

MONA LISA'S LOVER

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September, 1988

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate
Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of English.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of two parts. The first part is a critical introduction which examines the most important aspects of the craft of fiction relevant to the creation of my novel, Mona Lisa's Lover. This introduction indicates the relationship between the use of history and that of creative imagination in my novel, and demonstrates that the creation of the novel depended on the very deliberate use of various conventions and techniques. It also stresses that no single, special formula was used to create my novel, but rather that the various inter-related techniques of the craft of fiction were used according to the evolving demands of the creative process.

The second part of this thesis, Mona Lisa's Lover, is an historical novel set in Renaissance Florence. Told in the first-person by the narrator and protagonist, Francesco, a young apprentice to Leonardo Da Vinci, this novel illustrates the classic themes of love, loneliness, revenge, betrayal and self-discovery. While paying the debt of serious scholarship to the facts of the age being recreated, the background of the novel is of secondary importance to the creative representation of a group of archetypal characters centered around the figure of Francesco.

RESUME

Cette thèse comprend deux parties. La première est une critique dans laquelle j'introduis mon roman, Mona Lisa's Lover. Dans cette critique, j'analyse les aspects importants de la création de mon roman. Je discute de l'utilisation de l'histoire et de l'imagination dans le roman historique et tente de démontrer que la construction d'un tel écrit dépend seulement du choix de l'auteur quant aux techniques et aux conventions à utiliser. Je souligne ici, que pour ce roman, je ne me suis pas tenu à une formulation particulière mais plutôt à des techniques variées qui répondaient le mieux aux exigences du moment et du processus créatif.

La seconde partie est le roman historique, Mona Lisa's Lover. Cette histoire prend forme à Florence durant la Renaissance et est racontée par Francesco, un jeune apprenti de Léonard De Vinci. Tour à tour seront abordés des thèmes classiques tel qu'amour, solitude, trahison, revanche et découverte de la nature humaine. Notons que dans un tel roman, bien qu'on se laisse souvent prendre par le charme des lieux où se situent l'action, ceux-ci demeurent secondaires aux personnages qui y prennent place et à leur représentation.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO MONA LISA'S LOVER

In this critical introduction, I intend to deal with aspects of the craft of writing appropriate to the creation of Mona Lisa's Lover, discussing in general terms the conventions and techniques which can place this work in an intelligible context. I will begin with a discussion of the historical novel. Here, I will consider the distinction between the historian and the historical fiction writer and define the relationship between history and invention in my novel. Having discussed the conventions of the historical novel, I will then proceed to examine techniques of the craft of fiction as they are used in Mona Lisa's Lover. I intend to examine the following aspects: 1) Structure - including plot, unity and coherence, and management of the time factor. 2) Narrative method - focusing on the significance of the first-person narrator and use of the confessional mode. 3) Characterization - focusing on the use of archetypal characters made "real" through particularities. 4) Dialogue - focusing on its relationship to characterization and its role in helping to make a novel dramatic. 5) Setting - focusing on the way in which background and atmosphere must be made "expressionistic", and not be a mere accretion of "realistic" detail. 6) Style - defining what is meant by this ambiguous, perhaps all-embracing term, and defining what is unique and significant about the style in Mona Lisa's Lover. 7) Theme - in this last category, I will discuss the ideas in and behind the novel, considering briefly the relationship between art and morality in my work.

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

Defined in perhaps its most inclusive terms, an historical novel can be said to be "any novel in which the action takes place before the

author's birth so that he must inform himself about its period by study."¹ Yet, surely this is too limiting a definition to indicate properly the vast differences between nineteenth century historical novels, such as Alessandro Manzoni's The Betrothed (1830), which is concerned to portray history meticulously, and more modern historical novels, such as R.M. Lamming's The Notebook of Gismondo Cavelletti (1985), which tends to exploit history as a means to a more exclusively artistic end. In all likelihood, the central reason for the different attitudes towards the historical novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that creative historical writing now sees "scientific" history as a delusion. In our day and age, writers are not so concerned with the dualism between fact and fiction as were earlier writers such as Manzoni. Contemporary historical novelists understand that there is no such thing as authentic, objective, scientific history. This fact is, of course, also well understood by contemporary historians. As the historian and historical novelist/critic, Lion Feuchtwanger, writes:

The historicism of the nineteenth century was an illusion, now quite generally abandoned even by academic historians. The historians of the twentieth century have conceded virtually all of the inadequacies of historicism. Though they use its methods, they do not regard the ultimate purpose of their science to be the determination of fact, but rather the interpretation thereof.²

So then, if the historian is concerned not so much with "the determination of fact, but rather the interpretation thereof," the question logically arises: is this, also, the goal of the historical novelist? The answer to this question is, "no", because, although the contemporary historical novelist must certainly interpret the facts of the age which he is recreating, this is not his ultimate purpose. His ultimate purpose is to create a work of art. As the critic, Cleanth Brooks, points out, while the historian "is concerned to discover the pattern implied by the facts", the fiction writer "may choose or 'create' facts in accordance with the pattern of human conduct which he wishes to present."³ In this manner, many facts were created in Mona Lisa's Lover. While the story was carefully researched, in order to gain a general awareness of events

surrounding the life of Leonardo Da Vinci and Renaissance Florence, historical raw materials were radically transformed through artistic imagination. Several examples of this are: 1) The fact that, although Leonardo did, indeed, have two apprentices named Francesco and Salai, they were not under his tutelage at the same time, yet, to meet the demands of art (the need for protagonist and foil), I brought them together. 2) The central intrigue of the action - the love affair between Francesco and Lisa - is entirely a fabrication, but wholly necessary if there is to be a plot around which historical themes can be woven. 3) In the sphere of historical events, all has passed through the filter of artistic imagination and been compressed into the time span of one year to meet the needs of artistic patterning and heightening or intensification of interest. These are just three examples of many possible instances of the "exploitation" of history in Mona Lisa's Lover. While, by themselves, they insufficiently illustrate the myriad ways in which history was manipulated to fulfill the demands of art in my novel, they adequately show that, while the historical novelist is obliged to study sources and reflect seriously about the nature of historical events, he must also freely (but with good judgement) use intuitive imagination to create and shape the facts he needs to make his story conform to aesthetic demands.

Since the historical novelist must be considered first and foremost as an artist, it is a mistaken notion to think that he seeks to revivify the past. "Creative writers," as Feuchtwanger points out, "desire only to treat contemporary matters, even in those of their creations which have history as their subject."⁴ The historical novelist's, purpose, then, is to clothe contemporary content in an historical dress, so that contemporary problems may be effectively dramatized and objectified. As Feuchtwanger explains in his book on "the laurels and limitations of historical fiction"⁵, historical writers "are frequently moved to choose this or that material by important external events. Such writers want only to discuss their relation to their own time, their own personal experience, and how much of the past has continued into the present."⁶ In several respects, then, Mona Lisa's Lover is intended to appear as a projection of the problems of our own time. While, in the tradition of popular historical fiction, it is filled with exciting, colorful episodes, this

book is also meant to make the reader reflect on the serious concerns of our day. Such contemporary concerns as the appeals and dangers of fundamentalist religion, the merits and drawbacks of democratic and despotic governments, the problem of modern day plagues, such as Aids, and the threat of destruction brought about by man's continuing mismanagement of the dichotomy between his higher and lower instincts, are mirrored in the novel. Ultimately, my portrayal of Renaissance Florence in transition - a "golden age" passing - is intended to appear to the reader as a symbol of our contemporary situation.

As Feuchtwanger incisively notes, a writer in one epoch frequently adopts some previous one as a model and warning."⁷ This, I believe, is in many ways true of Mona Lisa's Lover. Early in the novel's conception, it struck me that the choice of Renaissance Florence as a setting would enable me to treat universal human concerns more artistically than the "brutal actuality"⁸ of contemporary materials would allow. An historical framework gave me the distance I needed to deal with contemporary problems in perspective. "To portray successfully a contemporary view of the world, an author must move it into vaster areas of time and space,"⁹ writes Feuchtwanger, and, indeed, I hope that, by portraying the struggles of Renaissance Florence (events which struck me from the beginning of my research as being enormously symbolic), I have successfully drawn a parallel between that period and our own times. I hope that my presentation of Renaissance Florence will enable the reader to step back and view the forest rather than the trees, to envision our immediate environment in perspective.

Mona Lisa's Lover draws its themes and facts from history. It should be made clear, however, that historical events were no more than stimuli for the creative writing process because, necessarily, "the ultimate cause or genesis of [an imaginative work] lies deep in the personality of the writer as well as in his lived experience."¹⁰ So, while it is true that, inspired by Da Vinci's portrait of Mona Lisa while looking for a subject to write about, I became involved in reading history books, art folios and other sources dealing with Renaissance Florence, the selection and arrangement of material was a very personal matter. Although it is in some

sense true that "instead of the artist selecting his materials, the materials must suggest themselves to the artist, that is to say, the materials really select the artist"¹¹, it is also true that the selection of material "must derive from the innermost being of the poet himself."¹² For me, this selection process was an ongoing one which was formed by the continuous struggle between the imagination and controlling reason. During the process of composition, I found that, as an artist, my driving force was always my own inner experience. Yet, in order to adhere to my historical framework and to give artistic significance to my materials, I always strove to objectify that experience.

In his Poetics, Aristotle compares history to poetry from a perspective that clearly favors poetry:

The true difference [between history and poetry], is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen....Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and a higher thing than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.¹³

Here, Aristotle implies that the "truth" portrayed by imaginative writing is more forceful than the "truth" of documentary history. In banning dramatic poetry from his ideal republic, Plato, of course, also acknowledged this fact. He recognized the power of poetry to take hold of and sway the minds of an audience; he saw that facts are inadequate in the face of lively, well-constructed and plausible creative writing which excites the imagination. Once we have accepted this idea of the potential power of art to influence an audience, the question poses itself: "How, then, does the aspiring historical fiction writer create a work which will fulfill the demands of poetry in order to make it a 'more philosophical and higher thing than history'?"

The answer to this question is that he does so by using, to the best of his ability, the tools of fiction to create an artifice that is convincing to the reader. He must also, of course, be fully cognizant of his goals. He must realize that, while the historical fiction writer may

get suggestions for his story from events of the past, these events by themselves never fully give him the kind of facts - facts concerning psychological processes and human motives - in which he, and the reader, are most interested. For history gives us what Cleanth Brooks calls "truth of correspondence."¹⁴ What a true history says "corresponds" to the facts. But fiction is not fact, and its "truth" does not involve a correspondence to something outside itself. In fiction, "truth of coherence"¹⁵ is the primary truth.

In order to explore some of the methods by which this "truth of coherence" in fiction can be achieved, let us now consider some of the most important techniques and conventions used in the creation of Mona Lisa's Lover.

STRUCTURE

In his book on historical fiction, Lion Feuchtwanger writes that "a strong, rapidly moving, solid plot is the prerequisite for the success of every historical tale, but particularly for the popular one."¹⁶ Now, while Mona Lisa's Lover does not purposefully pander to popular taste, it does seek a more "general" audience than strictly "literary", explicitly "experimental" fiction can hope to reach. In order to reach this wider reading public, Mona Lisa's Lover uses the convention of a clearly developing, rapidly moving, coherent plot. This, of course, is nothing to be ashamed of. For a well-constructed plot, with effective use of tension and emphasis, is an essential part of the art of storytelling. No matter how "lyrically" inclined he or she may be, the novelist cannot dispense with plot. Aristotle rightly assigns plot the place of chief honor in writing and calls it "the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy."¹⁷ Though, of course, it must be seen as working with the other elements of the work, such as character and setting, narrative plot, is, then, of prime importance in a novel.

In The Poetics, Aristotle formulates a very precise definition of

plot. He calls it "the imitation of an action"¹⁸ and also "the arrangement of the incidents."¹⁹ He goes on to explain that the action imitated should be "a whole" - that is, it should have "a beginning, a middle, and an end."²⁰ Here, Aristotle implies that a plot is not merely a concatenation of events. In accordance with the laws of "probability", about which more will be said later in this critical introduction, episodes in a drama or novel should follow one another with probable or necessary sequence. A plot, after all, as Aristotle maintains, should have unity: it should "imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed."²¹

In order to create a unified plot in Mona Lisa's Lover, the approach which I took in constructing the novel was that I first sketched the general outline of the narrative, and then filled in the episodes and expanded them with detail. Although the novel has its own organic form and grew from its conception in the thought, feeling and personality of the writer, rather than being arbitrarily shaped through mechanical forces in a preconceived mold, it also adheres in modified form to the timeless, dramatic structure of well-built tragedy. The book is divided into five parts, each of which represents a phase of dramatic conflict: introduction, rising action, climax or crisis (turning point), falling action, and catastrophe. I tried at all times to make sure that the main thread of the story was solid and sound and then created incidents to flesh out the skeleton of the work, weaving the plot together with character and setting. I began with the premise that a story should be excitingly and entertainingly told, and planned and organized my material accordingly. Much time and effort was spent in trying to ensure that the interdependent sequences of crisis and resolution contributed effectively to the rhythm of the whole work. This required the adjusting of means to ends. Even though the outline of the whole novel was established before beginning, the prefigured chain of events was conditioned by choices made sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter, throughout the novel. Always, I kept in mind the idea that I must organize my material to create an expressive unity. The internal logic of my imagination and emotions was allowed to work freely, but always I paid heed to the fact that, in

presenting the narrator's archetypal quest for self-knowledge, I was seeking to create aesthetic order through a logical narrative sequence.

In Aspects of the Novel, E.M. Forster makes a useful distinction between story and plot. A story, he writes, "is a narrative of events in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality."²² Thus, plotting is the process of converting story into plot, of changing a sequential arrangement of incidents into a causal and inevitable arrangement. As Forster notes, the art of constructing a good plot involves the "functioning of some kind of intelligent overview of action that establishes principles of selection and relationship among episodes."²³ This idea of selection is vital, for plot is an artificial rather than a natural ordering of events. Its function is to simplify life by imposing order upon it. As Henry James writes, art is "all discrimination and selection," while "life is all inclusion and confusion."²⁴ Thus, the novelist has to select the facts that seem to him useful for his particular purpose; he must choose only significant facts. "Out of the welter of experience, a selection of episodes is made that in itself constitutes a 'whole' action."²⁵

Once we have established the idea that plot can be viewed as a large and controlling frame, as a technique which allows the writer to form the spine of the novel, we must quickly add that plot is really only important insofar as it is the structure by means of which characters are displayed. Plot must derive from character. "The most effective plot presents a struggle such as would engage [a set of] characters, and the most effective emotion for the plot to present is that inherent in the quality of the given characters."²⁶ The function of plot, from this point of view, is to translate character into action. The most effective incidents are those which spring naturally from the given characters. So, for example, in Mona Lisa's Lover, plot grows out of characterization and conflict. My narrator and protagonist, Francesco, is faced with several major problems at the outset of the story - he longs to have revenge on his rival apprentice, Salai; he desperately wants Mona Lisa's love; and he deeply yearns for Da Vinci's respect. All of these goals are difficult to attain. The plot of the novel is formed by Francesco's successes and failures to attain his

goals. The story's interest inheres in the resistances encountered and overcome, or not overcome - in "the logic by which resistance evokes responses which, in their turn, encounter or create new resistances to be dealt with."²⁷ More generally, Francesco wants "to remember how it all began, remember it from the very beginning" (Mona Lisa's Lover, p.1), in the hope that "once memories have been ordered, the rest [will become] much simpler." On this level, plot serves to propel the narrator along on his journey towards self-knowledge; it is the means by which I was able progressively to establish the moral character of my protagonist, showing the degree and kind of his responsibility for what happens to him.

Plot, then, is "a guiding principle for the author and an ordering control for the reader."²⁸ For the author it is "the chief principle for selection and arrangement"²⁹; for the reader it is "something perceived as structure and unity."³⁰ To define plot as an intellectual formulation is not, however, to define it as abstract idea or philosophic concept. Abstract ideas and philosophical attitudes may help in shaping the plot, but, practically speaking, the plot is comprised of incidents - characters and actions - and how they interrelate.

In Mona Lisa's Lover, the plot is arranged, for the most part, in a linear time sequence. A good deal of initial effort was spent in contriving an accurate, chronological order for the events in the novel. It was necessary to select particular dates for the major occurrences in my characters' lives, and to decide the periods of time required for every episode. In general, the time scheme is firmly tied to precise days and seasons. The progress of the seasons in the cycle of the year emphasizes inevitable emotional changes in the characters' lives. My narrator looks back from a disenchanted present, recounting the events of the previous year, starting from the day "when [his] troubles all began" (Mona Lisa's Lover, p.1). Some chapters in the novel suggest only the time span of a single day, while others comprise weeks or several months. Always, I try to concentrate on matters of consequence, on insensibility of experience, while still remembering that, in order to create the illusion of reality, the overall rhythm of the work necessarily calls for lulls in certain parts, and a more rapid pace in others.

The management of the time factor in Mona Lisa's Lover also depends on the workings of my narrator's conscience. It is through the emphasis of certain events and the passing over of others that the relationship between "life by the clock", and "life by values"³¹ is made clear. Since individuality depends on memory, and memory in turn depends on time, Francesco's selection of events is significant, insofar as his choices about what to emphasize and what to delete from the one year time-span which the story covers becomes in itself a subjective commentary on his personal experience.

NARRATIVE METHOD

The differences in mood and tempo brought out by the handling of "plot" and "time" in a novel are emphasized by the writer's choice of narrative method. The plot of a story - that is, the structure of action as it is actually presented to the reader - depends on the point of view. According to Sir Percy Lubbock, "the whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, [is] governed by the question of point of view - the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story."³² While this statement perhaps exaggerates the point, and should immediately be tempered with reference to the inter-related nature of the various techniques of fiction, it is nevertheless true that the novelist's choice of narrative method can vitally affect the unity, emphasis and coherence of his work. The point of view - the choice of the teller of the story - is a question of the greatest importance for any piece of fiction since the point of view affects the whole story, including the reader's reception of it.

In fiction, as soon as we encounter a first-person narrator, we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of events comes between us and the events themselves. As Wayne Booth points out in The Rhetoric of Fiction, it is important for the critic to make distinctions between the man who writes the book (author), the man whose attitudes shape the book (implied author), and the man who communicates directly with the reader

(narrator).³³ In works told by a first-person narrator, "the narrator is often radically different from the implied author who creates him."³⁴ In The Rhetoric of Fiction, Booth goes on to explain that, in any reading experience, there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader.³⁵ The critic, maintains Booth, must gauge carefully the variations of distance between these several contributors to the reading experience. For practical criticism, of the sort intended in this introduction, probably the most important kind of distance . . . that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator. As Booth points out, a narrator can be said to be reliable "when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not."³⁶ If, as in the case of Mona Lisa's Lover, the narrator is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relates to the reader is transformed.

Although the reader is sometimes able to trust Francesco's narration of facts and events, at times he is an unreliable narrator whose reflections and reasonings should be questioned and qualified. Oftentimes, Francesco claims to be virtuous, while the author shows his vices in the things he does (his repeated assertions of indifference toward Salai, of love for Lisa, and of respect for Leonardo, for example, are belied by many of his actions). This creates an ironic "gap" in the work, which derives from the distance between the narrator and the implied author. Because of this ironic gap, strong demands are made on the reader's powers of inference. Francesco is quite often deliberately deceptive. Yet, he is also at times almost alarmingly honest in his self-revelations. He is an amiable, if sometimes contemptible narrator who simultaneously displays both a grievous lack of sensitivity and great depth of feeling. Thus, it is difficult to determine exactly to what degree Francesco is fallible. The reader views his alternate evasions and self-justifications, and judges the narrator as the story progresses and the evidence supporting and repudiating Francesco's view of things piles up. At the end of the novel, all the prior events are qualified by the final dramatic dialogue. At this point, an overall reassessment is demanded on the part of the reader in order to put into perspective the preceding actions.

When reading Mona Lisa's Lover, the reader is compelled, in a greater or lesser degree throughout the work, to take issue with Francesco and, in taking issue, is (hopefully) drawn more deeply into the story. The use of an unreliable narrator such as Francesco is a fairly simple device for provoking what we may call "reader participation." It is a technique used to make the reader do some of the interpreting himself, for drawing him into the inside of the story by making him discover meaning. As one critic points out, "the reader...entering the dramatization as listener, finds himself collaborating in the actualization of the objective situation which the tale embodies."³⁷ It is the reader himself, then, who becomes the maker of meaning. He must ask what the narrator knows not merely of the action, but of the meaning of the action. Francesco, for example, does not, at times, entirely comprehend the events which he relates. Thus, the meaning of the story is understated; the full significance is not made explicit, but must be inferred by the reader from the many clues offered throughout the work.

