are

our old Piero di Cosimo and Nello coming up the Borgo Pinti, bringing us

their flowers. Let us go and wave our hands to them, that they may know

we see them."

"How queer old Piero is!" said Lillo as they stood at the corner of the

loggia, watching the advancing figures. "He abuses you for dressing the

altar, and thinking so much of Fra Girolamo, and yet he brings you the

flowers."

"Never mind," said Romola. "There are many good people who did not love

Fra Girolamo. Perhaps I should never have learned to love him if he had

not helped me when I was in great need."