

# ROMOLA

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# CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
PROEM	I
I. THE SHIPWRECKED STRANGER	10
II. A BREAKFAST FOR LOVE	27
III. THE BARBER'S SHOP	33
IV. FIRST IMPRESSIONS	47
V. THE BLIND SCHOLAR AND HIS DAUGHTER	51
VI. DAWNING HOPES	69
VII. A LEARNED SQUABBLE	89
VIII. A FACE IN THE CROWD	97
IX. A MAN'S RANSOM	113
X. UNDER THE PLANE-TREE	123
XI. TITO'S DILEMMA	137
XII. THE PRIZE IS NEARLY GRASPED	142
XIII. THE SHADOW OF NEMISIS	158
XIV. THE PEASANT'S FAIR	167
XV. THE DYING MESSAGE	186
XVI. A FLORENTINE JOKE	197
XVII. UNDER THE LOGGIA	214
XVIII. THE PORTRAIT	222
XIX. THE OLD MAN'S HOPE	230
XX. THE DAY OF THE BETROTHAL	235
XXI. FLORENCE EXPECTS A GUEST	247
XXII. THE PRISONERS	257
XXIII. AFTERTHOUGHTS	266
XXIV. INSIDE THE DUOMO	271
XXV. OUTSIDE THE DUOMO	279
XXVI. THE GARMENT OF FEAR	285
XXVII. THE YOUNG WIFE	291
XXVIII. THE PAINTED RECORD	304
XXIX. A MOMENT OF TRIUMPH	311
XXX. THE AVENGER'S SECRET	320
XXXI. FRUIT IS SEED	331
XXXII. A REVELATION	338
XXXIII. BALDASSARRE MAKES AN ACQUAINTANCE	350
XXXIV. NO PLACE FOR REPENTANCE	361
XXXV. WHAT FLORENCE WAS THINKING OF	375

# CONTENTS

CHAP.

PAGE

XXXVI. ARIADNE DISCROWNS HERSELF

380

XXXVII. THE TABERNACLE UNLOCKED

393

XXXVIII. THE BLACK MARKS BECOMES MAGICAL

398

XXXIX. A SUPPER IN THE RUCELLAI GARDENS

406

XL. AN ARRESTING VOICE

427

XLI. COMING BACK

438

XLII. ROMOLA IN HER PLACE

442

XLIII. THE UNSEEN MADONNA

451

XLIV. THE VISIBLE MADONNA

459

XLV. AT THE BARBER'S SHOP

466

XLVI. BY A STREET LAMP

477

XLVII. CHECK

488

XLVIII. COUNTER-CHECK

492

XLIX. THE PYRAMID OF VANITIES

499

L. TESSA ABROAD AND AT HOME

507

LI. MONNA BRIGIDA'S CONVERSION

519

LII. A PROPHETESS

526

LIII. ON SAN MINIATO

534

LIV. THE EVENING AND THE MORNING

541

LV. WAITING

545

LVI. THE OTHER WIFE

550

LVII. WHY TITO WAS SAFE

564

LVIII. A FINAL UNDERSTANDING

572

LIX. PLEADING

579

LX. THE SCAFFOLD

590

LXI. DRIFTING AWAY

598

LXII. THE BENEDICTION

604

LXIII. RIPENING SCHEMES

610

LXIV. THE PROPHET IN HIS CELL

625

LXV. THE TRIAL BY FIRE

636

LXVI. A MASQUE OF THE FURIES

646

LXVII. WAITING BY THE RIVER

652

LXVIII. ROMOLA'S WAKING

660

LXIX. HOMEWARD

672

LXX. MEETING AGAIN

676

LXXI. THE CONFESSION

683

LXXII. THE LAST SILENCE

692

EPILOGUE

696

# ROMOLA.

## PROEM.

**MORE** than three centuries and a half ago, in the mid spring-time of 1492, we are sure that the star-quenching 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, amongst 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 *lucchetto* 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 gray 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 gray 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 façades and spires must needs wait. But what architect can the Frati Minori\* 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† 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?

\* The Franciscans.

† New Boboli.



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 only 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 *parentado*, or 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 trappings. 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 early 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 *riboboli* 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 the 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 filling 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, 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 Sabato* \*—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.

\* “God does not pay on a Saturday.”

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*,\* 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 gossips 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

\* The name given to Naples by way of distinction among the Italian States.

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 I.

### 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 door-place, 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 wool-carders 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 gray-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 Ferravecchj 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 *testoni* 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 promise you 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?*" \*

"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 (*così fatto come tu mi vedi*), 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?"

\* "Who wants to exchange rags, broken glass, or old iron?"

"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 profits 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, gray cloth is against yellow cloth; and there's as much gray 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