As well as providing a device for creating irony in a work of fiction, the appropriate choice of a first-person narrator may also allow a certain naturalness of exposition to be gained. In Mona Lisa's Lover, for example, we need to know something about the world of Renaissance Florence. If that information were given in the third-person, the burden of mere exposition would be more apparent. As it is, Francesco can more or less casually and incidentally give us a fairly complete notion of his world; he can feed in the expository material without making us feel that it is labelled, for it is part of his life. Thus, the presence of a first-person narrator introduces naturally into a novel a device for selectivity. Since the narrator can tell only what he has observed, heard, or reasonably surmised, a considerable body of material from the hypothetical underlying action is not available to him. As one critic notes, "if, for a particular story, the narrator is well chosen, then the deletions he must make will seem natural, and the selections significant."³⁸ This means to say that the scale of treatment of events can be controlled in terms of the narrator's presence - he tells the story in his own way, he makes the emphasis.

As well as being a first-person narrative, Mona Lisa's Lover is also

a confessional monologue. As confessional monologue, the novel offers the "I" as penitent "experiencing in immediacy or in recollection some night of the soul and striving towards self-knowledge as a means of redemption."³⁹ In her book, The Only Teller, the critic Hetty Clews astutely notes that the confessional monologue is not so much a recollection or a record as an inquiry into the meaning of personal experience:

The confessional monologue springs from the need to explore and to share the most private places of a suffering psyche and, therefore, forms itself around the question of individual identity and concomitant questions of responsibility. "Who am I?" resolves itself into "Could I have been, or done, otherwise?"⁴⁰

Clews goes on to note that, given this center of self-searching, there are two defining characteristics of the confessional mode in monologue. One is a principle of selection:

In the confessional monologue the speaker appears to create his own design. He makes his choices and defines them as he speaks; he considers certain events and people only as they are important to his soul-searching; he traces and retraces his past only as it impinges on his present; he examines those compulsions that seem to have shaped his decisions; and in all of this he continually acknowledges, and frequently expounds upon, his own selective process.⁴¹

The second distinguishing mark of the confessional monologue is "the expressed need for a "significant other in the listener, through whom purgation, if not absolution, may be achieved."⁴²

Mona Lisa's Lover bears both of these distinguishing marks of the confessional monologue. Speaking always from a condition of guilt and suffering, Francesco is intensely aware of the confession he is creating, and he consciously evaluates his success or failure at his task of achieving personal redemption. He refers directly to his audience only twice throughout the book. The first time is at the beginning of Part II,

when he talks about "[setting] down [his] history for all men to see" (Mona Lisa's Lover, p.35), and the second time is at the very end of the novel, when he expresses the "hope...that impulsive lovers who one day read these words will understand [his] life, and learn forbearance from [his] story." (Mona Lisa's Lover, p. 205). Yet, as he attempts to create some kind of order out of painful and d'sordered experiences, Francesco implicitly invites readers to consider the complex prospect of his past.

As Clews points out, "confessional heroes, exploring uncharted depths within themselves, are...driven to an experimental method - the only method which conforms to the subject of emergent self-understanding."⁴³ So, for example, in Mona Lisa's Lover my narrator's expressions of doubt, anger, regret and frustration proceed through increasingly intense stages of anguished introspection as he tries to come to grips with his past in order to face the future. Although he chooses the comparatively orderly form of the chronicle or history to tell his story, Francesco is thrice driven to reveal dreams which, though difficult for him to explain, are a very important part of his confession. Although he tries to keep the sequence of his reflections under conscious control, his unconscious desires often dominate his restraint and compel him to reveal that which he would rather conceal. Nevertheless, despite Francesco's occasional experiments with narrative method, Mona Lisa's Lover ultimately has the shape of a carefully constructed memoir which requires the reader to see with the eyes of the speaker, to know what he knows of suffering, and to realize with him the meaning of the human condition.

CHARACTERIZATION

In Mona Lisa's Lover, Francesco is both the first-person narrator and protagonist of the story. As the leading figure, both in terms of importance in the story, and in terms of his ability to enlist the reader's interest and sympathy, Francesco - whose cause is at times heroic while at others ignoble - is the key dynamic character in the novel.

While Francesco is the central figure of the story, there are four other main characters who play important roles. These characters are: Mona Lisa Giocundo - the woman Francesco desires; Salai - Francesco's rival apprentice and main antagonist; Leonardo da Vinci - Francesco's brilliant though eccentric master; and the merchant Giocundo - the wealthy and ruthless husband of Mona Lisa. Each of these main characters represents a fusion of the universal and the particular. They are archetypal characters who reveal their true natures when driven by love, hatred, fear, ambition, and despair.

Mona Lisa's Lover also contains a host of minor characters. While the major characters in the novel are intended to be "rounded", three-dimensional figures, the minor characters tend to be more flat, two-dimensional figures who serve the major characters and enhance plot and theme. The minor characters in the novel are: Maria - Mona Lisa's loyal maid-servant; the wasp-like Florentine and the bear-like Emilio - servants to Giocundo; and Angelica, the child of Francesco and Lisa. There are also several historical figures in the work. These include: Fra Girolamo Savonarola - a fundamentalist preacher; Signor Niccolo Machiavelli - a well-meaning, though anarchistic political agitator; and King Charles of France - the pathetic war-lord, conqueror of the divided states of Italy. The final important minor character in the novel is the old rag-vendor woman, who serves both as a choral figure, commenting on the action, and also as a confidant figure, to whom the protagonist feels compelled to express his innermost thoughts.

Although, in examining a novel, no one technique can be studied in isolation from all the other techniques which combine to create the completed whole, professional critics and common readers alike are inclined to emphasize the role of characterization. This is probably due to the fact that our involvement with the characters of a novel lies at the core of our reading experience. Character is but a single element in the imaginative statement made by the whole novel. Yet, the reader must be made interested in the affairs of the characters presented, or the novel will inevitably fail, no matter how well the author executes other techniques. The reader must care about the characters in a novel as human

beings, though, of course, he realizes that the figures in a novel are different from people in real life in that they serve interests directly connected to the art form by virtue of which they have their existence.

In Aspects of the Novel, E.M. Forster rightly reminds us that "Homo Fictus" is a totally different species from "Homo Sapiens."⁴⁴ "Homo Fictus" is deprived of a great many ordinary human characteristics because these are not relevant to the novelist's design. His function is "to act in unison with other narrative elements as a vehicle for the expression of the author's personal vision of life."⁴⁵ In order to be effective, characters in a work of fiction must be symbolic. However, while the novelist's figures are "abstractions whose principle function is to complete a structural or verbal pattern"⁴⁶, in the end, we recognize the true novelist by the strength with which his realization of the actual world and of human individuality triumphs over his abstract speculations. The novelist must have the capacity literally to "embody" ideas in character. In the case of the historical novel, this means that he must also have the ability to derive the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarities of their age. Yet, ideas must always be demonstrated through the experience and suffering of ordinary human beings. The writer must focus not on abstractions, but on individual experience. In order for a story to be moving, characters must "fit in a moral universe"⁴⁷, but also be invested with humanity. As the critic Miriam Allott points out, "the abstraction must be made credible and significant, which means it ceases to be a mere abstraction."⁴⁸

To give life to the characters in Mona Lisa's Lover, I combined three fundamental methods of characterization: (1) explicit presentation of character through direct exposition illustrated by action; (2) presentation of characters in action, with little or no explicit comment by the narrator, in the expectation that the reader will be able to deduce the attributes of the actor from the actions; and (3) the representation from within my narrator and protagonist of the impact of actions and emotions upon his inner self, with the expectation that the reader will come to a clear understanding of the attributes of this character. Through my use of these methods of characterization, I have tried to invest the symbolic

figures in my novel with a sufficient degree of humanity that their behavior will carry conviction for modern readers.

As Allott rightly remarks, "the novelist's argument... proceeds from the value of 'the marvellous' to the necessity of maintaining verisimilitude and consistency in his characters' behavior."⁴⁹ The writer must attempt to strike a balance between the uncommon and the ordinary so as, on the one hand, to give interest, on the other to give reality. As Allott points out, this question of "probability" of character is really a question of striking a balance between romance and realism:

There is required a sufficient degree of the marvellous to excite attention; enough of the manners of real life to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic to engage the heart in its behalf.⁵⁰

In giving his work "enough of the pathetic to engage the heart in its behalf", the writer must, of course, avoid the pitfalls of melodrama. The interaction of characters in a novel should create human interest but, at the same time, the novelist must avoid saccharine sentimentality if he hopes to be taken seriously. This is not to say that the writer should not strive to involve his reader's emotions as he portrays the lives of his characters for, as Allott points out, "in the great work, we surrender our emotions for reasons that leave us with no regrets, no inclination to retract, after the immediate spell is past."⁵¹

An important method which the novelist may use to create characters who are convincing enough to enlist the reader's interest is to invest them with a plausible mixture of good and bad. In Mona Lisa's Lover, for example, Francesco and Salai represent extremes of virtuous and licentious behavior, but both contain traits which qualify these extremes. Francesco is by no means consistently well-meaning, and Salai is by no means constantly reprehensible. However, happenings such as sudden conversions are avoided in the novel, since actions performed must be both "in character", that is psychologically credible, and also probable in terms of the work as whole. Thus, while I explored freely the nature of my

characters, I was wary not to make them either too good or too bad, or suddenly to change their essence. This was done in accordance with Aristotle, who notes that, "in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim at either the necessary or the probable."⁵² For this reason, I tried to make my characters appear to evolve naturally, without heavy-handedness on the part of the author.

DIALOGUE

One of the most important methods of character revelation in a novel is the way in which characters talk. Since characters exist largely through their speech, dialogue is a rich resource for dramatic presentation. An effective way of conveying a sense of individual identity is to give each character a different way of putting words together. In Mona Lisa's Lover, for example, while all the characters speak in a manner which hints at an Italian idiom, they all have individualistic ways of using words. Francesco, though able to express himself well enough in his own fashion, tends to be rather shy and stumbling in his speech. Conversely, the quick cadences of Salai's speech convey exuberance. Through their speech, Leonardo and Lisa are shown to have rather reserved and mysterious personalities. The final main character in the novel, the merchant Giocundo, has the calculated vocabulary of a businessman. Yet, even he reveals his essential nature through his use of words.

The way each character in a novel speaks is important because, in order to be convincing, the writer must have his characters speak "in character." The novelist's use of dialogue imports into his work something of the dramatist's discipline and objectivity. Its authenticity depends, as it does in the theater, on an adjustment of the "real" and the "stylized." As Anthony Trollope writes, the novel-writer, in constructing his dialogue,

must steer between absolute accuracy of language - which would give to conversation an air of pedantry, and the slovenly inaccuracy of ordinary talkers - which, if followed

closely, would offend by an appearance of grimace, - so as to produce upon the ear of his readers a sense of reality."⁵³

In a novel, there are basically two ways to present character, directly, with a summary of traits and characteristics, or dramatically, through dialogue and action. As Wayne Booth notes, "direct presentation, even summary presentation, may be properly and effectively used."⁵⁴ The danger of direct presentation, however, is that it tends to forfeit the vividness of drama and the reader's imaginative participation. Direct presentation works best, as Booth remarks, "with rather flat and typical characters, or as a means to get rapidly over more perfunctory materials."⁵⁵ When it comes to the significant scenes of the story, the writer is well advised to discard summary in favor of dramatic presentation. The novelist's task, after all, is to create scenes for the reader's imaginative participation.

The need for dramatic vividness in a novel naturally compels the writer to use dialogue as a technique to help create the very pace of the story. It is important for the writer to decide carefully when to summarize traits or events, when to describe directly, and when to allow the character to express his feelings through dialogue and action. As Booth justly notes, "artistry lies not in adherence to any one supreme manner of narration, but rather, in the writer's ability to order various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing."⁵⁶ In the composition of Mona Lisa's Lover, much time and thought went into deciding what to dramatize fully, and what to curtail, what to summarize and what to heighten. Though it is impossible to apply abstract rules to determine when any one method took precedence, generally speaking, individual chapters tended to proceed from "preparation" to "scene." In the preparation, the reader is taken into Francesco's inner life and made to assist in the various processes which guide his feelings and thoughts. Consequently, when we arrive at the scene itself, the reader is in a position "to savor the full irony of conversational hesitations, suppressions, wilful distortions and unwitting misapprehensions, and to appreciate the nature of the fresh developments which these will precipitate."⁵⁷

SETTING

In her book entitled Novelists on the Novel, Miriam Allott writes:

The artistic self-consciousness which compels the novelist to make "things of truth" from "things of fact" by adjusting them to their new context has gradually seen to it that the background and setting of "scene" is as integral to design as plot, characters, dialogue and narrative technique.⁵⁸

Here, Allott makes a point with which, in the light of my own recent experience in novel writing, I readily agree. For, during the early stages of the creation of Mona Lisa's Lover, I discovered that it was very wrong indeed to regard the setting of my story as merely decorative background. I discovered that, if it were going to function as an integral part of the novel's design, my setting would have to serve the dual purpose of providing the physical medium in which the characters move, as well as adding significance to the book through its power to evoke atmosphere and to reflect symbolically on other elements. I saw that my setting would have to be made "expressionistic", if it were going to reveal character, advance plot, and reinforce theme. Thus, I attempted to make my setting cohere with the other components in the design so that the reader would have both the sense of living in a "real" created world - of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting an authentic environment - and the sense that the setting is not merely "background", but contains a significance beyond the realm of mundane "realism".

In Mona Lisa's Lover, the importance of the interplay of setting with other elements in the novel is established right from the opening pages. In this book, I attempted to create a vivid, memorable setting which appeals to the reader's senses, but which should not be judged simply in terms of realistic accuracy, but rather in terms of what it accomplishes for the novel as a whole. While it is true that the creation of my setting was often inspired by a personal delight in the imaginative reconstruction

of the world of Renaissance Florence, it was never relegated to the position in which it became "primarily a method for the display of descriptive powers in fine writing."⁵⁹ From the outset of the book, I determined that description of setting should never be used as an end unto itself. I saw that the piling up of details for their own sake would be tedious and irrelevant. For this reason, I always tried to select the significant items for presentation. When describing setting, I tried to create a world which is recognizable, and which is rendered vividly, but I avoided superfluous, merely picturesque detail.

In Mona Lisa's Lover, description of setting is often symbolically related to the theme of the story. The settings of many of the scenes can be accepted at a straight, realistic level but, to the perceptive reader, they should appear as symbolic also. I tried to create my novel so that it would be vivid with a sense of place and character but, at the same time, I realized that it was necessary to select and conventionalize those parts of the setting which most strongly appealed to my imagination, for the purpose of strengthening the effect of my novel's over-all design. Thus, specific settings were chosen both for their potential to provide a realistic milieu, and for their capacity to produce symbolic reverberations. The initial choice of the city of Renaissance Florence as the main setting for the novel provides a physical, cultural and symbolic location in which the story unfolds, and the choice of settings for particular scenes - Leonardo's studio, the Great Market Square, the rich merchants' quarter, the park on the outskirts of the poorer quarter, and the Ponte Trinita, for example, - provide the locales in which the characters move. It is only by rendering these specific locales vividly that the walled city itself can be brought to life and be made to appear symbolic - as a metaphor with universal connotations.

STYLE

The style of a novel is rather a difficult quality to define with exactitude. In its most general sense, it can be said to be "the manner in

which the words of a novel are arranged in order to best express the individuality of the author and the ideas and intent in the author's mind."⁶⁰ For, certainly, "the best style, for any given purpose, is that which most nearly approximates a perfect adaptation of one's language to one's ideas."⁶¹ Yet, this definition remains a bit vague. To be sure, in its broadest sense, style must be considered to be the overall approach which the writer takes in dealing with his material, but specific elements of a work must first be considered as component parts of a writer's individual style if the critic is to define with any precision what distinguishes one author's method of presentation from that of another.

The way in which the writer arranges his ideas is the most fundamental structural element in his style. In Mona Lisa's Lover, I organized my material both within an historical framework and within the framework of the five stages of well-built tragedy. Yet, while staying within these perimeters, I used my imagination to develop a method of presentation which was specifically adapted to the kind of effect which I was trying to achieve. Guided by the idea that historical accuracy was of secondary importance to aesthetic form, I attempted to create a work of art which, when finished, would be a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Thus I did by carefully planning the narrative so that the dynamic tension between all parts of the artistic structure make it analogous to an organism. Whatever "life" the novel has is derived from the tension between the various parts.

As well as being the way in which the writer arranges his ideas, style is also the means by which he displays his feeling for the possibilities of language. If the novelist hopes to create "a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture"⁶², he must craft language with infinite care. This implies that he must have the capacity for self-criticism which allows him to produce a fiction which is workmanlike, intelligible, and free from clichés and grammatical mistakes. Yet, it also implies much more. It implies that he must make very conscious decisions about what sort of diction to use; about how to structure sentences; and about how to use image and metaphor. This is all necessary because, as Joseph Conrad eloquently writes:

It is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words.⁶³

In Mona Lisa's Lover, I took great care to construct well-made sentences, to choose diction which was appropriate for the voices of the narrator and of the other characters, and to use images and metaphors in keeping with the setting and theme of the work. Yet, all the while, I also tried to remember that too much style is, in itself, a pitfall to be avoided. I strove towards the "art which conceals art."⁶⁴ I tried to invest my prose with vitality by keeping it, for the most part, simple and clear. Although, at times, I aspired to write a subtly "poetic prose", for the most part I concentrated on keeping the narrative intelligible and harmonious.

THEME

The theme of a novel is the central or dominating idea found in the work. It is "the abstract concept which is made concrete through its representation in person, action, and image."⁶⁵ In other words, theme is what is made of the topic which the artist chooses to write about, and it is the comment on the topic that is implied by the story. The writer must always keep his theme in mind, and use the other techniques of fiction as the means by which he expresses his chosen subject. When all is said and done, theme is the essential reason for a story's existence. The attitude toward life which the story embodies - its portrayal of human experience - is of central importance to its significance as a work of art.

In a novel, the representation of human experience always involves, directly or indirectly, some comment on values and human conduct, on good and bad, on the true and the false. It always involves some conception of

what the human place is in the world. After reading a novel, one is always left with the question: "What does it all add up to? What does it mean?" We like to observe a story working itself out to a unity. As Cleanth Brooks notes, "just as we instinctively demand the logic of cause and effect, the logic of motivation in fiction, so we demand that there be a logic of theme - a thematic structure into which the various elements are fitted and in terms of which they achieve unity."⁶⁶ Brooks also goes on to note that "it is not any moralizing aspect of theme that comes first to mind; it is the structural necessity."⁶⁷ He rightly reminds us that "if there is no satisfactorily developed theme, all our other interests, no matter how intense they may be, tend to evaporate."⁶⁸

In accordance with these critical ideas about theme, when writing Mona Lisa's Lover, I tried to create a work which evokes a sense of an independent world in which characters act and are acted upon, and which, as one event leads to another, compels the reader to become more and more aware of the significance of the whole. This is to say, I attempted to write a novel in which the reader gradually senses a developing theme. The attitude toward life which is consistently developed throughout my novel is perhaps most easily determined by looking at the pattern of the plot and seeing what significant repetitions appear. The motifs in the novel are all intended to lead the reader toward a perception of the theme. Also, the final chapter is of crucial significance to the theme of the whole, since, while it follows logically from the body of the story, it works retrospectively to put the rest of the novel in a wider moral perspective. Mona Lisa's Lover is, at least to a large degree, an open-ended work. It demands that the reader carefully consider the tone of the narrative, and it demands that he be attentive to irony. Only through paying attention to these facets of the work will the reader be able to discern the novel's intended significance.

Mona Lisa's Lover was written to teach as well as to delight, but the book does not end with a neat moral tag. In fact, the novel avoids focusing narrowly upon a single, particular meaning, but rather strives to reflect the ambiguities of the human condition and of the universe itself. In this book, I illustrate the classic themes of love, loneliness, revenge,

betrayal and self-discovery. Yet, no definitive, unqualifiable conclusions are reached. In Mona Lisa's Lover, good and evil are interfused, and this is the main theme. Throughout the work, I try to allow meaning to arise out of paradox and ambiguity. This approach to novel-writing was taken because, as in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne,

the author...considered it hardly worth his while...relentlessly to impale the story with its moral...as by sticking a pin through a butterfly...thus at once depriving it of life, and causing it to stiffen in an ungainly and unnatural attitude.⁶⁹

In planning the composition of Mona Lisa's Lover, my object was to ask questions, not to solve them. Certainly, the work has a moral purpose, but, in meeting that purpose, it attempts to convey a more natural truth than that which can be achieved by stern didacticism. In writing this novel, I tried to maintain artistic detachment. I wanted to show that life is so complex that no one ever triumphs unambiguously. I saw that the writer's responsibility was "to engage the reader with a shared reality, which creates in him expectations and values, sympathies and repulsions, appropriate to the comprehension of that reality."⁷⁰ To this end, I created a work with a theme complex enough that the reader will be forced to respond to the world which is being presented to him. I want him to judge, estimate and evaluate what is being urged on him.

