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Chapter 21 - How Agostino Pisano Risked His Head

EVEN the squires' table at the Abbey of St. Andrew's at Bordeaux was on a very sumptuous scale while the prince held his court there. Here first, after the meagre fare of Beaulieu and the stinted board of the Lady Loring, Alleyne learned the lengths to which luxury and refinement might be pushed. Roasted peacocks, with the feathers all carefully replaced, so that the bird lay upon the dish even as it had strutted in life, boars' heads with the tusks gilded and the mouth lined with silver foil, jellies in the shape of the Twelve Apostles, and a great pasty which formed an exact model of the king's new castle at Windsor--these were a few of the strange dishes which faced him. An archer had brought him a change of clothes from the cog, and he had already, with the elasticity of youth, shaken off the troubles and fatigues of the morning. A page from the inner banqueting-hall had come with word that their master intended to drink wine at the lodgings of the Lord Chandos that night, and that he desired his squire to sleep at the hotel of the "Half Moon" on the Rue des Apotres. Thither then they both set out in the twilight after the long course of juggling tricks and glee-singing with which the principal meal was concluded.

A thin rain was falling as the two youths, with their cloaks over their heads, made their way on foot through the streets of the old town, leaving their horses in the royal stables. An occasional oil lamp at the corner of a street, or in the portico of some wealthy burgher, threw a faint glimmer over the shining cobblestones, and the varied motley crowd who, in spite of the weather, ebbed and flowed along every highway. In those scattered circles of dim radiance might be seen the whole busy panorama of life in a wealthy and martial city. Here passed the round-faced burgher, swollen with prosperity, his sweeping dark-clothed gaberdine, flat velvet cap, broad leather belt, and dangling pouch all speaking of comfort and of wealth. Behind him his serving wench, her blue whimple over her head, and one hand thrust forth to bear the lantern which threw a golden bar of light along her master's path. Behind them a group of swaggering, half-drunken Yorkshire dalesmen, speaking a dialect which their own southland countrymen could scarce comprehend, their jerkins marked with the pelican, which showed that they had come over in the train of the north-country Stapletons. The burgher glanced back at their fierce faces and quickened his step, while the girl pulled her whimple closer round her, for there was a meaning in their wild eyes, as they stared at the purse and the maiden, which men of all tongues could understand. Then came archers of the guard, shrill-voiced women of the camp, English pages with their fair skins and blue wondering eyes, dark-robed friars, lounging men-at-arms, swarthy loud-tongued Gascon serving-men, seamen from the river, rude peasants of the Medoc, and becloaked and befeathered squires of the court, all jostling and pushing in an ever-changing, many-colored stream, while English, French, Welsh, Basque, and the varied dialects of Gascony and Guienne filled the air with their babel. From time to time the throng would be burst asunder and a lady's horse-litter would trot past towards the abbey, or there would come a knot of torch-bearing archers walking in front of Gascon baron or English knight, as he sought his lodgings after the palace revels. Clatter of hoofs, clinking of weapons, shouts from the drunken brawlers, and high laughter of women, they all rose up, like the mist from a marsh, out of the crowded streets of the dim-lit city.

One couple out of the moving throng especially engaged the attention of the two young squires, the more so as they were going in their own direction and immediately in front of them. They consisted of a man and a girl, the former very tall with rounded shoulders, a limp of one foot, and a large flat object covered with dark cloth under his arm. His companion was young and straight, with a quick, elastic step and graceful bearing, though so swathed in a black mantle that little could be seen of her face save a flash of dark eyes and a curve of raven hair. The tall man leaned heavily upon her to take the weight off his tender foot, while he held his burden betwixt himself and the wall, cuddling it jealously to his side, and thrusting forward his young companion to act as a buttress whenever the pressure of the crowd threatened to bear him away. The evident anxiety of the man, the appearance of his attendant, and the joint care with which they defended their concealed possession, excited the interest of the two young Englishmen who walked within hand-touch of them.

"Courage, child!" they heard the tall man exclaim in strange hybrid French. "If we can win another sixty paces we are safe."