In a very real sense, Mona Lisa's Lover portrays Francesco's passage from adolescence to maturity. It illustrates his growth into an artist and humanist in a world robbed of faith as a guiding principle of life. Yet, the meaning of the work is ambiguous. Upon completion of the book, the reader will hopefully feel compelled to ask: "What exactly has the protagonist learned?" If the reader finds the only answer possible is that Francesco has learned that the truth about life is not simple to pin down, hopefully he will not be disappointed. If he sees that the only view which the novel offers is that the moral world is a murky place, hopefully he will not feel defrauded, but rather take a critical interest in the ambiguity which the combinations and conflicts of interests in the work

imply. Finally, if the reader discovers that it is difficult to judge any of my characters as wholly admirable or wholly contemptible, hopefully he will not feel disquieted, but rather judge the work by the success it achieves in its goal of portraying a world in which moral choices are equivocal.

ENDNOTES

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²Feuchtwanger, p. 18.

³Cleanth Brooks, Understanding Fiction (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), p. 26.

⁴Feuchtwanger, p. 144.

⁵Feuchtwanger, p. 13.

⁶Feuchtwanger, p. 129.

⁷Feuchtwanger, p. 140.

⁸Feuchtwanger, p. 139.

⁹Feuchtwanger, p. 140.

¹⁰Feuchtwanger, p. 145.

¹¹Feuchtwanger, p. 144.

¹²Feuchtwanger, p. 144.

¹³Aristotle, Poetics, trans. S.H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 68.

¹⁴Brooks, p. 27.

¹⁵Brooks, p. 27.

¹⁶Feuchtwanger, p. 28.

¹⁷Aristotle, p. 63.

¹⁸Aristotle, p. 63.

¹⁹Aristotle, p. 63.

²⁰Aristotle, p. 65.

²¹Aristotle, p. 66.

²²E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, ed. Oliver Stallybrass.
(London: Edward Arnold, 1927), p.60.

²³Forster, p. 60.

²⁴Henry James, Preface to The Spoils of Poynton (1897); quoted in
Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul,
1959), p. 76.

²⁵Henry James, quoted in Allott, p. 76.

²⁶Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel (London: Routledge and
Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 177.

²⁷Brooks, p. 81.

²⁸Hugh C. Holman, A Handbook to Literature (Indianapolis:
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²⁹Holman, p. 336.

³⁰Holman, p. 336.

³¹Forster, p. 19.

³²Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), p. 62.

³³Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 156.

³⁴Booth, p. 156.

³⁵Booth, p. 158.

³⁶Booth, p. 158.

³⁷Brooks, p. 148.

³⁸Brooks, p. 148.

³⁹Hetty Clews, The Only Teller (Victoria, British Columbia: Sons Nils Press, 1985), p. 168.

⁴⁰Clews, p. 169.

⁴¹Clews, p. 169.

⁴²Clews, p. 169.

⁴³Clews, p. 171.

⁴⁴Forster, p. 33.

⁴⁵Allott, p. 197.

⁴⁶Allott, p. 198.

⁴⁷Allott, p. 6.

⁴⁸Allott, p. 200.

⁴⁹Allott, p. 6.

⁵⁰Allott, p. 8.

⁵¹Allott, p. 203.

⁵²Aristotle, p. 81.

⁵³Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (1883), Chapter xii; quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 295.

⁵⁴Booth, p. 154.

⁵⁵Booth, p. 155.

⁵⁶Booth, p. 8.

⁵⁷Henry James. Preface to The Awkward Age (1899); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 297.

⁵⁸Allott, p. 216.

⁵⁹Allott, p. 218.

⁶⁰Holman, p. 432.

⁶¹Holman, p. 432.

⁶²Robert Louis Stevenson, The Art of Writing (1919); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 319.

⁶³Joseph Conrad, Preface to Nigger of the Narcissus (1897); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 321.

⁶⁴Holman, p. 432.

⁶⁵Holman, p. 443.

⁶⁶Brooks, p. 272.

⁶⁷Brooks, p. 274.

⁶⁸Brooks, p. 274.

⁶⁹Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to The House of the Seven Gables (1851); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 93.

⁷⁰Brooks, p. 275.

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MONA LISA'S LOVER

PART I

CHAPTER 1

If I could only remember how it all began, remember it from the very beginning, perhaps it would help me now. Once memories have been ordered, then surely the rest becomes much simpler.

It must be nearly a whole year ago now that my life's trouble began. It was early one hot spring morning. I was mixing the paints for my master's palette - carefully blending the smooth, chalky white and bloody black pigments in the way I know is to his satisfaction - when Salai bounded into the studio. He was singing one of those vulgar drinking songs he always sings so loudly when our master is away. He learns them from the ruffians he drinks and gambles with all night. The night before last he tried to sneak back from one of their filthy wine cellars after curfew, but the night-watch patrol caught him hiding in the shadows of the city wall, and my master had to go to the jail in the morning and pay for his release. It is not the first time that Salai has caused trouble, but my master only ever gives him an insincere scolding and then laughs, saying "Ah, Salai! You were born a devil and will most certainly die a devil's death."

My master always forgives Salai. He loves Salai more than all the others. He says that Salai is the most beautiful young man in all of Florence. I love only my lady, Lisa, yet I cannot help but feel ready to

explode with rage when I think that my master, a man of most remarkable abilities and capable of the most delicate perceptions of life and beauty, should be unable to discern the stupidity of his handsome Apollo. I know that Salai is a thief, a liar, and a glutton, but my master knows only his own sweet Salai.

It is true that I am not a beautiful young man like Salai. I am plain and long-faced. I have a too-big nose and my eyes are so grey that they can only be described as colorless. Yet I am not jealous of Salai. That is a lie! Why should I be jealous of him with his fleshy lips and the muscles my master so loves to draw? No, I am not jealous of my master's other apprentice. He is an oaf. Still, I cannot bear it when he and my master are together. It is always "today I have five florins for Salai to buy a new shirt" or "here are three gold ducats which Salai said he wanted for a pair of rose-colored hose with their trimming." I cannot bear Leonardo's affection for his Salai. He is shameless to play with Salai the game in the behind that Florentines love so much, yet I am powerless to tell my feelings to my master. I have only my Lisa to confide my secrets to, and now she is gone from me.

My Lisa is lost to me! My thoughts stray too easily. I must think back to that first day, the day it all began. Yes, and so it was that Salai came into the studio, singing his filthy song while I sat working, mixing the paints, refusing to look up and acknowledge his presence, but Salai can never let himself be ignored. His clumsy hand fell on my shoulder.

"Francesco, the master is not here. Why do you work this morning?" he said.

"No, Salai, our master is not here, but I choose to work. I must prepare this palette for when he returns. He will arrive soon," I said.

"No, you are wrong, my friend," said Salai. "The maestro sent me to tell you that he will not return until late today. He has been to the hot baths and is now on his way to the hospital San Dominico. They have given him another corpse to cut apart. That knave who was hanged yesterday. Ah, it was a glorious hanging! He will be in bits before long!"

"It is for the sake of science that our master investigates the human

body, when will you ever learn that, Salai?" I said, putting down the palette. "But why didn't you hurry back to tell me this? These paints will be ruined by the time Leonardo arrives. But tell me now, have you any other news?"

"Yes..." said Salai, teasingly.

"Well?" I said, but Salai didn't continue. He is a prankster. He likes to play tricks on people. My master, too, likes to invent elaborate tricks to astonish people. My master's tricks are the workings of a powerful mind that cannot rest. One time he spent weeks trying to devise a way to make it thunder and to make lightening appear at the banquet hall of the Duke. My master was the guest of honour at the feast and he thought that thunder and lightening would be a fitting accompaniment to his entrance. In the end he was disgraced because he could find no way to make either thunder or lightening. He had wasted all his time and had not finished the painting which the Duke had commissioned and was to be presented to the court during the feast. Salai's tricks, however, are nothing like my master's. They too are often failures; but much pettier failures. He is not bright enough to try to invent anything. He is merely a buffoon.

And so Salai sauntered carelessly about the studio, waiting for me to beg him for the message from my master. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. First he would walk over to one painting, lift the cloth cover off it and, standing back to give the appearance of one appreciating the masterful technique that makes a work of art, nod his head approvingly. He would then put the cover back on and go to another painting and repeat the whole spectacle. My master's studio is filled with unfinished paintings, so Salai could have continued all day in this fashion. Yet, he was not really interested in the paintings, he was only trying to force me to ask again for the news from my master. Soon he became sulky and gave up the pretence of being an art connoisseur. He knows I perceive that his interest lies not in art, but in adoration. He wants only to be looked upon as beautiful, he cares nothing for any beauty outside of himself. And so he sauntered back over to where I was cleaning brushes in a pail of water.

"Francesco, do you not want to know the other news?" he said.

"I will not play your game, Salai," I said. "Tell me the message."

"I would not try to keep the master's orders from you," said Salai, trying to look offended. "You had only to ask."

"Tell me," I said.

"Very well! You are to go to the home of Francesco Giocundo, the wealthy silk merchant," said Salai. "That is the master's message."

"But he must have said why I am to go there," I said.

"You ask why?" said Salai, now with a sly grin on his lips. "You are to go there because at that house you will find a certain Florentine lady whom you are to escort here. The master is to paint a portrait of her. Her name is Mona Lisa."

The name meant nothing to me at that time. It was only Salai who derived some childish excitement from the fact that I was to escort a lady to my master's studio. I thought nothing of it. It is not unusual for my master to require me to do errands of diplomacy for him. He never orders Salai to do such errands. Salai cannot be trusted to be civil. He is never diplomatic. And so naturally I was the one who had been chosen to escort Giocundo's wife, the lady Lisa, to my master's studio.

After having cleaned my master's brushes, and completed my other morning tasks about the studio, I prepared to depart for the home of Francesco Giocundo, thinking at the time, "Why has that man my same Christian name, yet I have not his same earthly wealth?" Telling myself to be rid of such jealous thoughts, I put on my sandals and brushed off my best cloak, which I reserve for times when I must present an image of well-being to public eyes. I then stepped out into the street.

I began walking through the dusty, meandering streets of our quarter in the direction which leads to Giocundo's home. I knew that his home was built on the other side of the Great Market Square in the quarter where the richest merchants of Florence live. Giocundo's mansion is the grandest in the quarter. He is known throughout Florence as a man of enormous wealth and he has considerable influence over the city governors. He is said to be a man of fiery temper, without mercy for his enemies. There is a story about Giocundo: When he was a much younger man he had a rival in the silk industry, a fellow named Zanobi di Cela. One season Giocundo was competing

with Zanobi for a cargo of rare silk worms which had just arrived by caravan from the Orient. The caravan was stopping for only one night in Florence. Giocundo was bargaining for the worms, but Zanobi's competition made the worm merchant keep the price very high. Giocundo was furious. The story ends with the mystery of Zanobi's death. He and his new bride were found together in bed on the morning the caravan left. Both their throats had been cut. It is not without guile that Giocundo has become the richest silk merchant in all of Florence.

After my walk through the narrow, winding streets which lead from our quarter into the Great Market Square, it was something of a relief to be in the open space which the Square provides. Even so, the thick, motley throng of market people soon made me feel once more closed in by the city walls. I seldom venture into the streets of Florence. I prefer to stay and work in my master's studio. The crowded streets only remind me of my loneliness. I am a stranger here and so for me these city streets are filled with cold, stoney faces.

And so it was that I pushed and jostled my way through the crowd that day. The Great Square was alive with the energy of a new spring season. There were all the usual merchants shouting the nature and the price of their wares: fishmongers and poultry vendors, sellers of glassware and china, butchers with their whole suckling pigs to sell by the pound, and old peasant women selling the vegetables they had sold all their lives. There were also young peasant women with their baskets of chestnuts and pears. There were pilgrims on their way to Rome and pickpockets attracted by the large crowds and bulging purses. There were sellers of Mongol slaves from the Black Sea region and artisans from the neighboring villages. Prostitutes and their pimps, beggars and thieves, bankers and sorcerers - all these people found the source of their being in the life which made the Market Square the pulsing heart of Florence. But my blood does not flow from this same heart. I am a stranger in this city and I see the crowds with the eyes of a stranger. I cut my way through the life of the market crowd and continued my way to the home of Giocundo.

It was not long before I arrived. The sun was now high overhead and I

was hot from my walk through the dusty streets. The Giocundo servant-girl brought me water while I waited in the front hall for her mistress to appear. The hall was cool, with a lofty ceiling, great marble pillars and beautiful tapestries on the walls. It was the hall of a man who wishes his visitors to be awed by his wealth and fine taste.

After waiting for a considerable amount of time, just as I was beginning to become impatient with my forced idleness, I heard footsteps approaching down the hallway. A moment later, a young lady appeared. I stood and bowed to her.

"You are to be my escort?" she asked.

"I am," I replied.

"Let us depart," she said.

I wondered immediately why this enchanting young woman was speaking in such an abrupt manner and why she seemed to be so upset. "What could be disturbing her?" I thought. She was such a lovely young woman, wearing a simple dress, with her dark brown hair falling in little curls about her shoulders. "Her life should be filled with only happiness," I thought. Then I looked into her eyes, and I saw a tear - the tear that shall remain forever frozen in my mind - as it fell to the cold marble floor.

CHAPTER 2

I had no time to voice my concern at the young lady's distraught state. True enough, at that time it was not my place to inquire into the personal problems of a woman whom I had never met before. But that did not matter. Before I could collect my thoughts or utter a word, Giocundo's wife discreetly wiped away a lingering tear and motioned that we should depart. Although I had almost fully regained my outward composure after the initial shock of seeing Lisa's distress, my mind was racing with a flurry of questions. Even while I tried to convince myself that whatever was disturbing her was none of my business, I couldn't help but feel an interest in the affair. What has happened to upset her? I wondered. Does she know I saw the tears she tried to hide? Will the lady continue to try to conceal her all too obvious despair? Or will she try to find sympathy from whoever offers it, perhaps even from a complete stranger?

As these questions formed in my mind, I realized that I was experiencing a strong surge of compassion for this woman who was suffering some mysterious pain. And then, looking at her shapely full figure as she drew her street cloak about her shoulders, I recognized, with not a small portion of astonishment, that my compassion was accompanied by another sort of emotion. This emotion was felt as a surging flame burning deep in my loins. I understood with a strange mixture of surprise and horror that I was very strongly attracted to the wife of the wealthy and ruthless merchant, Giocundo.

Obediently I followed the lady Giocundo out of the great house. We passed in silence through the courtyard which separated the front of the mansion from the street. To the side of the courtyard were manicured cypress and olive trees. The heat of the courtyard paving stones burned through the hardened leather of my sandals. I momentarily wished to be

back once again in the cool of Giocundo's hall. Then I remembered the task at hand. I turned my attention to Mona Lisa.

I guided the lady at a brisk walk through the hot, empty streets of the residential quarter. Though her cheeks were still flushed, she seemed content to be in the open street, away from the confining walls of Giocundo's palace. Her tears soon stopped. Only an occasional sob betrayed the fact that she had been crying heavily for a long while. I determined that, before reaching the studio where Salai and perhaps my master also would be waiting, I would engage the lady Lisa in conversation. I hoped to gain some clue as to what had upset her. Also, I wanted to establish myself as more than merely an anonymous escort. I wanted to prove that I was more than just the silent servant of Maestro Da Vinci.

When, after a few moments, I spoke, my voice startled the lady Giocundo.

"Forgive me for intruding upon your meditations," I said. "But I have remarked that you are much upset by something. If there is anything I can do to ease your troubles, I would be honoured to be of service." Mona Lisa looked at me with curious, attentive eyes. She was squinting slightly because of the glare from the sun. The air was utterly still. No breeze gave relief from the close, stifling heat. Only the measured rhythm of a blacksmith's hammer from somewhere in the next block indicated that the city contained any life other than ourselves. As usual, Florence seemed empty at that time of day when her citizens rested in the cool interiors of their homes after the afternoon meal. Although I knew that in just another hour the streets would once again be crowded with people, at that moment there were only we two strangers walking in the mid-day sun.

After having first addressed her, I waited a few moments for Lisa to speak. She walked on, however, as if ignoring the fact that I had spoken. I cleared my throat and spoke again.

"If you share your troubles with someone, they will perhaps soon seem lighter," I said.

Lisa hesitated, remaining silent for a minute. She looked at me with

a poisonous glare. She obviously did not appreciate my attempt at confidential communication.

"You are a most modest-looking young man, yet evidently you are capable of extravagant impertinence," she said.

I knew that this was a crucial moment. I was faced with a critical choice. I could apologize for forgetting my proper place, beg the lady's forgiveness and implore her to say nothing about my conduct to her husband or my master. Alternatively, I could risk all and demand that she speak honestly to me about whatever was distressing her. I decided to take the risk. Yet, I proceeded with caution.

"Though I am only a humble servant, my lady, You would do well to consider me also as... your friend," I said.

"I see no reason for friendship between us," she replied.

"Must friendship always be grounded in reason?" I asked.

"No, perhaps not always," she answered. "And your offer is kind." Then in a soft voice, almost as if murmuring to herself, she added, "but do you promise never to be false?"

Upon hearing this, I understood that, despite her aloofness and seeming arrogance toward me, this young woman craved compassion. She was reluctant to speak for fear that her confessions would be betrayed.

"I have only the deepest respect for your trust," I said.

Mona Lisa gave me a quick, sidelong glance. But she said nothing immediately.

For several minutes we walked on in silence.

The noon heat burned. A lone market merchant driving a small donkey over-laden with bundles of cloth passed us, going in the opposite direction. The man's face was hidden by his hat brim which was pulled down to afford protection from the sun. Impatient to find shelter in the shade, the merchant beat the struggling donkey on its tender underflanks with a wooden switch. He cursed their slow progress. The donkey fought desperately to obey the sharp command of the whip, but he could not move any faster under the weight of his load. A trickle of blood dripped in the dust of the donkey's path as he plodded on and finally turned into a shaded sidestreet.

After the merchant and his donkey had passed, my attention was suddenly re-focused when Mona Lisa grasped my arm. With her hand tightly clutching me, she looked searchingly into my eyes.

"I am a prisoner in Giocundo's house," she said. "I will not return there." Startled by this sudden revelation, I nevertheless tried to return the steady gaze of Lisa's eyes. But, somehow unable to endure their desperate quality, I soon lowered my own.

I now realized that while Lisa was risking much by talking openly with me, I too risked much by encouraging a relationship between us. Any deep involvement with this woman carried with it dangers which would destroy the peace and stability of my life. I feared change. Suddenly I was terribly afraid of saying anything more which might prompt Lisa to reveal further secrets to me. I now wished to regain the anonymity which I had so very recently despised. I wanted to repel Lisa, yet I dared not. I knew that any attempt to retract my offer of friendship would seem a terrible insult. I had flattered Lisa's vanity. She was aware of her personal charms and not blind to their effect on me. Before I had a chance to say something which might have freed me from any further commitment, Lisa spoke again.

"Do not misunderstand me," she said. "Giocundo has shown me great kindness. He protects me. Yet, although I am grateful to him, I can only think of him as a horrible old man."

"But you must remember that he is your husband," I said.

"I feel a bond of loyalty, not as a wife to her husband, but as a slave to its master," she replied. "Until now I have despaired. I could do nothing other than continue in misery and servitude under Giocundo's roof. But now you have come."

"But I have so little to offer you," I replied. "In place of the splendor of Giocundo's mansion, I have only a small loft room which I rent from Messer Da Vinci."

"That does not matter," Lisa said. "Don't you understand? Giocundo may be rich and respected, but I am much too poorly loved. If you promise to love me, I will gladly forsake Giocundo's wealth for your affection."

Not knowing what to reply, I walked on in silence.

CHAPTER 3

Lisa was brooding when we arrived at my master's studio. Perhaps she was angry because I had refused to reciprocate her sudden commitment of love. Perhaps she was ashamed at having exposed her weakness. While I was interested to know precisely why Lisa's mood had become so reserved and anxious (I later learned that the reason was entirely different from anything I might have imagined), my most pressing concern was that she should not reveal the impropriety of my conduct to Maestro Da Vinci. As I opened the gate of the courtyard which fronts my master's studio and sets it back from the street, I was tempted to take hold of Lisa's hand. However, I resisted this impulse. I was preparing to re-adopt the role of servant to the genius, Da Vinci.

The studio door was ajar, half open. "Please enter," I said, ushering Lisa before me. She entered hesitatingly, pausing in the threshold. I led her down the hall from the foyer. The cool darkness inside instantly set a contrasting mood to the one which had developed during our walk. Without the heat and glare of the sun's fierce rays, emotions seemed less urgent, less necessary.

When we reached the doorway to Leonardo's main studio, I saw him sitting at his worktable. He was bent over some project, studying with intense absorption. His appearance forbids interruption when he is at work. I stood and waited. In a moment he looked up. On his face, which is covered with deep furrows of old age, was the expression of profound thought. Maestro Da Vinci often seems lost in contemplation. Even just looking at a simple rock, he seems to see wonders. His is a world which does not admit the presence of other men. Often he orders Salai and me to leave the workshop when he must concentrate. We distract him. He tells us that when there is another person in the room he no longer feels alone.

And Leonardo often needs to be alone. I believe that he is not happy in the world of men. Sometimes I think that he fears it, and that is why he prefers his loneliness.

Eventually, after I had silently waited several minutes for Leonardo to acknowledge my presence, I made a slight sound to attract his attention. He looked up from his work. As his eyes fell upon me, they slowly grew dim as they drained of whatever marvelous vision had held his imagination. His face, with its long, grizzled beard, regained its familiar composure.

"Francesco, where have you been? Why are you standing there dumb? Have you something to report?" he asked, his voice strong, yet displaying its characteristic high, almost feminine tenor.

"I have just returned from the Giocundo household," I said. "I have brought Giocundo's wife here as you requested."

"Ah, yes. That is fine," said Leonardo. "Bring her into the studio immediately. I will be ready to begin the painting in a few minutes. You will prepare the necessary oils. And bring my new brushes from the tray in the back studio. Be quick about it! If we must paint rich men's wives to put bread on our table, let us at least do it swiftly!"

CHAPTER 4

The interview that afternoon had been uncommonly brief. When Lisa entered the studio, my master observed her. He studied her face with a penetrating gaze which became more and more contemplative, as though seeking something there. He stood up and went over to her. He lifted her chin with his long, slender forefinger. Lisa, rather than curtseying as is the custom of young Florentine ladies, stepped back and held out her hand. Her eyes met Leonardo's without faltering. A curious, almost imperceptible smile was on her lips. A strange spark of intimacy seemed to pass between them. For an extended moment, neither one spoke. Then Leonardo said:

"I see, Madam Giocundo, that you are a lady quite different from the usual procession of spoiled young wives who tramp through my studio in their powdered faces and garish finery. Your smile reflects a mystery that intrigues me. Please tell me about yourself."

"I have little to tell, Messer Da Vinci," said Lisa. "I am here at my husband's command. You are to execute the portrait which has been commissioned. I may then return to my daily life. I did not wish to come here. Now that I am here, however, I see that my time may be spent in a fashion more interesting than I had anticipated. I have heard your talents as an artist are somewhat extraordinary; yet I wonder if you can capture the truths of my soul with your brushes and canvas."

"You wish to mock the powers of my art, Madam, but you must submit to my will if I am to create a portrait which reflects your inner light and your darkness also. My painting shall mirror your soul, and you will believe that my brush is the instrument of truth."

"We shall see, Messer Da Vinci, whether your words are mere shallow pools, or whether they promise something of interest. For now I am intrigued. I shall submit to your will and place my trust in you. But you must be warned. You may paint my face, but I shall guard closely the secrets of my soul."

After this brief dialogue, which I must admit perplexed me somewhat at the time, Leonardo abruptly cancelled the sitting. "We shall postpone beginning," he said "to a more suitable day." He needed to be more properly prepared. I was told to return the lady to her home.

The afternoon was now drawing to a close. The sun was less fierce overhead, and at first it appeared that the walk back to Giocundo's mansion would be more comfortable and less eventful than our earlier trip. Lisa held her reserve toward me, and I kept my eyes on the cracked red clay of the dusty road. Soon we neared the city center. We passed under the shadows of the Cathedral Santa Maria and the Medici Palace. Peasants with their empty wooden push-carts were travelling in the opposite direction. The market day was over and when we reached the Great Square it seemed almost deserted compared to the press of the earlier afternoon crowd. City street cleaners with huge iron buckets of steaming water were washing down the great slabs of pavement stone. The multitude of Florentines who swarmed to this core were by now in their homes, resting before the evening meal. The only reminder of the day's long bartering was the brownish stream of oozings from the bruised and discarded fruit which had been trodden underfoot and now flowed into the run-off gutters.

Immediately after we passed the stall of the street dentist, who was packing the last of his worn instruments in the dirty felt wrappings to which they returned every evening, Lisa suddenly stopped. Something had caught her eye. She was looking deep in the midst of heaps of cloth which lay strewn in bundles on the counter of a rag-vendor's cart. There sat a battered wire cage inside which perched a tiny golden bird. Lisa stood, mesmerized. Evidently this dilapidated cart belonged to a squat old peasant woman who was sitting beside it on a small wooden stool. The woman's gnarled hands were busily stitching a torn piece of black shawl as her sunken eyes watched us. Her tangled web of silver hair and her toothless grin warned me that she clearly was of that host of Florentine poor who are nourished on a diet of too little soup and too much cheap wine. I wished we were on our way, but this was not to be. Just as I reached to turn Lisa toward the street, the old woman spoke to us. She had a voice that was wheezing and cracked with age and dissipation.

"You are admiring my bird," she said. "Do his feathers not shine like the sun? A pretty finch, my young ones. A perfect gift for lovers! At day's end he will sing you to sleep; at dawn's break he will wake you to joy. For a few silver florins you may buy this pretty finch to hold cupped in the palms of your hands. You will feel the pulse of its tiny heart, wonder at the softness of its feathers! It is a softness finer than silk. Secure the lady's love, good sir!" said the old woman, looking cunningly at me. "This bird is a gift that will bring a sweet song of freedom to your mistress's chamber."

Needless to say, I was astonished and embarrassed by the unwanted outburst of this chattering old woman. For her part, Lisa may have blushed, but her eyes remained hypnotized by the golden-yellow finch perched in its cage. From time to time the bird would sing a short, pretty melody and then fly about in a tight, frantic circle. It ruffled its feathers and fluttered its wings against the rusted wire cage. When it did so, Lisa's eyes blinked momentarily and then lit with pleasure. She smiled in amusement at the tiny bird's play. She was absorbed in this spectacle, and seemed unaware of the old woman and myself.

Unaccustomed to scenes such as this, I did not at first know what to do. The old woman's assumption that Lisa and I were lovers had put me off balance. I wanted to urge Lisa that we should depart and leave this old woman to jabber at the next set of strangers who passed by. Obviously that is what I should have done, but something deep inside of me sought to appease the look of longing in Lisa's eye. I thought that if I could buy her this present it might be received as a humble token of my esteem. I also thought it might make amends for our earlier confrontation. Yet I lacked the courage to buy this gift and brazenly present it to Lisa in the open space of the Market Square. This I considered far too impulsive and unseemingly forward. So instead, I touched Lisa's arm and beckoned that we should leave. I told her that I was expected back at my master's studio. I insisted that I must escort her the remaining distance to her home.

Lisa lowered her eyes as we turned to go. The old rag-vendor woman was now silent. She seemed to read my thoughts; she knew that as I passed

through the Square on my way back to Leonardo's I would return to purchase the tiny finch in its battered silver cage. She stood, watching us with her lively, crow-black eyes and smiling her toothless grin, as we continued our journey to Giocundo's mansion.

CHAPTER 5

It was past twilight when I finally returned to my master's studio, having seen Lisa safely through the front gates of Giocundo's courtyard. As I silently mounted the dark, winding stairs to my room on the second floor, I could hear Salai and his loutish friends laughing in the kitchen below. The lamp was still lit in the front room where Leonardo was working. With one hand trailing the worm-eaten banister and the other balancing the canary's wire cage, I held my breath and prayed that I would reach my bedchamber unnoticed.

Now that I had bought the golden finch, I felt sure I had committed a dreadful mistake. It was absurd of me to suppose that I could deliver this gift to the Lady Giocundo. If my master discovered my intentions, he would be furious. If Salai found me out he would bait me relentlessly. Perhaps, I considered, I could hide the golden bird in my chamber. Later I would decide upon a course of action. After all, how could I, a mere artist's apprentice, presume to offer gifts to a rich merchant's wife? The very idea would be construed as an attack on Giocundo's honour. And the gift itself, now that I had brought it within the threadbare confines of Leonardo's studio, seemed to me insignificant and dull. It was wanting the air of romance it had acquired with the ardor of the rag-vendor's words.

I managed to reach my chamber without drawing the attention of Leonardo or Salai. I entered my small room and searched about for a candle to light. Having lit the candle, I quickly found a length of cord and knotted a loop. I then hung the battered silver cage from an exposed overhead beam in the back of the attic storeroom adjacent to my chamber.

The golden finch was sleeping, its sharp, tiny beak tucked under its wing. I resolved to forget about it until next morning when I would decide what to do.

Tired from the day's events, I sat down at the small wooden desk set against one wall of my chamber. I lit a fresh candle from the stub of the first which, as it died in its socket, was causing shadows to dance and flicker. The flame of the new candle created a wider circle of light and the objects in my chamber became visible.

My room has always been sparsely furnished. There is a hard, narrow bed set against the wall opposite my desk. Beside the bed, on a small rickety table, there stands a white porcelain wash-basin and chipped blue water jug. There is a square woolen carpet in the middle of the otherwise bare wooden floor. On the end wall a brown wooden crucifix hangs on a nail. This crucifix has been with me since I was a boy of fourteen. It was a parting gift from my mother when I left my family home in the mountain countryside of Bologna. At night, before sleep, I once prayed to the image of the Saviour carved in these sticks. I prayed for his guidance. Though it now sounds unmeaning, it brought me comfort. I defended myself from the Devil's whisperings with a simple cross and prayers.

Aside from these few furnishings, the sole object in my chamber is a lean, bronze statue of a pipe-playing satyr. It stands, nearly two feet tall, in the darkest far corner of my room. It dances on one leg as it plays its pipe. It was a gift from Salai on my last birthday. In emulation of the late Lorenzo Medici, there has grown amongst the merchant class a lust for collecting such heathen idols of classical antiquity. Salai knows I disapprove of this irreligious Florentine fashion. He gave me this gift to prick my conscience. I would destroy the leering satyr in a moment if I didn't know that Salai would jump at the chance to jeer and accuse me of prudery. The statue is with me still, and how I loathe it. I avoid the glint of its taunting, mischievous eyes.

Although I would have gladly prepared for sleep at this time, the

! goose-quill pen lying beside my papers reminded me that the day's duties were still not complete. The parchment leaves scattered about my room represent but a small part of the volumes of Leonardo's notes, which it is my self-appointed task to assemble. My master is incorrigibly haphazard in his work habits; if I did not take the initiative these notes would soon go torn and lost. Yet, that evening I could not immediately face another long night of deciphering Da Vinci's peculiar script. My eyes were already heavy and strained. My bones ached. I felt weary beyond my years. I stood up and went over to the one large window with which my room is blessed. I opened wider the shutters and breathed deeply the evening air. A faint, teasing breeze promised a night slightly cooler than many previous ones. To Florence, that spring brought no delight. Trapped within the walls of the city, we prayed for relief from the heat. It was not much past Easter and already it was as if a cloud of hot mist had settled over the city. While the peasants were free to return to the fresh country air, we in the city suffocated.

As I looked out of my window over the tiled roofs of Florence, I could see the great river Arno flowing beneath the Ponte Trinita, the central bridge which connects the two halves of this city. As I watched the river's swirling eddies, my thoughts were drawn along its currents to memories of my past. When I closed my eyes, I could see once again the small house on the mountain San Gervaso, where I was raised. I could see my father digging in the vineyards; his white shirt billowing in the wind. I could see again the olive trees he tended with such care. I could hear the clucking of fat chickens in the courtyard, and I could smell the aroma of hot vermicelli cooking on the stove. I could almost taste again the nutty tang of cinnamon, which seems such a vital part of my childhood. I could even remember how I would lie awake and listen to the swollen drops of rain splash in the courtyard below as my family slept secure in their beds.

As I remember these sensations now, I realize that it has been nearly thirteen years since I last saw my family. My childhood days are long past; then answers were simple, the questions left unasked. When I departed from my home to come to study in this city, my father said to me,

"If you would lose your soul, Francesco, then go to Florence and Messer Leonardo." He had heard the old men's tales of Da Vinci. It was said in those days that Leonardo's mind was darkened with Satanic pride; that he sought to penetrate the mysteries of nature by steeping himself in mathematics and the arts of black magic. Perhaps some of this was true. It was not my place to judge. I had worked hard at the rudiments of perspective and rule, which I believed lay at the heart of the artist's craft. I had learned these rudiments under the guiding hands of the Franciscan monks in my village school. Yet I yearned to learn more. Despite the love that I knew there, I desperately needed to break from my family home. I knew that Florence was the place for me to go. I, too, had heard the tales about Da Vinci. However, all of this matters little now. Leonardo has aged greatly since then. Now despair is often seen in his pale-blue, enigmatic eyes. Yet, even if my life has turned out much differently from my dreams, perhaps I have learned from Leonardo's many failures. People have come to talk of him now as a pitiful and impotent old man. However, this, as with all things, I believe to be true only in part.

The sound of the Cathedral bells ringing brought me back to the present. I returned to my desk and sat down. Just as I picked up my pen to begin work, the door handle clicked and Salai stuck his head into the room. Fire flashed from his dark green eyes. I knew he had important news to tempt me with. I restrained myself from rising to anger at his having entered my chamber without knocking.

"Francesco," he said, "why are you cooped up in your dingy little room? Why aren't you scampering off to evening vespers? Did you not hear the clanging Cathedral bells? Have you no faith? They say Fra Girolamo is to preach the sermon tonight. Fire and Brimstone! Plague and Pestilence! You must not miss it. The master and I rely on you to pray for our sins. Have you no sense of Christian duty?"

I said nothing. I refused to let Salai get the better of me.

"Come now, Francesco," he continued, striding over to the window-sill

where he sat down. "Do not be so morose. Have you not heard? There is to be a bonfire tomorrow night. All the vanities Girolamo's collectors have been piling up these past weeks are soon to be torched. We are getting drunk downstairs to celebrate. If this ridiculous priest insists on burning our trinkets, who are we to yowl in despair? I handed over my best plum-colored tunic, and a mirror and ivory comb to boot! You have sacrificed nothing. You own nothing! You should be proud. Who else in Florence is so eagerly virtuous as our very own Francesco?"

Saying this last, Salai lifted his cup of wine. With malicious mirth, he looked straight into my eyes. His face was fixed in one broad smile. His contempt for me was almost palpable.

"Salai, can you not leave me in peace?" I said. "I have no desire to defend once again the righteousness of Fra Girolamo's words. We have gnawed this question to the bone. If you choose not to repent your ways, that is your own ill-fortune. I believe that Fra Girolamo is just. This city is corrupt with heathen worship and idle luxury. Girolamo perceives this iniquity. He has rallied the people to his cause. You are angry because you have been obliged to sacrifice a few of your precious possessions for a cause you do not believe in. But it is for the best, Salai. Sometimes sinners need help to relieve themselves of the pagan trappings of vanity."

"How dare you preach to me, you self-righteous toad!" said Salai, his face darkening with frustration and anger. "You beware of your own sins. You are a simpleton and an ass! I'll see you yet in hell. You and Girolamo both. Poor fool! You have caught the fever of his delirium. You are no better than the thick-skulled peasants who tremble and quake before his cursed visions. But I tell you he is just another black-minded priest, clutching his crucifix as a drunkard clutches his bottle. I, for one, shall pay him no heed."

"But you dare not renounce him!" I said.

"If I do not renounce him in public, that is because I have no wish to be flogged. But inwardly, I laugh at his prophecies! And while I still have breath, I shall go on singing and drinking. Tonight let us feast, for tomorrow we die!"

I sat quite still, avoiding the threatening gleam in Salai's eyes. He was challenging me to defend my position. He knew full well how precarious that position was. How could I, who committed myself to the irreligious arts of Leonardo with far greater zeal than Salai had ever shown, also expect to present myself as a true disciple of the Church. Was Da Vinci, with his constant meddling with science, not considered the very enemy of God? How could I explain my devotion to these contrary forces? As Salai knew I could never hope to answer this question in a satisfactory manner. Many sleepless nights I had spent examining my situation from every conceivable angle. And still I was tortured by self-doubts which strove to cleave my mind in two. I had no clear answers. I could only resolve that this was a form of penance which I must suffer in payment for my inability to choose one path or the other in an age which demanded that men must take sides.

Salai had still not accomplished what he had come to do. With the news of the bonfire of vanities, which all of Florence had been expecting, he had re-lit our disagreements about Fra Girolamo Savonarola. Yet I knew he held in reserve a tid-bit of gossip or scandal which would touch me deeper than the usual goading over Girolamo. Having uttered his last speech, Salai grew quiet. He sat on the window-sill, whistling softly and sadly as he looked at the stars. He was pretending to be in a contemplative, philosophical mood.

I knew his game, however, and I refused to play it his way.

"Salai," I said. "If that is all you have to say, kindly leave now. I am busy with the master's notebooks, and unable to go to vespers this evening. Anyway, this is none of your business. Hadn't you better get back downstairs before your greedy-mouthed friends drink all the wine?"

"But Francesco," said Salai, not looking at me, but still at the stars, "I really came up here to tell you some other news. My friend Rudolfo just arrived at my little party. His lover, Maria, is a maid-servant in Messer Giocundo's household. Maria tells us that soon after the lady Giocundo arrived home this evening, she had a terrible fight

with her husband. Giocundo ordered her locked in her bedchamber. When Maria went in to bring the lady comfort, she found her lying on the floor beside her great satin bed."

Saying this, Salai paused and turned to face me.

"Maria says that her one wrist was immersed in a basin of bloody water. A jewelled knife, glistening with rubies, was still in her other hand, which lay open on her breast. Giocundo's men-servants used the private enclosed coach to rush the lady to the hospital of San Dominico. But of course she's made a mess of it. The whole town will soon know. They bandaged her wrists and with her luck she'll probably live to be an old woman of one hundred long years!"

Salai said these last words with a characteristic sneer and a toss of his golden head. He emptied his wine cup. Then, clapping me merrily on the shoulder, he strode out of my chamber, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER 6

It was several weeks later before next I met Lisa. These weeks had passed slowly, though the days were eventful. It was now the third week in May. The city, still enveloped in a cloud of heat, had continued to function in a listless routine under the sun's watchful eye. I longed for the birds and the grass in the meadows, but I had little time for such pastoral thoughts. Florence was abuzz with all manner of intrigue. Though perhaps my memory plays me tricks, it all seemed to follow hard upon the night of the bonfire of vanities.

I remember that night vividly. I can still picture Fra Girolamo in his black flowing robes, his sharp, yellow face emaciated from fasting. I can see his thick, purple lips spitting out prayers, his misshapen jaw snapping the air. His fiery, coal-black eyes still burn in my mind. I remember the crowd in the Square that night, tremendous and pulsing. People were shoving and pushing forward in an effort to get closer to Girolamo's altar. The bells of the great Cathedral clanged continuously. Above all this din, I can still hear the piercing cries of Girolamo himself. His right hand was raised, clutching the crucifix. His neck sinews were corded tight from screaming his prophecies. He cried to us of floods and war, pestilence and hunger. He chastized Florence and Italy; he cursed us for our sins. He lifted open arms toward heaven, pleading for mercy and forgiveness. In a half-circle behind Girolamo stood his torch-bearing disciples, their faces hidden inside their black cowls. And in the center, the pyre, stacked high with vanities, wooden carvings of pagan idols piled on a bed of lesser iniquities. The crowd began chanting a hymn in slow rhythm to Girolamo's frenzied lead. I remember the fury of the fire's close heat, the hissing and crackling flames. And, finally, the thick smoke, grey, then blackening, as it rose in coils toward heaven.

Soon after that night, two fateful items of news came to Florence. The first was a vague rumor from the East of a plague so virulent that men who were healthy at sun-up fell dead before nightfall. The second news, much more immediately alarming, was that Charles VIII, bastard king of France, had taken up arms and was marching to conquer the divided states of Italy. Panic spread throughout the city. In the minds of the people, Girolamo's prophecies were being fulfilled. The priest was raised high on his altar and, for a time, his words governed Florence. Even the Duke himself dared not make policy before consulting Girolamo as his first counsel. Girolamo's visions were given all rightful credence. Florence clung to his words. We prayed for salvation.

Despite my interest in these affairs of church and state, my thoughts during this time were focused mostly on private concerns. My daily routine in my master's studio continued uninterrupted. Together with my regular duties, I now had the added responsibility of bringing seed and water to the golden finch, whose cage still hung in the attic storeroom. I did not know what to do with this creature, which had grown silent and merely pecked at its food when I brought it. During this period, I also thought much about Lisa. I reflected on the conversation of our first meeting. I tried to shake out of my head the image of her blood-stained hands. I told myself that I certainly was not to blame for her act. I considered going unannounced to Giocundo's home to speak with the lady, but I knew this to be impossible. And then, just when I had firmly resolved that I would do my best to forget all about her and concentrate on the silver-point studies which Leonardo deemed vital to my education, Lisa reached out to me once again.