"Hold it safe, father," the other answered, in the same soft, mincing dialect. "We have no cause for fear,"

"Verily, they are heathens and barbarians," cried the man; "mad, howling, drunken barbarians! Forty more paces, Tita mia, and I swear to the holy Eloi, patron of all learned craftsmen, that I will never set foot over my door again until the whole swarm are safely hived in their camp of Dax, or wherever else they curse with their presence. Twenty more paces, my treasure: Ah, my God! how they push and brawl! Get in their way, Tita mia! Put your little elbow bravely out! Set your shoulders squarely against them, girl! Why should you give way to these mad islanders? Ah, cospetto! we are ruined and destroyed!"

The crowd had thickened in front, so that the lame man and the girl had come to a stand. Several half-drunken English archers, attracted, as the squires had been, by their singular appearance, were facing towards them, and peering at them through the dim light.

"By the three kings!" cried one, "here is an old dotard shrew to have so goodly a crutch! Use the leg that God hath given you, man, and do not bear so heavily upon the wench."

"Twenty devils fly away with him!" shouted another. "What, how, man! are brave archers to go maidless while an old man uses one as a walking-staff?"

"Come with me, my honey-bird!" cried a third, plucking at the girl's mantle.

"Nay, with me, my heart's desire!" said the first. "By St. George! our life is short, and we should be merry while we may. May I never see Chester Bridge again, if she is not a right winsome lass!"

"What hath the old toad under his arm?" cried one of the others. "He hugs it to him as the devil hugged the pardoner."

"Let us see, old bag of bones; let us see what it is that you have under your arm!" They crowded in upon him, while he, ignorant of their language, could but clutch the girl with one hand and the parcel with the other, looking wildly about in search of help.

"Nay, lads, nay!" cried Ford, pushing back the nearest archer. "This is but scurvy conduct. Keep your hands off, or it will be the worse for you."

"Keep your tongue still, or it will be the worse for you," shouted the most drunken of the archers. "Who are you to spoil sport?"

"A raw squire, new landed," said another. "By St. Thomas of Kent! we are at the beck of our master, but we are not to be ordered by every babe whose mother hath sent

him as far as Aquitaine."

"Oh, gentlemen," cried the girl in broken French, "for dear Christ's sake stand by us, and do not let these terrible men do us an injury."

"Have no fears, lady," Alleyne answered. "We shall see that all is well with you. Take your hand from the girl's wrist, you north-country rogue!"

"Hold to her, Wat!" said a great black-bearded man-at-arms, whose steel breast-plate glimmered in the dusk. "Keep your hands from your bodkins, you two, for that was my trade before you were born, and, by God's soul! I will drive a handful of steel through you if you move a finger."

"Thank God!" said Alleyne suddenly, as he spied in the lamplight a shock of blazing red hair which fringed a steel cap high above the heads of the crowd. "Here is John, and Aylward, too! Help us, comrades, for there is wrong being done to this maid and to the old man."

"Hola, mon petit," said the old bowman, pushing his way through the crowd, with the huge forester at his heels. "What is all this, then? By the twang of string! I think that you will have some work upon your hands if you are to right all the wrongs that you may see upon this side of the water. It is not to be thought that a troop of bowmen, with the wine buzzing in their ears, will be as soft-spoken as so many young clerks in an orchard. When you have been a year with the Company you will think less of such matters. But what is amiss here? The provost-marshal with his archers is coming this way, and some of you may find yourselves in the stretch-neck, if you take not heed."

"Why, it is old Sam Aylward of the White Company!" shouted the man-at-arms. "Why, Samkin, what hath come upon thee? I can call to mind the day when you were as roaring a blade as ever called himself a free companion. By my soul! from Limoges to Navarre, who was there who would kiss a wench or cut a throat as readily as bowman Aylward of Hawkwood's company?"

"Like enough, Peter," said Aylward, "and, by my hilt! I may not have changed so much. But it was ever a fair loose and a clear mark with me. The wench must be willing, or the man must be standing up against me, else, by these ten finger bones I either were safe enough for me."

A glance at Aylward's resolute face, and at the huge shoulders of Hordle John, had convinced the archers that there was little to be got by violence. The girl and the old man began to shuffle on in the crowd without their tormentors venturing to stop them. Ford and Alleyne followed slowly behind them, but Aylward caught the latter by the shoulder.

"By my hilt! camarade," said he, "I hear that you have done great things at the Abbey to-day, but I pray you to have a care, for it was I who brought you into the Company, and it would be a black day for me if aught were to befall you."