It was one afternoon, during the lunch hour. I was busy at my easel in the studio, putting the last finishing touches to my umpteenth effort at a scaled-down, full skeletal anatomy study. The windows were open and the streets were quiet. I could hear the shop-woman singing in the bakery across the road. I was enjoying the peacefulness of working alone in the studio. Salai was off on one of his junkets to Rome. There he whored and gambles, staying away sometimes for more than a week. He comes back bleary-eyed and sleeps as if dead for two nights and two days. Leonardo

was at another appointment at the castle of the Duke. With the threat of the bastard Charles reaching over the Alps to snatch at Italy, the old man Da Vinci had once again found useful service. He was employed in the design of war-machines to help defend the Duke. I had seen the sketches of his "Exploding Devices" and "Armoured Fortifications". That May afternoon, I was thinking about how it was that Leonardo cared nothing for the Duke himself. Rather, he willingly drew his plans to save this city which contains so much of his making. Also, he naturally wanted to see his ideas put into form. I was absorbed in these thoughts - imagining the wheels and pulleys and blades of Leonardo's toy-size drawings cast in the larger, solid proportions of timber and steel - when a faint knocking at the back door of the studio interrupted my reflections. I put down my sharp-tipped silver-point pen and went to answer.

Standing on the doorstep was a fine-featured girl of about seventeen years. Her cheeks were colored a russet-tan, and her auburn hair was tied in loose, beaded braids. She wore a light cotton servant-girl's dress. Two thin silver bracelets jangled on one of her wrists. Her azure eyes, flecked with tints of yellow, sparkled as she smiled shyly at me.

"May I help you?" I asked.

"Although you do not know me, Messer Francesco," she said, "my name is Maria. I am a maid in the household of the merchant, Giocundo. I have come here on behalf of my mistress. She wishes for her portrait to be re-commenced at Messer Da Vinci's earliest convenience."

The thought of what it would mean to see Lisa again flared in my mind. Yet I retained my composure.

"I am afraid that the Maestro is much preoccupied with concerns of state at this time," I said. "However, I will deliver your message to my master and he will decide if a sitting is possible."

"Thank you for your courtesy," said the house-girl, bobbing politely. Then, just as she seemed about to leave, she smiled again and looked knowingly at me. It was as if she could clearly hear my heart thumping its quick rhythm beneath my thin ribs.

"And you, Messer Francesco," she said, "did you have... a personal message you would like delivered to my mistress?"

My blank face must have given her the answer she required. With a short, lilting laugh, Maria turned on her heels and left me standing dumb on the doorstep.

Needless to say, I was greatly surprised when, upon being informed of Giocundo's wish to have his wife's portrait started again, my master assented immediately.

"Yes, yes," he said. "She was a most perplexing young woman. And how peculiar to have so feared beginning the painting that she went to such lengths to postpone it. Quite remarkable... indeed."

This was the first time I had heard my master speak of Lisa's action. His interpretation of the incident disturbed me and gave me pause.

"Yes, it promises to be interesting work," said Da Vinci with a thoughtful gleam in his eye. "We shall begin in three days."

I soon found out these three days would be put to good use. My master had Salai and me prepare the front octagonal studio in a special way. We were told to paint the walls black, and to secure thick canvas curtains to dull the sun's light. Leonardo said that these measures would give a special charm to the face of the Lady Giocundo. He said that this was the perfect light, when shadows seemed to float underwater. I was told to set up his best three-legged easel in the middle of the room. A chair of smooth, dark mahogany was set out for Lisa. Later, Leonardo's white cat would be brought in for the lady to hold in her lap to help distract her from boredom. Salai was told to tune his gilded lyre and sit in the background, playing his saddest sweet love songs.

"We shall attempt," said Leonardo, "to mirror in these surroundings the deep currents of the lady's dark heart." Then, setting down the sketch of the Madonna he was working on, he looked wearily out of the window at the night sky and, in a softening voice, he added, "This may be the last portrait I paint in my lifetime. Yes...I shall make it... my last."

CHAPTER 7

On the morning of the third day, having prepared the studio to Leonardc's liking, I was sent to escort Lisa from her home.

Before setting out for Giocundo's mansion that morning, I took care to shave closely and to comb and oil my hair. I put on my best leather tunic and I rubbed the copper buckle on my street-cloak till it gleamed. I even stole into Salai's room when he was not there and splashed on my face a moderate amount of the perfume which he keeps on his dresser. I looked at myself one last time in the hand-mirror beside Salai's bed, and then, treading softly down the stairs, I went out the front door and into the street.

It had rained the previous night - a short shower-burst that, for a time, relieved our parched throats - and the day seemed slightly fresher than usual. My mood that morning was open and genial. I could not help but enjoy my surroundings. It was a Saturday morning, and children played on the steps outside their homes in the poorer quarter where Leonardo's studio lay. Old men sat talking and smoking pipes of tobacco under colorful awnings which hung over doorways. From the sidewalk bistros percolated the aroma of strong coffee. Overhead, the narrow strip of white sky between the rooftops unraveled like a thread into the distance.

After about twenty minutes walk through the streets, I came to a small park that lay on the outskirts of our district. There were then a few such patches of green left within the two hundred acres circumscribed by the walls of this city. Sometimes I went out of my way to visit that park when I needed to walk and think alone. I entered the main gardens by a winding footpath. On either side were olive trees whose under-leaves blew silver in the rippling wind. As was my custom, I had stopped at a confectioner's booth to purchase a sac of crusts to feed to the pair of swans which glided

on the blue pond nestled in one corner of the park. I walked along the side of the pond, scattering the crusts to the stately white birds. I talked to them softly. They arched their proud necks and, nipping at a group of mottled ducks which had paddled over, they greedily ate the bits of bread which floated on the water's surface. I watched these birds preen for several more minutes and then, having rinsed my hands at the water's edge, I continued on my way to Giocundo's.

As I walked out of the park, my thoughts were light and pleasant. Having spent two sleepless nights thinking anxiously about seeing Lisa again, I felt strangely carefree once the time arrived to fetch her. After a while, I neared the city core. Soon I crossed the bright Palazzo Vecchio where the upstart Angelo's "David" stands. Despite my master's rivalry with this rough-hewn young sculptor who knows nothing of decorum and manners, I could not help but admire the fine workmanship of the statue's smooth limbs. As I passed beneath its pedestal, my hand reached out to touch the cool, grey marble. However, I refused to allow thoughts of Da Vinci's rivalries to spoil my good humour. The day was mild and my mood was the same. Anyway, I reflected, my artistic loyalties to Leonardo remained steadfast, even if my deepest convictions sometimes were otherwise.

Although I tried to still my mind, as I drew nearer to the rich merchants' quarter, my thoughts ran ahead of me. Once again, for the thousandth time, I tried to anticipate how Lisa would act toward me. Also, I thought of how I should act toward her. I began to realize that perhaps I was foolish to hope that all could be well between us. After all, the circumstances of our first meeting had been rather unusual. As I walked the last short distance along the paved streets of the merchants' quarter, I felt again an uncertain dread creeping over me. There was an emptiness in the pit of my stomach. When I turned into Giocundo's courtyard, I kicked a loose stone at a ground lizard which was sleeping lazily in the morning sun. Its yellow eyes sprang open, and it scurried into the shadow of a large red rock wedged between the roots of a cypress tree. I told myself to be calm as I walked the last few steps to Giocundo's front door.

As I had hoped might happen, the maid-servant Maria answered to the sound of Giocundo's silver door chimes. With averted eyes, she asked me kindly to wait for her mistress. I sat on the same wooden bench which I had occupied on my first visit. Once again I admired the grandeur of the cool, lofty hall. Absentmindedly, I noted beside me a fan of peacock feathers set in a blue Damascan vase. This was a new addition to the splendors of Giocundo's home. As I waited, I ran my forefinger along the strong spine of one of the feathers. After enduring this idleness for nearly ten minutes, I heard voices approaching from the corridor which leads to Giocundo's back garden. In a few minutes, Lisa and her husband arrived in the hallway. They evidently didn't see me at first as I was partially hidden behind the fan of peacock feathers. I sat frozen. Perhaps unreasonably, it had not occurred to me that Giocundo might be here. Confronted by this fact, I was momentarily stunned. While my limbs twitched and then went numb, my mind registered Giocundo's appearance. He was a short, balding man with tired brown eyes beneath which sagged puffed pouches of skin. Though well past middle age, the merchant's thick-shouldered build showed that he had once been as strong as a bull. Even now, somewhat unstable on his feet, he still commanded a certain respect. His voice had a menacing edge to it. He took off his embroidered felt hat as he and Lisa crossed the wide hall toward me.

"A morning walk in my gardens is always most refreshing," said Giocundo. "But now I must be off to my warehouses. Affairs cannot be run without me. The city tax collectors and notaries await me this morning to discuss my contribution to the Duke's war effort. I must not be late or they will appropriate some unspeakable sum that will serve to ruin me."

"Yes, of course," said Lisa.

"Once again, I am pleased that you have decided to resume the portrait with Maestro Da Vinci," said Giocundo. "It will be another pretty ornament for my home."

"Yes," said Lisa.

At this moment, I stood up to announce my presence.

"Ah," said Giocundo, "here is your escort, my dear. Leave me now. And do not expect me for supper as I shall dine with Messer Martuccio this evening. We are to discuss the insurance finances for a cargo of silk worms from Mecca. I must prepare the necessary papers before I depart."

Having said these words, Giocundo turned and entered his study. I felt my face redden. Considering me a mere servant, not once had Giocundo addressed me directly. With obvious contempt, he had seen me as too insignificant to warrant his slightest attention. I felt the tips of my ears burning crimson. My eyes refused to look upwards as Lisa crossed the hall toward me.

"We may depart now," she said, taking her street-cloak from Maria, who had hurried forward when the heavy oak door to Giocundo's study closed with a muffled thud.

"Yes, Madam," I said, as I ushered the Lady Giocundo before me. I nodded politely to Maria, who suddenly looked timid and quickly turned to return to her duties.

Once out in the street, Lisa and I walked quietly for some time. Not a word was spoken between us until we passed out of the merchants' quarter, where the houses of the great families of Florence vie for standing by the height of their towers. Lisa walked by my side with her eyes fixed straight in front. The silence began to grow brittle. We continued on in this fashion for nearly another whole block. A fat man riding a sturdy horse doffed his cap to us as he passed, going in the opposite direction. From the rich embroidery of his apparel and the polish of his saddle, it was clear that he was one of Giocundo's neighbours. Even after this man had passed, Lisa still did not seem to want to speak. Her lips were pressed tightly together. Despite my fear of re-igniting the tinderbox of our first conversation, I decided that it would be wise to clear up any misunderstanding between Lisa and myself. I screwed up my courage, and spoke the first words.

"Do you not find the day much more temperate than when last we met?" I said.

But Lisa said nothing.

"And these past weeks, have you been...well, Madam?" I asked.

Lisa's steps hesitated for a moment, but then she went on walking in silence.

Soon we reached the walls of the Porta Maria, which leads to the Ponte Trinita - the central bridge of Florence which Lisa and I had to cross to reach my master's studio. On the street which ran parallel below the hill-side road along which we travelled, densely packed tenements were built close to the banks of the great river Arno. These dilapidated dwellings stood on sturdy wooden stilt-like supports. The rooftops of the houses were cut at all different levels. Many of the serrated, red and brown roof tiles were broken and loose. Disfigured wooden sheds were wedged in the spaces between dwellings. Even from a distance, I could see the mud-colored water which flowed freely in the gutters. Here in this district lived the countless number of men and women employed in producing the wool and fine cloth which are this city's main export. I had never ventured into this quarter which I knew to be dangerous to walk through even in daylight. In certain parts of the district, the rooftops leaned so closely together that they blocked out the sun. In those streets, I reflected, even a modestly dressed stranger would soon be stabbed in the back for his purse. I shuddered at this thought, and unconsciously quickened my steps.

When I did so, Mona Lisa suddenly stopped in her tracks. Without turning her head - standing really quite still - she said to me in a voice that was almost a whisper, "I was born down there, you know."

I was too surprised by this abrupt revelation to say anything at all.

"My father first worked washing and carding wool, and then later as a supervisor in Giocundo's first factory," said Lisa. "My mother died when I was very young and Papa worked hard all his life to erase her memory. Like all others who work at such tasks, he slowly choked to death inhaling the wool-fibers in the warehouses. My two younger brothers now work at Giocundo's factories, but before they are old they too will choke on the fibers."

"I am sorry," I said.

"Oh, do not be sorry," said Lisa. "I do not seek your pity. I need nobody's sympathy."

Lisa then paused; she lowered her eyes.

"But you have it in your power to do me a great service, which will cost you nothing," she said.

Naturally I was astonished and secretly delighted at these words.

"And how may I be of service, Mistress Lisa?" I inquired.

"First, I must warn you of one thing," said Lisa. "What I am about to tell you, beware of repeating a single word of it to anyone."

"May God be my witness!" I said.

We walked on slowly. The sharp cries of scavenger birds feeding on the remains of fish sounded from the cloth mills by the riverside. Lisa did not seem to hear their distant screeches.

"I have escaped from the life of this district," she said. "At seventeen, I left my home a virgin to be given away in marriage to Messer Giocundo. He had seen the deaths of two wives already. Whether it was my luck or misfortune, I cannot say, but Giocundo was taken with my face one day and I was chosen to be lifted from one cruel existence to another with entirely different concerns."

"Surely you have been most fortunate," I said.

"Perhaps," said Lisa. "But I disappoint my husband. I may yet finish my days as an old women turning one of the wooden handles which churn the wool in the dying vats."

"I do not understand why you are telling me these things," I said, as we stopped at a high bluff from which the road we were on descended in a sloping grade to connect with several others leading to the Ponte Trinita.

"I am telling you because I wish for you to understand," said Lisa, looking directly into my eyes. "As you can see, I am a woman. When I first met you that afternoon several weeks past, I sensed your ardor for me. Unfortunately, that day I was greatly distressed. That morning, my husband had renewed his threats to me with increased violence. I must apologize if I proceeded in a fashion too impulsive; but I am sometimes driven to despair. I hate Giocundo for the life he forces me to endure. Despite Fra Girolamo's campaign, our house is filled with ornaments of luxury. I am but another ornament in my husband's collection. I am trapped like a fly in crystal. I have no means of escape. Giocundo will not admit to himself that he is the one incapable of producing a child. He

accuses me of depriving him of my one useful service." Lisa now lowered her eyes. "That, Francesco," she said "is why I so impulsively determined to have you for my lover. Even now I would have you before any other man in the world if you will promise to be true to my wishes."

Understandably, I was shocked by these words. I told myself that, if Lisa was a virtuous woman, there would be no one she loved or cherished more than her husband. Yet here she was offering to commit adultery with me. And yet again, I was in love with her. I had never known the customary arts for winning the favor of a lady and, put into these circumstances, I was at my wit's end. Ignorant of how to conquer my passion, yet finding it beyond the scope of my conscience to consider her proposal, I was split in two on the double-edged blade of Lisa's love.

Everything was hushed except for a silver ringing in my ears. I knew that if I let this opportunity slip, it would not offer itself again. I silenced my conscience and made up my mind to take it, come what may.

I reached out and took Lisa's hand in mine. I began to caress it. She turned and embraced me; a sweet, lingering kiss with her soft rose-petal lips. I held her warm body in my arms. My mind raced with a flurry of strange new sensations. I looked down into Lisa's upturned face. Her eyes were closed. For a moment, I understood what the poets were trying to say in their sonnets. Then Lisa pulled away. For a full ten seconds, I stood dumb as a post. Then I reached out to pull her toward me again.

"No, listen to what I have to tell you before you come closer!" said Lisa. "I want you to come to my chamber this evening. Come without raising suspicion. I will give you the key to the gardener's gate at the rear of our house. My husband will be away until the early hours of morning. He and Don Martuccio will undoubtedly drink too much wine as they always do. My husband is easily tempted to become a sot."

"But Madam, your plan is far too risky," I said. "How would I get into the house? What if the servants were to see me?"

"That will present no difficulty," said Lisa. "You can easily climb the trestle which runs up the house beside my balcony. The moon is in its lowest phase tonight, so you will be safe and unseen in the shadows."

Although I would certainly have protested this arrangement had I had a few moments to think things out, Lisa gave me no such opportunity. She squeezed my hand, then suggested that we had better hurry along to Maestro Da Vinci's studio since the first sitting was to begin before noon. Unable to order my thoughts or emotions, I meekly acquiesced. At a brisk pace, Lisa and I walked down the hill toward the Ponte Trinita. As I watched the gaily-painted gondolas passing on the swift waters under the eroding stone arches of the great central bridge, I silently cursed my own inability to alter my course. All that I truly desired at that moment was to make sense of my life amidst the reigning confusion of that fair and wretched Tuscan city.

PART II

CHAPTER 8

Far into the night I lie awake examining the question of what I must do next. I turn it over in my mind. I explore it from every possible perspective. And yet, I am strangely blinded. The mist still surrounds me. My tale attempts to gather together the facts of the matter, yet memory is often elusive. Most assuredly, my pen will continue to scrawl its black ink over this eggshell parchment. Only thereby can I set down my history for all men to see. But even if I get it straight, will my dull soul be unburdened? And if I perceive the answer, will I act?

Doubtless, the evening when I went to see Lisa again marked a significant change in my life. I remember that night all too well. It was still and warm. The moon hung like a Turk's silver scimitar in the black velvet sky. As I wound my way through the dark narrow streets, the shapes of buildings could barely be distinguished in the distance. There was a thin, noxious mist in the air, and I coughed occasionally as I breathed in the fog. In the streets and alleyways around me, Florentines hurried to reach their homes before the midnight curfew took effect. They disappeared like phantoms into doorways. Carrying the golden finch's cage, which I had wrapped in a brown burlap sac, I too walked as quickly as I could. My eyes strained to see through the mist as I hurried on my way toward the safety of Giocundo's garden gate.

As I reflect upon it now, I realize that that evening has always remained with me because of its nightmarish uncertainty. My heartbeat still quickens when I think of it. I try to erase it from my mind. But,

in reality, the fearful sight which I saw might have been nothing at all. The darkness of that night could have conjured up its own images. Even so, I have never been able to cross the Ponte Trinita since then without feeling a shiver run down my spine. Of course, I hardly gave a second's thought to the commonplace sight of the great central bridge as I approached it enroute to Giocundo's mansion that night. The bridge itself was barely visible in the distance until I came well within earshot of the powerful, groaning great river Arno. Clouds passed in front of the curved blade of the moon. For several minutes, I walked in complete darkness. I listened to my sandals clapping the wet pavement as I crossed the Great Market Square. Then, without warning, the Ponte Trinita rose before me as I had never seen it before. Its humpbacked frame arched across the breadth of the Arno like the colossal spine of some prehistoric beast. Just at that moment, the golden finch sang a faint note of despair. For the first time in my life, a sense of helplessness swept over me. At that moment, I knew I was lost. I could not bring myself to traverse this bridge which I had crossed without thinking so many times before. My limbs were frozen. My mind was numbed. My spirit was as blank as the starless night sky.

Precisely how long I remained in this condition, I cannot say. After some time, however, I managed to summon enough courage to dispel my groundless disquietude. I clenched my teeth and forced my feet to continue. With my eyes fixed straight in front, I crossed the Ponte Trinita. I dared look to neither the left nor the right. Most of all, I did not dare to look down.

When at last I arrived at Giocundo's back gate, my pulse was racing. I unlocked the latch. The gate closed behind me with a soft, hollow click. I began to walk up the footpath toward Giocundo's back courtyard. My eyes were straining to see ahead of me. The paving stones of the footpath were damp from the mist, and my sandals were wet and slippery. Holding the finch's cage aloft, I walked slowly and carefully as I approached the house which I soon knew to be just up ahead. To my right, a stone boundary wall about eight feet high guided my way. To my left, I could see the twisted branches of fig trees in a small orchard at the back of Giocundo's property. As I neared the house, I passed several statues and fountains in

the smaller gardens. Though my curiosity was aroused, their features remained indistinguishable in the gloom. Eventually, I came to the square courtyard which lay right behind the house. I noted, in the center of its alabaster paving stones, a private well which supplied water for the household. Although I was perspiring and thirsty, I did not dare to haul up a pail of water for fear of waking the servants.

For quite some time, I stood silently in the courtyard. My eyes were fixed on the large window of a marble balcony above me. The wooden shutters were closed. I had not anticipated the possibility that Lisa would not be ready to greet me, and I was seized with uncertainty. I cursed myself for having let Lisa convince me to follow this dangerous course. Having thrown caution to the wind, I had been led into temptation and sin. My skull was throbbing. My very consciousness pained me. I wished I was asleep in my bed. I thought of what a ridiculous figure I cut, standing in the pallid moonlight. I knew that this was immoral behavior. Yet having come this far, I could not bear to turn back.

"God be with me!" I muttered to myself, as it occurred to me what I should do next. Setting down the finch's cage, I stooped and picked up a handful of smooth, round pebbles from Giocundo's flower-bed. After a moment's hesitation, I began tossing them singly at the balcony window above. After three or four throws, the shutters of the window opened. Lisa peered out.

"Francesco?" she asked.

She could not see me below in the deep shadow. She was holding a lamp. My eyes beheld her, dressed in a translucent, white robe with tight-fitting sleeves. Aloft in the lamplight, she was like a celestial virgin, the most beautiful of angels.

"It is I," I replied in my loudest whisper.

"I expected you sooner," said Lisa.

"The tower bells have only just struck midnight," I said.

"Yes, well you must climb up the vine trestle beside the balcony. Be careful, but hurry!" said Lisa.

Unable to think of any alternative, I slung the loop of the rope

attached to the finch's cage over one shoulder and crept furtively to the base of the ladder. I looked up and saw that it was just barely close enough to the balcony to allow me to climb into the window. I began mounting the vine-ladder. My hands and feet clung to the rungs of the wooden frames which bent under my weight. The brick wall was inches from my face and it glowed dusty red in the lamplight. The strong sweet perfume of rose blossoms was almost overpowering as I climbed to the second story balcony. An occasional thorn pulled at my street-cloak; once, the covering on the finch's cage caught and I had to stop to free it. When I reached the lip of the balcony, my teeth were chattering. I was filled with fear and desire. I reached out and managed to jump onto the balcony without slipping. Lisa quickly drew me into the room, securing the shutters behind her.

From between the shutter slats, the moonlight shone on Lisa's neck and body. Her robe was undone. She led me over to her huge satin bed. Then she turned and crossed to the other side of the room. Seating myself on the bed, I took in my surroundings. In the flickering lamplight, I could see the heavy silken curtains on Lisa's windows. There were fine goat-skin carpets on her floors. A red cross glistening with set jewels hung over her dressing table. Apart from this cross, the walls were bare. On Lisa's dresser there was one small portrait whose face I couldn't immediately determine in the poor light. Sitting in that room, I began to feel sinful; like a typical, love-sick Florentine fool. Lisa lowered the flame in the lantern and placed it on a small table beside the door. Then she came back over and sat down beside me. Neither of us said anything for a long, tense moment.

Then I remembered the golden finch.

"I have brought you a small present," I said.

"How kind," said Lisa, with a smile.

"Yes," I said, taking the sack-cloth off the bird cage and holding the golden finch out toward her. "I couldn't help but remark that you were most impressed with this pretty finch when we passed through the Market Square on our first meeting. I was in the Market again recently and I decided to buy it for you."

"How kind," said Lisa once again. "I shall treasure it dearly, I'm sure. And if my husband asks me where I got it, I shall tell him that Maria asked me to buy it as a pet."

With these words, Lisa took the finch's cage from me and carried it over to the lamplight. She talked softly to the bird for a few moments, and then set the silver cage on the floor in a dark far corner of the room. She covered it with a heavy silk veil which she picked up from the cushion of a slender-backed chair.

"The bird is asleep," she said. "I will inspect my present more closely in the morning."

"As you wish, Madam," I said with a slight bow. At that moment, Lisa reached out and slipped her hand into mine.

"You must leave before daybreak, we must not wait," she said, pulling me gently toward her.

"Perhaps there is not enough time," I said. "Were it not better we waited?"

"No," said Lisa, laying her hand softly on my neck.

"But, it is a terrible sin!" I said.

Lisa drew me nearer to her until we were lying entwined on the huge satin bed.

"Well, I will take the sin upon my own soul," she said as she guided my hand to her breast.

My eyes were glued to the passageway door. Beside this entrance, I could see two pale moths in the lamplight, circling the flame.

"But what if your husband discovers us?" I eventually stammered.

But Lisa said nothing. She was breathing softly. I could feel her gentle heartbeat. I could smell the subtle fragrance of her skin. Her lips were warm and quivering as we embraced. Her tongue flickered in search of my own. Soon I was flushed with a strange, delicious excitement. I was joined in Lisa's rhythm. For a minute or more, I closed my eyes tight. Then, suddenly, my body convulsed with pleasure. In wide-eyed horror, I emptied my loins.

After a minute or so, the lamplight sputtered and died. Vanquished, I fell down beside Lisa.

We lay still in the silent, shifting shadows. Only the silver moonbeams which shone between the shutter slats made anything visible. When I turned toward Lisa, I could see the faint smile of contentment on her lips. All was silent for several minutes more. Then, almost without thinking, I jumped out of bed. "Oh, dear God, what have I done?" I muttered to myself. Not daring to look at Lisa, I went over and stood by the window. Without a stitch on my back, I stood naked and shivering in the moonlight. Lisa looked at me with curiosity, not understanding my state of perplexity.

"You have done me a very great service," she said, sitting up on the bed. "I must admit that I was unsure at first whether to invite you here tonight. But, having let you in, you have proved yourself most capable."

"You must not speak to me of it, mistress Lisa," I said, blushing crimson, I'm sure. "While I understand what it must be like for a lovely woman like you to have an old miser for a husband, I am terribly ashamed of my behavior this evening."

"Ah, well that is your concern," said Lisa.

"This must never happen again," I said.

"It is up to you to act as you see fit," said Lisa.

"Yes, it is my trial," I said.

"But remember," said Lisa. "You must keep your word and say nothing. My husband is a jealous man as well as a rich one."

"I am not so crack-brained as to confess my sins openly to the world," I said. "I have no wish to play the gloating trickster. I give you my word."

"Good," said Lisa. "Now come to bed and sleep by my side. We still have two or three hours before dawn, when it will be time enough for you to leave."

The room fell silent. In the distance, a dog began to bark. Having no real alternative at that time of night, I reluctantly consented, and went over to the bed.

CHAPTER 9

The next morning, I was awakened by the sun and by the sound of Cathedral bells and children's voices. I dressed hurriedly while Lisa slept, a tender smile still on her lips. The room was cool and comfortable, yet I thought only of how to get away as quickly as possible. In my heart boiled a mixture of love and confusion. I needed desperately to be alone to think.

Having descended the vine trestle, I found that outside the dawn was grey and mild. My head was spinning and my thoughts flew in tight circles. As I scurried down the footpath through Giocundo's back gardens, I breathed deeply the perfume of fruits and herbs. On either side of the footpath grew ashen-white and lead-black mulberry trees. Silky-throated swallows twittered in their branches. Looking at the blending colors of leaves, my thoughts wandered to tales I'd heard of gnomish alchemists who consumed their entire lives searching for something they called the philosopher's stone. I involuntarily shuddered to think that I could end my own life as one of their kind. Thinking these odd thoughts, I locked Giocundo's garden gate. Walking as quickly as possible, I left Lisa and the mansion behind me.

As I walked along, I might have continued thinking my guilt-ridden thoughts had my attention not been suddenly brought back to the present. Just as I was nearing the end of the main street of the residential quarter, I saw coming toward me Lisa's husband, the merchant Giocundo. I immediately noticed that he was wobbling drunkenly on his black mule. His face was bloated and red. He was attended by two servants. The one leading the mule by the reins was a giant, clumsy bear of a man with a huge, shaggy head and a black patch over one eye. The other man was a small, wasp-like Florentine with narrow slit eyes and a carefully trimmed

beard. He hummed about the inattentive merchant in the manner of an overly solicitous valet. As they approached, I lowered my glance and stepped quickly to the gutter side of the road to allow Giocundo and his servants to pass. I held my breath and prayed that the merchant would not recognize me. Fortunately, however, he passed me by without an inkling of suspicion. I breathed a sigh of relief. Without further ado, I hurried through the white-washed streets of the rich merchants' quarter. I then followed the long, straight Canale Navegerio northward as I sought the seclusion of my master's studio.

When I arrived back at the studio, Leonardo was already at his writing desk. I quickly mounted the stairs to my room where I changed into my coarse linen work shirt and tanned leather apron. I then went immediately downstairs. By this time, Leonardo had finished at his desk and was now sitting before his easel. He was beginning a sketch of an angel. Salai was sitting on the window-sill, whistling. He was wearing a new green-feathered cap and red velvet slippers. My master was using his profile to draw from. Without saying a word, I quickly went over to the wooden panel and frame which served as my own easel. Leonardo hardly noticed my entrance. He merely glanced at me from under his thick, overhanging eyebrows. Then he turned his gaze back to Salai. As for Salai, he deliberately stared at me with a mischievous grin. He gave me a sly wink. Then he resumed his characteristic posture of apathy and conceit - a posture which our master has always mistaken for a rare and precious innocence. Grateful that Leonardo was too preoccupied to address me, I went directly to my own work area at the back of the studio.

It was Sunday morning, yet I knew that I could not go to early mass at the Cathedral as was my custom. I needed first to sort out my thoughts. I had always had my self respect to rely upon. My life of regular prayer and absolution had brought ease and comfort to my soul. Now I feared to confess even to myself my recent iniquity. My shameful appetite had conquered my best intentions. Lisa's words about taking the sin upon her own soul echoed in my head, yet they sounded terribly hollow. I knew that I had brought this disgrace upon myself, and that any child born of such an unholy union was at least half my responsibility. However, while I told

myself that these were the facts of the matter, a small voice deep inside of me whispered that if Giocundo found out that I had usurped his place, my life would not be worth a pittance. In vain I strove to determine a proper course of action. Like a worm slowly burrowing toward the core of an apple, guilt and fear gnawed at my conscience.

After some time, my emotions gradually began to subside. My one consolation in life is that I have always been able to lose myself in my work. As I began to trace lines on the colored drawing paper in front of me, the necessary concentration blocked out all other thoughts. I was copying an anatomical figure and had to pay careful attention to the required dimensions and proportions of the body. I was following as minutely as possible all of Leonardo's rules. His axioms of perspective guided my hand. Yet, I confess, as always my goal eluded me. The more I tried, the less I succeeded. My outlines were coarse and heavy, my shadows remained thick and unnatural. Although the monotony of hard work has always been my only refuge, it is also my greatest burden. I devote myself to the glory of art, yet I lack the inspiration necessary to produce more than merely mediocre work. I have studied the examples of the old masters, and I have contemplated the beauty of Nature herself. Yet my sketches and paintings always appear flat and lifeless. In his teaching sessions, Leonardo says that I distrust myself too much. Along with the exalted science of perspective, he says that I must learn to have faith in my own judgement. Possibly he is right. Perhaps I truly am my own worse enemy. If I cannot change this, I shall never attain the lofty heights of art to which Leonardo so effortlessly soars. Yet, even if this must be so, if I do not despair, might my unrelenting self-criticism not one day enable me to achieve the knowledge of light and shade which I believe to be the primary tools of every fine craftsman? Even if I never become a great painter, might I not at least be allowed to penetrate these most humble mysteries of artifice?

My hopeful musings on my chosen vocation were interrupted by the sound of bells and shouting from the street. At Fra Girolamo's bidding, it had been decreed, soon after the bonfire of vanities, that cripples and lepers, formerly barred from Florence's interior, should henceforth be allowed

within the walls of the city. They were permitted the freedom to beg openly in the streets. Until that Sunday, however, it had never occurred that these lepers found it necessary to canvas the streets of even our poor quarter. The lepers' bells, which they wore on collars welded around their necks, warned the crowds to clear the way as they proceeded. Soon the sound of the bells drew nearer. Out of the back window of the studio, I could see a group of three beggars moving slowly down the street toward my master's studio. All the neighbourhood Florentines threw copper coins into the middle of the road. They then stood as distant as possible, hugging the shadows of walls until the lepers had passed.

Although the approach of these unfortunate beggars created quite a stir outside in the streets, my master noticed nothing at first. Then Salai, who was still sitting at the South window, spoke up.

"Maestro Leonardo!" he said. "Come quickly to look! Here are some truly ugly models for you to draw!"

Hardly believing the impudence of Salai's ridiculous remark, at first I paid no special attention to his outburst. But then I felt a twinge of revulsion in the pit of my stomach when, leaving the picture of the angel unfinished, Leonardo stood up and went over to the window.

"Exquisite!" he said. "Call to them Salai! Invite them into the studio. Offer them some wine and small money."

Disbelieving that my master could possibly be serious, I spoke up.

"But master Da Vinci," I said, "surely you jest! You cannot truly desire to draw these foul wretches."

"Hold your peace, Francesco," said Leonardo. With a wave of his hand, he silenced me and then bid Salai once again to ask the lepers into our house. Salai looked at me with a confident sneer. My face whitened.

"But master, do you...think it best?" I stammered.

"Silence!" said Leonardo.

Soon Salai had ushered the trio of beggars into the front studio. He seated them in one corner, beside the chimney. Two of the beggars were men, the other one was a wrinkled old woman. All had gaping mouths and swollen, purple tongues. Spittle drooled from the split lip of the oldest

man, who was the most wasted with disease. A spreading, cancerous wart, which sprouted hairs, grew on the face of the other man, whom the two others treated as their leader. The old woman was a humpbacked crone with withered dugs and a face which was all but consumed by her disease. All three of these lepers had stuffed scraps of cloth into their festering wounds to help stop the scabs from bleeding. Surrounding all three was a sharp, biting odor reminiscent of rodent droppings. I looked at this party with horror and revulsion. Involuntarily, I shuddered.

Once these unfortunate grotesques were seated in the studio, Leonardo's eyes lit up.

"Give them some wine to drink," he said, motioning impatiently at me. When I returned with the wine, Leonardo poured it himself. At first the beggars were restive and suspicious, not knowing why they had been brought. But Leonardo sat down with them and soon elicited their good will with amiable, empty words. After a short time, all three were slightly drunk, laughing and making the most horrible faces. Leonardo watched them closely, his cold gaze filled with deep and eager curiosity. When their hideousness reached its height, he took out his silver-point pen and began to draw. I restrained myself and said nothing. By this time, the old hag had started licking the fallen crumbs from the table. I was disgusted and looked away.

Salai kept refilling the beggars' goblets with wine. In less than an hour, my master had completed several drawings. As I stood behind him, awaiting instructions, I could finally hold my peace no longer.

"Master, how is it possible to see the slightest beauty in such deformity?" I whispered to him.

Leonardo did not even take his eyes off of his work.

"Great deformity is as rare as great beauty, Francesco," he said in a low voice. "As I have told you many times, only mediocrity is negligible."

Stung by these words, I felt my blood begin to rise. Unable to respond, I clenched my teeth tightly until my jaws ached. Yet, although I said nothing out loud, at that moment I vowed to myself that, in due course, I would impress my master enough so that he would come to admire my

abilities as an apprentice. I swore that before I was through I would somehow gain Leonardo's respect.

CHAPTER 10

For the next several weeks, Lisa came to the studio almost daily. Sometimes she was escorted by Maria, other times I was sent to fetch her. During this period, the lady Giocundo and I spoke little to each other. Lisa seemed unwilling to discuss the night we had spent together, and I was grateful that the subject was never broached. When I look back on it now, I realize that we were both equally stubborn and prideful. Lisa was a clever woman and knew how to suspend moments indefinitely. She smiled benignly. She skirted the theme and then refused to pursue it. Although I found this most exasperating, I must in truth also admit that I was secretly delighted. These circumstances afforded me the opportunity to continue my liaison with Lisa without having to deal with it directly. I was eager to play the role of the dark, mysterious lover without having responsibilities attached. Still, oftentimes I cudgelled my brains. I was certain that there was something I had missed - something yet unlearned.

During this period, Leonardo worked with unprecedented zeal and devotion. Lisa arrived daily for her session at noon. She sat in the middle of the large, octagonal front studio which slowly filled with soft liquid shadows. My master worked at her portrait until early evening light faded into darkness. As I went about my duties in the studio, I watched the portrait's progress.

Evidently, it was to be a painting of modest size. Leonardo had ordered me to stretch, frame and pumice the canvas. I had also prepared and applied an undercoat of egg-shell paste to aid in preservation. While I worked at these tasks, Leonardo drew many preliminary charcoal sketches of Lisa. He already knew that it was to be a full frontal portrait, and so

he did not bother to sketch Lisa's profiles, or to examine his subject from various vantage points. Time and time again, he drew her face as directly as possible. Leonardo worked on these sketches every afternoon for nearly a full fortnight. He slowly shaded Lisa's face into life. But when he came to the details of her features, he laid aside his silver-point pen and sat silently, looking into Lisa's face with an intentness, mixed with perturbation. My master discarded many of these preliminary sketches, telling me to take them away and burn them. All this while, Lisa sat seemingly calm and submissive. She always wore the same dark dress with a transparent black veil covering her hair. She sat poised in her carved mahogany chair, slowly stroking the long, silky fur of Leonardo's white Persian cat which lay curled in her lap, licking its paws.

During these sessions, Lisa hardly ever initiated conversation. Sometimes Leonardo would speak; but then only to demand small bits of information from the lady Giocundo, or to give orders to Salai or me. Usually the artist and his subject acted as veritable strangers toward each other. Yet they seemed to share a secret, unspoken trust.

For the first week of the preliminary work on the portrait, it was pleasant enough in the quiet atmosphere of the studio. Even Salai seemed content and subdued by Mona Lisa's presence. He sat in the background, playing soft tunes on his silver lyre. He had curtailed his carousing to the evening hours, and was almost always in attendance. He sat on a cushioned chair in one corner and played interminably. While Lisa posed for Leonardo, oblivious to her surroundings, Salai plucked mellow notes and strummed brilliant arpeggios on his lamb-gut strings. I believe he was perplexed that Lisa seemed not to notice him. Salai was used to being pampered and flattered by all the young Florentine ladies, and to his chagrin Lisa appeared to perceive his existence as something purely ornamental.

The second week of preliminary studies for the portrait was much more stressful than the first. Leonardo grew frustrated with his inability to calculate the exact measurements for the painting's ideal point of perspective. I recall that he worked in an agitated, impatient manner,

drawing innumerable brief sketches of Lisa's lips and eyes. This went on for several afternoons, until one day, toward the end of the fortnight, Leonardo abruptly closed the cover of his sketch-book and stood up. He slowly replaced the cap to his silver-point pen. It was only shortly after the beginning of the session, so Lisa, Salai and I turned in surprise to see what was matter.

"Madam Giocundo," Leonardo said. "You are as beautiful of form and feature as any woman alive, but it seems to me that you are weighed down by a burden which is much too heavy to bear."

"What do you mean?" said Lisa.

"Well, you live with your husband in the midst of such luxury, and yet I perceive that you are deeply troubled by something. You are too sensitive to speak, yet there is always the slightest hint of sadness in your smile. You must speak to me of it!"

"I warned you before we started that you would not be permitted access to the secrets of my soul," said Lisa, lowering her eyes. "You must paint the portrait as best you are able. I shall pose as you require."

"If you are resolved not to reveal your secret, I shall respect your silence," said Leonardo. "However, your manner and attitude will continue to puzzle me, and the painting will never be started, never mind completed."

"As I have told you," said Lisa, "that is your own concern."

"But, I cannot...be...defeated once again," said Leonardo, in a dark, trembling voice.

Although Lisa paid little heed to Leonardo's grim countenance, I knew the importance of these words. So many of the projects which my master spent his lifetime creating were already beginning to disintegrate: There were the many half-finished paintings and sketches stored in the attic of the studio. Also, there were the many parchment leaves of notes which he scribbled and then discarded. There was his great equestrian statue, the "Cavello", for which the bronze needed for finishing was far too expensive for even the Duke to afford. And there was his "Last Supper", which was already bubbling with mold because he had impulsively painted directly on the walls of the Convent instead of using a canvas stretched on a frame.

Finally, of course, there was the flying machine which was Leonardo's greatest disappointment and most haunting failure. Knowing these things, I understood the desperate quality in my master's voice as he thought of painting this portrait which was to be his last bid for immortality. He could no doubt feel Death's cold breath on his neck. He knew that the time left to him was too short to allow for hesitation. I could see that my master was determined to capture this last elusive vision so that he could still his guilty conscience, and die in peace.

After their brief dialogue, Leonardo's gaze locked into Lisa's in a glaring battle of defiance. Salai stopped playing his lyre. There was a long moment of terrible silence in the studio. Then Leonardo suddenly turned his back on Lisa. Turning to me, he ordered that the very best paints should be immediately prepared.