"Nay, Aylward, I will have a care."

"Thrust not forward into danger too much, mon petit. In a little time your wrist will be stronger and your cut more shrewd."

There will be some of us at the 'Rose de Guienne' to-night, which is two doors from the hotel of the 'Half Moon,' so if you would drain a cup with a few simple archers you will be right welcome."

Alleyne promised to be there if his duties would allow, and then, slipping through the crowd, he rejoined Ford, who was standing in talk with the two strangers, who had now reached their own doorstep.

"Brave young signor," cried the tall man, throwing his arms round Alleyne, "how can we thank you enough for taking our parts against those horrible drunken barbarians. What should we have done without you? My Tita would have been dragged away, and my head would have been shivered into a thousand fragments."

"Nay, I scarce think that they would have mishandled you so," said Alleyne in surprise.

"Ho, ho!" cried he with a high crowing laugh, "it is not the head upon my shoulders that I think of. Cospetto! no. It is the head under my arm which you have preserved."

"Perhaps the signori would deign to come under our roof, father," said the maiden. "If we bide here, who knows that some fresh tumult may not break out."

"Well said, Tita! Well said, my girl! I pray you, sirs, to honor my unworthy roof so far. A light, Giacomo! There are five steps up. Now two more. So! Here we are at last in safety. Corpo di Baccho! I would not have given ten maravedi for my head when those children of the devil were pushing us against the wall. Tita mia, you have been a brave girl, and it was better that you should be pulled and pushed than that my head should be broken."

"Yes indeed, father," said she earnestly.

"But those English! Ach! Take a Goth, a Hun, and a Vandal, mix them together and add a Barbary rover; then take this creature and make him drunk--and you have an Englishman. My God I were ever such people upon earth! What place is free from them? I hear that they swarm in Italy even as they swarm here. Everywhere you will find them, except in heaven."

"Dear father," cried Tita, still supporting the angry old man, as he limped up the curved oaken stair. "You must not forget that these good signori who have preserved us are also English."

"Ah, yes. My pardon, sirs! Come into my rooms here. There are some who might find some pleasure in these paintings, but I learn the art of war is the only art which is held in honor in your island."

The low-roofed, oak-panelled room into which he conducted them was brilliantly lit by four scented oil lamps. Against the walls, upon the table, on the floor, and in every part of the chamber were great sheets of glass painted in the most brilliant colors. Ford and Edricson gazed around them in amazement, for never had they seen such magnificent works of art.

"You like them then," the lame artist cried, in answer to the look of pleasure and of surprise in their faces. "There are then some of you who have a taste for such trifling."

"I could not have believed it," exclaimed Alleyne. "What color! What outlines! See to this martyrdom of the holy Stephen, Ford. Could you not yourself pick up one of these stones which lie to the hand of the wicked murderers?"

"And see this stag, Alleyne, with the cross betwixt its horns. By my faith! I have never seen a better one at the Forest of Bere."

"And the green of this grass--how bright and clear! Why all the painting that I have seen is but child's play beside this. This worthy gentleman must be one of those great

painters of whom I have oft heard brother Bartholomew speak in the old days at Beaulieu."

The dark mobile face of the artist shone with pleasure at the unaffected delight of the two young Englishmen. His daughter had thrown off her mantle and disclosed a face of the finest and most delicate Italian beauty, which soon drew Ford's eyes from the pictures in front of him. Alleyne, however, continued with little cries of admiration and of wonderment to turn from the walls to the table and yet again to the walls.

"What think you of this, young sir?" asked the painter, tearing off the cloth which concealed the flat object which he had borne beneath his arm. It was a leaf-shaped sheet of glass bearing upon it a face with a halo round it, so delicately outlined, and of so perfect a tint, that it might have been indeed a human face which gazed with sad and thoughtful eyes upon the young squire. He clapped his hands, with that thrill of joy which true art will ever give to a true artist.

"It is great!" he cried. "It is wonderful! But I marvel, sir, that you should have risked a work of such beauty and value by bearing it at night through so unruly a crowd."