Having anticipated this moment, I quickly set to work. Even though he was undoubtedly certain of my competence, Leonardo watched over my shoulder as I mixed and measured in separate bowls the dark oily hues and the pasty ash-white flesh tones which he required. I mixed each basic mixture with a compound of arabic gum. Then I heated the potions over a candle flame. Once they had achieved the correct consistency, I divided the result into six smaller bowls. To these bowls, I added the various ground minerals, strained liquids and sifted powders to make the necessary different shades. This was slow work which demanded a steady hand and careful concentration. Once this had been accomplished, however, I quickly prepared a suitable palette which I proudly presented to my master. I then took out of a drawer three new paint brushes which I offered to him. Leonardo chose one with fine, long bristles. With a wide, sweeping gesture of his arm, he then ordered me to draw the canvas curtains to dull the sun's afternoon light. It was time, he said, for the real painting to begin.

CHAPTER 11

Although many incidents occurred during the days and weeks that followed the commencement of Lisa's portrait, these facts seem all but irrelevant now. Certainly, life went on in the usual fashion: Leonardo painted, I worked at my studies and small tasks about the studio, and Salai continued his characteristic pranks and merry mischief. This was my immediate world. Outside of this world, events unfolded as they inevitably will: News that the bastard Charles and his army had taken Milan reached our city during the early days of June. Fear and panic gradually heightened as Florentines anticipated the imminent invasion of their streets. Also, during this time ractions led by certain Franciscan friars began to grow within the city. Neighbours and families split over their opinions of Fra Girolamo and his rigid Dominican precepts. As if this was not enough trouble to contend with, during this period superstition also gripped the citizens of Florence. This was due to the fact that toward the middle of the month a merchant ship drifted into the main port of the city, its entire crew dead of some peculiar pox which even the Duke's physicians were unable to explain.

These, then, were the circumstances of the time. Yet, although these facts are perhaps significant in and of themselves, they are really important now only insofar as they form the backdrop of my history, most of the battles of which were fought within the confines of my skull. When I think of that time now, I believe that, as far as my personal history is concerned, it is best explained by one recurring dream which continued right up until the June nights shortly before Summer Solstice. It was on one morning following this dream that finally, driven beyond my limits of endurance, I took my fate into my own hands and acted in a manner directly opposed to that which my conscience demanded.

In my dream, I am greatly aged - an old man in his seventies at least. When the dream begins, I am walking slowly, lost in thought, through the narrow, deserted city streets. My sense of balance has begun to fail, and I am unsteady on my feet. My joints creak as I walk, and I am bone-tired and scant of breath. Because of my poor eyesight, I cannot see far ahead. I have no idea where I am walking to since I have never travelled through this particular quarter before.

"You are lost," a voice in my head whispers.

And, indeed, there are no signs of human life. As I look around me, I am certain that any building I may enter will prove to be uninhabited and abandoned.

"You are lost!" the voice whispers again. "You are lost, and you are mad, and you are going to die!"

Yet, my sandaled feet shuffle onward.

Leaning heavily on my walking stick, I navigate the unfamiliar streets and alleyways, past the deserted dwellings. Already it is near sunset. Although I am wizened and bent with years, my shadow stretches out before me, enormous and elongated.

"Call on the demon to punish her!" whispers the voice in my head. "Call on the demons, and have your revenge!"

"I shall not," I mutter aloud. "It was so long ago. Now it is almost forgotten. It does not matter any more. The sin is surely forgiven."

In the distance, I hear the rumbling thunder of an approaching storm. For an extended moment, the city is lit with fire as streak lightening flashes across the sky. Mindful of the first hesitant drops of rain, I hobble onward in search of a likely place to take shelter.

The voices in my head are now several.

"There is no escape," the voices whisper. "No one escapes! Here there are no longer choices to be made about which path to follow. There is no possibility of redemption. You are a prisoner! But then you were always a prisoner. Did you not choose to sacrifice your freedom for a mere moment of pleasure?"

I say nothing. It is impossible to reply.

After some time, I come to the steps of what appears in my dream to be the Cathedral Santa Maria. Already the city has begun to darken. A feeling of helplessness wells up inside me. Unsteadily, I climb the steep stone steps toward the huge iron-studded oak doors which loom above me. The doors open slowly with a sigh.

The Cathedral is empty. I hesitate for a moment in the threshold, my eyes adjusting to the deep gloom inside. I shake the dust off my sandals. Slowly I begin to walk up the main aisle, my eyes fixed on the empty wooden pulpit ahead.

"Despair!" the whispers cry in my head. "Soon to be still. Ashes scattered in darkness. Despair!"

Yet the cool air under the great arches of the Cathedral ceiling seems comforting. I stop beside a huge grey marble pillar. I touch the smooth stone, and its surface consoles me.

For a moment, the whispering voices subside.

Despite my stiff limbs, I genuflect and enter a pew. For some time, I kneel in silent prayer. Then I sit back on the polished hardwood bench. For a lingering moment, I admire a spiral rosette which is set in one of the Cathedral's multi-colored stained glass windows. This window still glows slightly as the evening sun sinks in the west. I close my eyes.

Gradually, I become aware that the silence is being disrupted as the Cathedral organ begins to play a faint, somber fugue. I slowly become

aware of the organ, yet my thoughts do not linger on it. As the music builds, however, I become filled with an unspeakable barrenness.

The chorus of voices in my head now returns.

"Yes, that is right!" the voices whisper. "You must now understand. Blind, and yet seeing. Yet no longer to touch! Above all, understand! Here there is no multi-foliate rose to behold. Here only the silence blossoms. Here darkness prevails!"

As I sit all alone in the empty Cathedral, I can no longer escape the truth. I become aware that this dream is an enactment of my death. I sit guilty and ashamed. My soul is like the dried out husk of an insect. I have been justly condemned; I am greatly afraid to watch the proceedings.

"But what man is not guilty of sin?" I absentmindedly mutter. "Who is there that does not share my great sorrow and shame?"

Yet, although I reprimand myself for having allowed my life to pass out of my control, I am not entirely penitent. As I view my moment of death, I am relieved that the truth of my life will be buried forever. I am content that this should be so. I am prepared to suffer even eternal damnation to guard the jealous secret close to my heart.

What happens next is perhaps merely a vision resulting from my brewing disquietude, but still it lives in my mind as if real. In my dream, the bells in the Cathedral spire begin to toll. They soon drown out both the sound of the organ, and the voices in my head which continue to whisper. Slowly, I become aware that the darkness surrounding the altar is broken by the glow of candlelight. I see that there are two black-robed figures preparing the Eucharist. At this moment, I hear the sound of fluttering wings. When I look upward, I see that there is a huge black raven perched on one of the wooden rafters supporting the domed ceiling. The bird's glittering eyes flash in my head. Its caws echo in my ears. Suddenly, it rises from its perch. Slowly, it swoops in diminishing spirals down toward the altar. It lands with fluttering wings and piercing cries on the

shoulder of the high priest, who is occupied with the chalice. This priest, who appears as a hollow, faceless figure, takes out a handful of black rice and feeds his loyal pet. Then the priest and his server move forward toward the altar-rail, where the faithful usually kneel to await communion. The two figures stand there. Instinctively, I know that it is me they are waiting for. The raven flies in circles above me. This I take as a sign that I am to walk toward the altar.

As I slowly proceed up the main aisle, my lips feverishly mutter the disjointed lines of a psalm which I sang by heart as a boy. Soon I am kneeling on the hard marble step in front of the altar-rail. My trembling hands are clasped tightly in front of me. As the two priests approach, I open my mouth to receive the blessed communion, but when the high priest lowers the golden chalice in his hand, I see that it is filled, not with white-wafer hosts, but with burning black embers. With a pair of long, silver tongs, this priest lifts a glowing coal from the chalice. Although I want to cry outloud, he places the red-hot stone on my tongue, and I am committed to everlasting silence.

MONA LISA'S LOVER

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September, 1988

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate
Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of English.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of two parts. The first part is a critical introduction which examines the most important aspects of the craft of fiction relevant to the creation of my novel, Mona Lisa's Lover. This introduction indicates the relationship between the use of history and that of creative imagination in my novel, and demonstrates that the creation of the novel depended on the very deliberate use of various conventions and techniques. It also stresses that no single, special formula was used to create my novel, but rather that the various inter-related techniques of the craft of fiction were used according to the evolving demands of the creative process.

The second part of this thesis, Mona Lisa's Lover, is an historical novel set in Renaissance Florence. Told in the first-person by the narrator and protagonist, Francesco, a young apprentice to Leonardo Da Vinci, this novel illustrates the classic themes of love, loneliness, revenge, betrayal and self-discovery. While paying the debt of serious scholarship to the facts of the age being recreated, the background of the novel is of secondary importance to the creative representation of a group of archetypal characters centered around the figure of Francesco.

RESUME

Cette thèse comprend deux parties. La première est une critique dans laquelle j'introduis mon roman, Mona Lisa's Lover. Dans cette critique, j'analyse les aspects importants de la création de mon roman. Je discute de l'utilisation de l'histoire et de l'imagination dans le roman historique et tente de démontrer que la construction d'un tel écrit dépend seulement du choix de l'auteur quant aux techniques et aux conventions à utiliser. Je souligne ici, que pour ce roman, je ne me suis pas tenu à une formulation particulière mais plutôt à des techniques variées qui répondaient le mieux aux exigences du moment et à processus créatif.

La seconde partie est le roman historique, Mona Lisa's Lover. Cette histoire prend forme à Florence durant la Renaissance et est racontée par Francesco, un jeune apprenti de Léonard De Vinci. Tour à tour seront abordés des thèmes classiques tel qu'amour, solitude, trahison, revanche et découverte de la nature humaine. Notons que dans un tel roman, bien qu'on se laisse souvent prendre par le charme des lieux où se situent l'action, ceux-ci demeurent secondaires aux personnages qui y prennent place et à leur représentation.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO MONA LISA'S LOVER

In this critical introduction, I intend to deal with aspects of the craft of writing appropriate to the creation of Mona Lisa's Lover, discussing in general terms the conventions and techniques which can place this work in an intelligible context. I will begin with a discussion of the historical novel. Here, I will consider the distinction between the historian and the historical fiction writer and define the relationship between history and invention in my novel. Having discussed the conventions of the historical novel, I will then proceed to examine techniques of the craft of fiction as they are used in Mona Lisa's Lover. I intend to examine the following aspects: 1) Structure - including plot, unity and coherence, and management of the time factor. 2) Narrative method - focusing on the significance of the first-person narrator and use of the confessional mode. 3) Characterization - focusing on the use of archetypal characters made "real" through particularities. 4) Dialogue - focusing on its relationship to characterization and its role in helping to make a novel dramatic. 5) Setting - focusing on the way in which background and atmosphere must be made "expressionistic", and not be a mere accretion of "realistic" detail. 6) Style - defining what is meant by this ambiguous, perhaps all-embracing term, and defining what is unique and significant about the style in Mona Lisa's Lover. 7) Theme - in this last category, I will discuss the ideas in and behind the novel, considering briefly the relationship between art and morality in my work.

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

Defined in perhaps its most inclusive terms, an historical novel can be said to be "any novel in which the action takes place before the

author's birth so that he must inform himself about its period by study."¹ Yet, surely this is too limiting a definition to indicate properly the vast differences between nineteenth century historical novels, such as Alessandro Manzoni's The Betrothed (1830), which is concerned to portray history meticulously, and more modern historical novels, such as R.M. Lanning's The Notebook of Gismondo Cavelletti (1985), which tends to exploit history as a means to a more exclusively artistic end. In all likelihood, the central reason for the different attitudes towards the historical novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that creative historical writing now sees "scientific" history as a delusion. In our day and age, writers are not so concerned with the dualism between fact and fiction as were earlier writers such as Manzoni. Contemporary historical novelists understand that there is no such thing as authentic, objective, scientific history. This fact is, of course, also well understood by contemporary historians. As the historian and historical novelist/critic, Lion Feuchtwanger, writes:

The historicism of the nineteenth century was an illusion, now quite generally abandoned even by academic historians. The historians of the twentieth century have conceded virtually all of the inadequacies of historicism. Though they use its methods, they do not regard the ultimate purpose of their science to be the determination of fact, but rather the interpretation thereof.²

So then, if the historian is concerned not so much with "the determination of fact, but rather the interpretation thereof," the question logically arises: is this, also, the goal of the historical novelist? The answer to this question is, "no", because, although the contemporary historical novelist must certainly interpret the facts of the age which he is recreating, this is not his ultimate purpose. His ultimate purpose is to create a work of art. As the critic, Cleanth Brooks, points out, while the historian "is concerned to discover the pattern implied by the facts", the fiction writer "may choose or 'create' facts in accordance with the pattern of human conduct which he wishes to present."³ In this manner, many facts were created in Mona Lisa's Lover. While the story was carefully researched, in order to gain a general awareness of events

surrounding the life of Leonardo Da Vinci and Renaissance Florence, historical raw materials were radically transformed through artistic imagination. Several examples of this are: 1) The fact that, although Leonardo did, indeed, have two apprentices named Francesco and Salai, they were not under his tutelage at the same time, yet, to meet the demands of art (the need for protagonist and foil), I brought them together. 2) The central intrigue of the action - the love affair between Francesco and Lisa - is entirely a fabrication, but wholly necessary if there is to be a plot around which historical themes can be woven. 3) In the sphere of historical events, all has passed through the filter of artistic imagination and been compressed into the time span of one year to meet the needs of artistic patterning and heightening or intensification of interest. These are just three examples of many possible instances of the "exploitation" of history in Mona Lisa's Lover. While, by themselves, they insufficiently illustrate the myriad ways in which history was manipulated to fulfill the demands of art in my novel, they adequately show that, while the historical novelist is obliged to study sources and reflect seriously about the nature of historical events, he must also freely (but with good judgement) use intuitive imagination to create and shape the facts he needs to make his story conform to aesthetic demands.

Since the historical novelist must be considered first and foremost as an artist, it is a mistaken notion to think that he seeks to revivify the past. "Creative writers," as Feuchtwanger points out, "desire only to treat contemporary matters, even in those of their creations which have history as their subject."⁴ The historical novelist's, purpose, then, is to clothe contemporary content in an historical dress, so that contemporary problems may be effectively dramatized and objectified. As Feuchtwanger explains in his book on "the laurels and limitations of historical fiction"⁵, historical writers "are frequently moved to choose this or that material by important external events. Such writers want only to discuss their relation to their own time, their own personal experience, and how much of the past has continued into the present."⁶ In several respects, then, Mona Lisa's Lover is intended to appear as a projection of the problems of our own time. While, in the tradition of popular historical fiction, it is filled with exciting, colorful episodes, this

book is also meant to make the reader reflect on the serious concerns of our day. Such contemporary concerns as the appeals and dangers of fundamentalist religion, the merits and drawbacks of democratic and despotic governments, the problem of modern day plagues, such as Aids, and the threat of destruction brought about by man's continuing mismanagement of the dichotomy between his higher and lower instincts, are mirrored in the novel. Ultimately, my portrayal of Renaissance Florence in transition - a "golden age" passing - is intended to appear to the reader as a symbol of our contemporary situation.

As Feuchtwanger incisively notes, a writer in one epoch frequently adopts some previous one as a model and warning."⁷ This, I believe, is in many ways true of Mona Lisa's Lover. Early in the novel's conception, it struck me that the choice of Renaissance Florence as a setting would enable me to treat universal human concerns more artistically than the "brutal actuality"⁸ of contemporary materials would allow. An historical framework gave me the distance I needed to deal with contemporary problems in perspective. "To portray successfully a contemporary view of the world, an author must move it into vaster areas of time and space,"⁹ writes Feuchtwanger, and, indeed, I hope that, by portraying the struggles of Renaissance Florence (events which struck me from the beginning of my research as being enormously symbolic), I have successfully drawn a parallel between that period and our own times. I hope that my presentation of Renaissance Florence will enable the reader to step back and view the forest rather than the trees, to envision our immediate environment in perspective.

Mona Lisa's Lover draws its themes and facts from history. It should be made clear, however, that historical events were no more than stimuli for the creative writing process because, necessarily, "the ultimate cause or genesis of [an imaginative work] lies deep in the personality of the writer as well as in his lived experience."¹⁰ So, while it is true that, inspired by Da Vinci's portrait of Mona Lisa while looking for a subject to write about, I became involved in reading history books, art folios and other sources dealing with Renaissance Florence, the selection and arrangement of material was a very personal matter. Although it is in some

sense true that "instead of the artist selecting his materials, the materials must suggest themselves to the artist, that is to say, the materials really select the artist"¹¹, it is also true that the selection of material "must derive from the innermost being of the poet himself."¹² For me, this selection process was an ongoing one which was formed by the continuous struggle between the imagination and controlling reason. During the process of composition, I found that, as an artist, my driving force was always my own inner experience. Yet, in order to adhere to my historical framework and to give artistic significance to my materials, I always strove to objectify that experience.

In his Poetics, Aristotle compares history to poetry from a perspective that clearly favors poetry:

The true difference [between history and poetry], is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen....Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and a higher thing than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.¹³

Here, Aristotle implies that the "truth" portrayed by imaginative writing is more forceful than the "truth" of documentary history. In banning dramatic poetry from his ideal republic, Plato, of course, also acknowledged this fact. He recognized the power of poetry to take hold of and sway the minds of an audience; he saw that facts are inadequate in the face of lively, well-constructed and plausible creative writing which excites the imagination. Once we have accepted this idea of the potential power of art to influence an audience, the question poses itself: "How, then, does the aspiring historical fiction writer create a work which will fulfill the demands of poetry in order to make it a 'more philosophical and higher thing than history'?"

The answer to this question is that he does so by using, to the best of his ability, the tools of fiction to create an artifice that is convincing to the reader. He must also, of course, be fully cognizant of his goals. He must realize that, while the historical fiction writer may

get suggestions for his story from events of the past, these events by themselves never fully give him the kind of facts - facts concerning psychological processes and human motives - in which he, and the reader, are most interested. For history gives us what Cleanth Brooks calls "truth of correspondence."¹⁴ What a true history says "corresponds" to the facts. But fiction is not fact, and its "truth" does not involve a correspondence to something outside itself. In fiction, "truth of coherence"¹⁵ is the primary truth.

In order to explore some of the methods by which this "truth of coherence" in fiction can be achieved, let us now consider some of the most important techniques and conventions used in the creation of Mona Lisa's Lover.

STRUCTURE

In his book on historical fiction, Lion Feuchtwanger writes that "a strong, rapidly moving, solid plot is the prerequisite for the success of every historical tale, but particularly for the popular one."¹⁶ Now, while Mona Lisa's Lover does not purposefully pander to popular taste, it does seek a more "general" audience than strictly "literary", explicitly "experimental" fiction can hope to reach. In order to reach this wider reading public, Mona Lisa's Lover uses the convention of a clearly developing, rapidly moving, coherent plot. This, of course, is nothing to be ashamed of. For a well-constructed plot, with effective use of tension and emphasis, is an essential part of the art of storytelling. No matter how "lyrically" inclined he or she may be, the novelist cannot dispense with plot. Aristotle rightly assigns plot the place of chief honor in writing and calls it "the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy."¹⁷ Though, of course, it must be seen as working with the other elements of the work, such as character and setting, narrative plot, is, then, of prime importance in a novel.

In The Poetics, Aristotle formulates a very precise definition of

plot. He calls it "the imitation of an action"¹⁸ and also "the arrangement of the incidents."¹⁹ He goes on to explain that the action imitated should be "a whole" - that is, it should have "a beginning, a middle, and an end."²⁰ Here, Aristotle implies that a plot is not merely a concatenation of events. In accordance with the laws of "probability", about which more will be said later in this critical introduction, episodes in a drama or novel should follow one another with probable or necessary sequence. A plot, after all, as Aristotle maintains, should have unity: it should "imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed."²¹

In order to create a unified plot in Mona Lisa's Lover, the approach which I took in constructing the novel was that I first sketched the general outline of the narrative, and then filled in the episodes and expanded them with detail. Although the novel has its own organic form and grew from its conception in the thought, feeling and personality of the writer, rather than being arbitrarily shaped through mechanical forces in a preconceived mold, it also adheres in modified form to the timeless, dramatic structure of well-built tragedy. The book is divided into five parts, each of which represents a phase of dramatic conflict: introduction, rising action, climax or crisis (turning point), falling action, and catastrophe. I tried at all times to make sure that the main thread of the story was solid and sound and then created incidents to flesh out the skeleton of the work, weaving the plot together with character and setting. I began with the premise that a story should be excitingly and entertainingly told, and planned and organized my material accordingly. Much time and effort was spent in trying to ensure that the interdependent sequences of crisis and resolution contributed effectively to the rhythm of the whole work. This required the adjusting of means to ends. Even though the outline of the whole novel was established before beginning, the prefigured chain of events was conditioned by choices made sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter, throughout the novel. Always, I kept in mind the idea that I must organize my material to create an expressive unity. The internal logic of my imagination and emotions was allowed to work freely, but always I paid heed to the fact that, in

presenting the narrator's archetypal quest for self-knowledge, I was seeking to create aesthetic order through a logical narrative sequence.