"I have indeed been rash," said the artist. "Some wine, Tita, from the Florence flask! Had it not been for you, I tremble to think of what might have come of it. See to the skin tint: it is not to be replaced, for paint as you will, it is not once in a hundred times that it is not either burned too brown in the furnace or else the color will not hold, and you get but a sickly white. There you can see the very veins and the throb of thee blood. Yes, diavolo! if it had broken, my heart would have broken too. It is for the choir window in the church of St. Remi, and we had gone, my little helper and I, to see if it was indeed of the size for the stonework. Night had fallen ere we finished, and what could we do save carry it home as best we might? But you, young sir, you speak as if you too knew something of the art."

"So little that I scarce dare speak of it in your presence," Alleyne answered. "I have been cloister-bred, and it was no very great matter to handle the brush better than my brother novices."

"There are pigments, brush, and paper," said the old artist. "I do not give you glass, for that is another matter, and takes much skill in the mixing of colors. Now I pray you to show me a touch of your art. I thank you, Tita! The Venetian glasses, cara mia, and fill them to the brim. A seat, signor!"

While Ford, in his English-French, was conversing with Tita in her Italian French, the old man was carefully examining his precious head to see that no scratch had been left upon its surface. When he glanced up again, Alleyne had, with a few bold strokes of the brush, tinted in a woman's face and neck upon the white sheet in front of him.

"Diavolo!" exclaimed the old artist, standing with his head on one side, "you have power; yes, cospetto! you have power, it is the face of an angel!"

"It is the face of the Lady Maude Loring!" cried Ford, even more astonished.

"Why, on my faith, it is not unlike her!" said Alleyne, in some confusion.

"Ah! a portrait! So much the better. Young man, I am Agostino Pisano, the son of Andrea Pisano, and I say again that you have power. Further, I say, that, if you will stay with me, I will teach you all the secrets of the glass-stainers' mystery: the pigments and their thickening, which will fuse into the glass and which will not, the furnace and the glazing--every trick and method you shall know."

"I would be right glad to study under such a master," said Alleyne; "but I am sworn to follow my lord whilst this war lasts."

"War! war!" cried the old Italian. "Ever this talk of war. And the men that you hold to be great--what are they? Have I not heard their names? Soldiers, butchers, destroyers! Ah, per Bacco! we have men in Italy who are in very truth great. You pull down, you despoil; but they build up, they restore. Ah, if you could but see my own dear Pisa, the Duomo, the cloisters of Campo Santo, the high Campanile, with the mellow throb of her bells upon the warm Italian air! Those are the works of great men. And I have seen them with my own eyes, these very eyes which look upon you. I have seen Andrea Orcagna, Taddeo Gaddi, Giotto, Stefano, Simone Memmi--men whose very colors I am not worthy to mix. And I have seen the aged Giotto, and he in turn was pupil to Cimabue, before whom there was no art in Italy, for the Greeks were brought to paint the chapel of the Gondi at Florence. Ah, signori, there are the real great men whose names will be held in honor when your soldiers are shown to have been the enemies of humankind."

"Faith, sir," said Ford, "there is something to say for the soldiers also, for, unless they be defended, how are all these gentlemen whom you have mentioned to preserve the pictures which they have painted?"

"And all these!" said Alleyne. "Have you indeed done them all?-- and where are they to go?"

"Yes, signor, they are all from my hand. Some are, as you see, upon one sheet, and some are in many pieces which may fasten together. There are some who do but paint upon the glass, and then, by placing another sheet of glass upon the top and fastening it, they keep the air from their painting. Yet I hold that the true art of my craft lies as much in the furnace as in the brush. See this rose window, which is from the model of the Church of the Holy Trinity at Vendome, and this other of the 'Finding of the Grail,' which is for the apse of the Abbey church. Time was when none but my countrymen could do these things; but there is Clement of Chartres and others in France who are very worthy workmen. But, ah! there is that ever shrieking brazen tongue which will not let us forget for one short hour that it is the arm of the savage, and not the hand of the master, which rules over the world."

A stern, clear bugle call had sounded close at hand to summon some following together for the night.

"It is a sign to us as well," said Ford. "I would fain stay here forever amid all these beautiful things--" staring hard at the blushing Tita as he spoke--"but we must be back at our lord's hostel ere he reach it." Amid renewed thanks and with promises to come again, the two squires bade their leave of the old Italian glass-stainer and his daughter. The streets were clearer now, and the rain had stopped, so they made their way quickly from the Rue du Roi, in which their new friends dwelt, to the Rue des Apotres, where the hostel of the "Half Moon" was situated.