In Aspects of the Novel, E.M. Forster makes a useful distinction between story and plot. A story, he writes, "is a narrative of events in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality."²² Thus, plotting is the process of converting story into plot, of changing a sequential arrangement of incidents into a causal and inevitable arrangement. As Forster notes, the art of constructing a good plot involves the "functioning of some kind of intelligent overview of action that establishes principles of selection and relationship among episodes."²³ This idea of selection is vital, for plot is an artificial rather than a natural ordering of events. Its function is to simplify life by imposing order upon it. As Henry James writes, art is "all discrimination and selection," while "life is all inclusion and confusion."²⁴ Thus, the novelist has to select the facts that seem to him useful for his particular purpose; he must choose only significant facts. "Out of the welter of experience, a selection of episodes is made that in itself constitutes a 'whole' action."²⁵

Once we have established the idea that plot can be viewed as a large and controlling frame, as a technique which allows the writer to form the spine of the novel, we must quickly add that plot is really only important insofar as it is the structure by means of which characters are displayed. Plot must derive from character. "The most effective plot presents a struggle such as would engage [a set of] characters, and the most effective emotion for the plot to present is that inherent in the quality of the given characters."²⁶ The function of plot, from this point of view, is to translate character into action. The most effective incidents are those which spring naturally from the given characters. So, for example, in Mona Lisa's Lover, plot grows out of characterization and conflict. My narrator and protagonist, Francesco, is faced with several major problems at the outset of the story - he longs to have revenge on his rival apprentice, Salai; he desperately wants Mona Lisa's love; and he deeply yearns for Da Vinci's respect. All of these goals are difficult to attain. The plot of the novel is formed by Francesco's successes and failures to attain his

goals. The story's interest inheres in the resistances encountered and overcome, or not overcome - in "the logic by which resistance evokes responses which, in their turn, encounter or create new resistances to be dealt with."²⁷ More generally, Francesco wants "to remember how it all began, remember it from the very beginning" (Mona Lisa's Lover, p.1), in the hope that "once memories have been ordered, the rest [will become] much simpler." On this level, plot serves to propel the narrator along on his journey towards self-knowledge; it is the means by which I was able progressively to establish the moral character of my protagonist, showing the degree and kind of his responsibility for what happens to him.

Plot, then, is "a guiding principle for the author and an ordering control for the reader."²⁸ For the author it is "the chief principle for selection and arrangement"²⁹; for the reader it is "something perceived as structure and unity."³⁰ To define plot as an intellectual formulation is not, however, to define it as abstract idea or philosophic concept. Abstract ideas and philosophical attitudes may help in shaping the plot, but, practically speaking, the plot is comprised of incidents - characters and actions - and how they interrelate.

In Mona Lisa's Lover, the plot is arranged, for the most part, in a linear time sequence. A good deal of initial effort was spent in contriving an accurate, chronological order for the events in the novel. It was necessary to select particular dates for the major occurrences in my characters' lives, and to decide the periods of time required for every episode. In general, the time scheme is firmly tied to precise days and seasons. The progress of the seasons in the cycle of the year emphasizes inevitable emotional changes in the characters' lives. My narrator looks back from a disenchanted present, recounting the events of the previous year, starting from the day "when [his] troubles all began" (Mona Lisa's Lover, p.1). Some chapters in the novel suggest only the time span of a single day, while others comprise weeks or several months. Always, I try to concentrate on matters of consequence, on insensibility of experience, while still remembering that, in order to create the illusion of reality, the overall rhythm of the work necessarily calls for lulls in certain parts, and a more rapid pace in others.

The management of the time factor in Mona Lisa's Lover also depends on the workings of my narrator's conscience. It is through the emphasis of certain events and the passing over of others that the relationship between "life by the clock", and "life by values"³¹ is made clear. Since individuality depends on memory, and memory in turn depends on time, Francesco's selection of events is significant, insofar as his choices about what to emphasize and what to delete from the one year time-span which the story covers becomes in itself a subjective commentary on his personal experience.

NARRATIVE METHOD

The differences in mood and tempo brought out by the handling of "plot" and "time" in a novel are emphasized by the writer's choice of narrative method. The plot of a story - that is, the structure of action as it is actually presented to the reader - depends on the point of view. According to Sir Percy Lubbock, "the whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, [is] governed by the question of point of view - the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story."³² While this statement perhaps exaggerates the point, and should immediately be tempered with reference to the inter-related nature of the various techniques of fiction, it is nevertheless true that the novelist's choice of narrative method can vitally affect the unity, emphasis and coherence of his work. The point of view - the choice of the teller of the story - is a question of the greatest importance for any piece of fiction since the point of view affects the whole story, including the reader's reception of it.

In fiction, as soon as we encounter a first-person narrator, we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of events comes between us and the events themselves. As Wayne Booth points out in The Rhetoric of Fiction, it is important for the critic to make distinctions between the man who writes the book (author), the man whose attitudes shape the book (implied author), and the man who communicates directly with the reader

(narrator).³³ In works told by a first-person narrator, "the narrator is often radically different from the implied author who creates him."³⁴ In The Rhetoric of Fiction, Booth goes on to explain that, in any reading experience, there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader.³⁵ The critic, maintains Booth, must gauge carefully the variations of distance between these several contributors to the reading experience. For practical criticism, of the sort intended in this introduction, probably the most important kind of distance is that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator. As Booth points out, a narrator can be said to be reliable "when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not."³⁶ If, as in the case of Mona Lisa's Lover, the narrator is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relates to the reader is transformed.

Although the reader is sometimes able to trust Francesco's narration of facts and events, at times he is an unreliable narrator whose reflections and reasonings should be questioned and qualified. Oftentimes, Francesco claims to be virtuous, while the author shows his vices in the things he does (his repeated assertions of indifference toward Salai, of love for Lisa, and of respect for Leonardo, for example, are belied by many of his actions). This creates an ironic "gap" in the work, which derives from the distance between the narrator and the implied author. Because of this ironic gap, strong demands are made on the reader's powers of inference. Francesco is quite often deliberately deceptive. Yet, he is also at times almost alarmingly honest in his self-revelations. He is an amiable, if sometimes contemptible narrator who simultaneously displays both a grievous lack of sensitivity and great depth of feeling. Thus, it is difficult to determine exactly to what degree Francesco is fallible. The reader views his alternate evasions and self-justifications, and judges the narrator as the story progresses and the evidence supporting and repudiating Francesco's view of things piles up. At the end of the novel, all the prior events are qualified by the final dramatic dialogue. At this point, an overall reassessment is demanded on the part of the reader in order to put into perspective the preceding actions.

When reading Mona Lisa's Lover, the reader is compelled, in a greater or lesser degree throughout the work, to take issue with Francesco and, in taking issue, is (hopefully) drawn more deeply into the story. The use of an unreliable narrator such as Francesco is a fairly simple device for provoking what we may call "reader participation." It is a technique used to make the reader do some of the interpreting himself, for drawing him into the inside of the story by making him discover meaning. As one critic points out, "the reader...entering the dramatization as J stener, finds himself collaborating in the actualization of the objective situation which the tale embodies."³⁷ It is the reader himself, then, who becomes the maker of meaning. He must ask what the narrator knows not merely of the action, but of the meaning of the action. Francesco, for example, does not, at times, entirely comprehend the events which he relates. Thus, the meaning of the story is understated; the full significance is not made explicit, but must be inferred by the reader from the many clues offered throughout the work.

As well as providing a device for creating irony in a work of fiction, the appropriate choice of a first-person narrator may also allow a certain naturalness of exposition to be gained. In Mona Lisa's Lover, for example, we need to know something about the world of Renaissance Florence. If that information were given in the third-person, the burden of mere exposition would be more apparent. As it is, Francesco can more or less casually and incidentally give us a fairly complete notion of his world; he can feed in the expository material without making us feel that it is labelled, for it is part of his life. Thus, the presence of a first-person narrator introduces naturally into a novel a device for selectivity. Since the narrator can tell only what he has observed, heard, or reasonably surmised, a considerable body of material from the hypothetical underlying action is not available to him. As one critic notes, "if, for a particular story, the narrator is well chosen, then the deletions he must make will seem natural, and the selections significant."³⁸ This means to say that the scale of treatment of events can be controlled in terms of the narrator's presence - he tells the story in his own way, he makes the emphasis.

As well as being a first-person narrative, Mona Lisa's Lover is also

a confessional monologue. As confessional monologue, the novel offers the "I" as penitent "experiencing in immediacy or in recollection some night of the soul and striving towards self-knowledge as a means of redemption."³⁹ In her book, The Only Teller, the critic Hetty Clews astutely notes that the confessional monologue is not so much a recollection or a record as an inquiry into the meaning of personal experience:

The confessional monologue springs from the need to explore and to share the most private places of a suffering psyche and, therefore, forms itself around the question of individual identity and concomitant questions of responsibility. "Who am I?" resolves itself into "Could I have been, or done, otherwise?"⁴⁰

Clews goes on to note that, given this center of self-searching, there are two defining characteristics of the confessional mode in monologue. One is a principle of selection:

In the confessional monologue the speaker appears to create his own design. He makes his choices and defines them as he speaks; he considers certain events and people only as they are important to his soul-searching; he traces and retraces his past only as it impinges on his present; he examines those compulsions that seem to have shaped his decisions; and in all of this he continually acknowledges, and frequently expounds upon, his own selective process.⁴¹

The second distinguishing mark of the confessional monologue is "the expressed need for a "significant other in the listener, through whom purgation, if not absolution, may be achieved."⁴²

Mona Lisa's Lover bears both of these distinguishing marks of the confessional monologue. Speaking always from a condition of guilt and suffering, Francesco is intensely aware of the confession he is creating, and he consciously evaluates his success or failure at his task of achieving personal redemption. He refers directly to his audience only twice throughout the book. The first time is at the beginning of Part II,

when he talks about "[setting] down [his] history for all men to see" (Mona Lisa's Lover, p.35), and the second time is at the very end of the novel, when he expresses the "hope...that impulsive lovers who one day read these words will understand [his] life, and learn forbearance from [his] story." (Mona Lisa's Lover, p. 205). Yet, as he attempts to create some kind of order out of painful and disordered experiences, Francesco implicitly invites readers to consider the complex prospect of his past.

As Clews points out, "confessional heroes, exploring uncharted depths within themselves, are...driven to an experimental method - the only method which conforms to the subject of emergent self-understanding."⁴³ So, for example, in Mona Lisa's Lover my narrator's expressions of doubt, anger, regret and frustration proceed through increasingly intense stages of anguished introspection as he tries to come to grips with his past in order to face the future. Although he chooses the comparatively orderly form of the chronicle or history to tell his story, Francesco is thrice driven to reveal dreams which, though difficult for him to explain, are a very important part of his confession. Although he tries to keep the sequence of his reflections under conscious control, his unconscious desires often dominate his restraint and compel him to reveal that which he would rather conceal. Nevertheless, despite Francesco's occasional experiments with narrative method, Mona Lisa's Lover ultimately has the shape of a carefully constructed memoir which requires the reader to see with the eyes of the speaker, to know what he knows of suffering, and to realize with him the meaning of the human condition.

CHARACTERIZATION

In Mona Lisa's Lover, Francesco is both the first-person narrator and protagonist of the story. As the leading figure, both in terms of importance in the story, and in terms of his ability to enlist the reader's interest and sympathy, Francesco - whose cause is at times heroic while at others ignoble - is the key dynamic character in the novel.

While Francesco is the central figure of the story, there are four other main characters who play important roles. These characters are: Mona Lisa Giocundo - the woman Francesco desires; Salai - Francesco's rival apprentice and main antagonist; Leonardo da Vinci - Francesco's brilliant though eccentric master; and the merchant Giocundo - the wealthy and ruthless husband of Mona Lisa. Each of these main characters represents a fusion of the universal and the particular. They are archetypal characters who reveal their true natures when driven by love, hatred, fear, ambition, and despair.

Mona Lisa's Lover also contains a host of minor characters. While the major characters in the novel are intended to be "rounded", three-dimensional figures, the minor characters tend to be more flat, two-dimensional figures who serve the major characters and enhance plot and theme. The minor characters in the novel are: Maria - Mona Lisa's loyal maid-servant; the wasp-like Florentine and the bear-like Emilio - servants to Giocundo; and Angelica, the child of Francesco and Lisa. There are also several historical figures in the work. These include: Fra Girolamo Savonarola - a fundamentalist preacher; Signor Niccolo Machiavelli - a well-meaning, though anarchistic political agitator; and King Charles of France - the pathetic war-lord, conqueror of the divided states of Italy. The final important minor character in the novel is the old rag-vendor woman, who serves both as a choral figure, commenting on the action, and also as a confidant figure, to whom the protagonist feels compelled to express his innermost thoughts.

Although, in examining a novel, no one technique can be studied in isolation from all the other techniques which combine to create the completed whole, professional critics and common readers alike are inclined to emphasize the role of characterization. This is probably due to the fact that our involvement with the characters of a novel lies at the core of our reading experience. Character is but a single element in the imaginative statement made by the whole novel. Yet, the reader must be made interested in the affairs of the characters presented, or the novel will inevitably fail, no matter how well the author executes other techniques. The reader must care about the characters in a novel as human

beings, though, of course, he realizes that the figures in a novel are different from people in real life in that they serve interests directly connected to the art form by virtue of which they have their existence.

In Aspects of the Novel, E.M. Forster rightly reminds us that "Homo Fictus" is a totally different species from "Homo Sapiens."⁴⁴ "Homo Fictus" is deprived of a great many ordinary human characteristics because these are not relevant to the novelist's design. His function is "to act in unison with other narrative elements as a vehicle for the expression of the author's personal vision of life."⁴⁵ In order to be effective, characters in a work of fiction must be symbolic. However, while the novelist's figures are "abstractions whose principle function is to complete a structural or verbal pattern"⁴⁶, in the end, we recognize the true novelist by the strength with which his realization of the actual world and of human individuality triumphs over his abstract speculations. The novelist must have the capacity literally to "embody" ideas in character. In the case of the historical novel, this means that he must also have the ability to derive the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarities of their age. Yet, ideas must always be demonstrated through the experience and suffering of ordinary human beings. The writer must focus not on abstractions, but on individual experience. In order for a story to be moving, characters must "fit in a moral universe"⁴⁷, but also be invested with humanity. As the critic Miriam Allott points out, "the abstraction must be made credible and significant, which means it ceases to be a mere abstraction."⁴⁸

To give life to the characters in Mona Lisa's Lover, I combined three fundamental methods of characterization: (1) explicit presentation of character through direct exposition illustrated by action; (2) presentation of characters in action, with little or no explicit comment by the narrator, in the expectation that the reader will be able to deduce the attributes of the actor from the actions; and (3) the representation from within my narrator and protagonist of the impact of actions and emotions upon his inner self, with the expectation that the reader will come to a clear understanding of the attributes of this character. Through my use of these methods of characterization, I have tried to invest the symbolic

figures in my novel with a sufficient degree of humanity that their behavior will carry conviction for modern readers.

As Allott rightly remarks, "the novelist's argument... proceeds from the value of 'the marvellous' to the necessity of maintaining verisimilitude and consistency in his characters' behavior."⁴⁹ The writer must attempt to strike a balance between the uncommon and the ordinary so as, on the one hand, to give interest, on the other to give reality. As Allott points out, this question of "probability" of character is really a question of striking a balance between romance and realism:

There is required a sufficient degree of the marvellous to excite attention; enough of the manners of real life to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic to engage the heart in its behalf.⁵⁰

In giving his work "enough of the pathetic to engage the heart in its behalf", the writer must, of course, avoid the pitfalls of melodrama. The interaction of characters in a novel should create human interest but, at the same time, the novelist must avoid saccharine sentimentality if he hopes to be taken seriously. This is not to say that the writer should not strive to involve his reader's emotions as he portrays the lives of his characters for, as Allott points out, "in the great work, we surrender our emotions for reasons that leave us with no regrets, no inclination to retract, after the immediate spell is past."⁵¹

An important method which the novelist may use to create characters who are convincing enough to enlist the reader's interest is to invest them with a plausible mixture of good and bad. In Mona Lisa's Lover, for example, Francesco and Salai represent extremes of virtuous and licentious behavior, but both contain traits which qualify these extremes. Francesco is by no means consistently well-meaning, and Salai is by no means constantly reprehensible. However, happenings such as sudden conversions are avoided in the novel, since actions performed must be both "in character", that is psychologically credible, and also probable in terms of the work as whole. Thus, while I explored freely the nature of my

characters, I was wary not to make them either too good or too bad, or suddenly to change their essence. This was done in accordance with Aristotle, who notes that, "in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim at either the necessary or the probable."⁵² For this reason, I tried to make my characters appear to evolve naturally, without heavy-handedness on the part of the author.

DIALOGUE

One of the most important methods of character revelation in a novel is the way in which characters talk. Since characters exist largely through their speech, dialogue is a rich resource for dramatic presentation. An effective way of conveying a sense of individual identity is to give each character a different way of putting words together. In Mona Lisa's Lover, for example, while all the characters speak in a manner which hints at an Italian idiom, they all have individualistic ways of using words. Francesco, though able to express himself well enough in his own fashion, tends to be rather shy and stumbling in his speech. Conversely, the quick cadences of Salai's speech convey exuberance. Through their speech, Leonardo and Lisa are shown to have rather reserved and mysterious personalities. The final main character in the novel, the merchant Giocundo, has the calculated vocabulary of a businessman. Yet, even he reveals his essential nature through his use of words.

The way each character in a novel speaks is important because, in order to be convincing, the writer must have his characters speak "in character." The novelist's use of dialogue imports into his work something of the dramatist's discipline and objectivity. Its authenticity depends, as it does in the theater, on an adjustment of the "real" and the "stylized." As Anthony Trollope writes, the novel-writer, in constructing his dialogue,

must steer between absolute accuracy of language - which would give to conversation an air of pedantry, and the slovenly inaccuracy of ordinary talkers - which, if followed

closely, would offend by an appearance of grimace, - so as to produce upon the ear of his readers a sense of reality."⁵³

In a novel, there are basically two ways to present character, directly, with a summary of traits and characteristics, or dramatically, through dialogue and action. As Wayne Booth notes, "direct presentation, even summary presentation, may be properly and effectively used."⁵⁴ The danger of direct presentation, however, is that it tends to forfeit the vividness of drama and the reader's imaginative participation. Direct presentation works best, as Booth remarks, "with rather flat and typical characters, or as a means to get rapidly over more perfunctory materials."⁵⁵ When it comes to the significant scenes of the story, the writer is well advised to discard summary in favor of dramatic presentation. The novelist's task, after all, is to create scenes for the reader's imaginative participation.

The need for dramatic vividness in a novel naturally compels the writer to use dialogue as a technique to help create the very pace of the story. It is important for the writer to decide carefully when to summarize traits or events, when to describe directly, and when to allow the character to express his feelings through dialogue and action. As Booth justly notes, "artistry lies not in adherence to any one supreme manner of narration, but rather, in the writer's ability to order various forms of telling in the service of various forms of showing."⁵⁶ In the composition of Mona Lisa's Lover, much time and thought went into deciding what to dramatize fully, and what to curtail, what to summarize and what to heighten. Though it is impossible to apply abstract rules to determine when any one method took precedence, generally speaking, individual chapters tended to proceed from "preparation" to "scene." In the preparation, the reader is taken into Francesco's inner life and made to assist in the various processes which guide his feelings and thoughts. Consequently, when we arrive at the scene itself, the reader is in a position "to savor the full irony of conversational hesitations, suppressions, wilful distortions and unwitting misapprehensions, and to appreciate the nature of the fresh developments which these will precipitate."⁵⁷

SETTING

In her book entitled Novelists on the Novel, Miriam Allott writes:

The artistic self-consciousness which compels the novelist to make "things of truth" from "things of fact" by adjusting them to their new context, has gradually seen to it that the background and setting of "scene" is as integral to design as plot, characters, dialogue and narrative technique.⁵⁸

Here, Allott makes a point with which, in the light of my own recent experience in novel writing, I readily agree. For, during the early stages of the creation of Mona Lisa's Lover, I discovered that it was very wrong indeed to regard the setting of my story as merely decorative background. I discovered that, if it were going to function as an integral part of the novel's design, my setting would have to serve the dual purpose of providing the physical medium in which the characters move, as well as adding significance to the book through its power to evoke atmosphere and to reflect symbolically on other elements. I saw that my setting would have to be made "expressionistic", if it were going to reveal character, advance plot, and reinforce theme. Thus, I attempted to make my setting cohere with the other components in the design so that the reader would have both the sense of living in a "real" created world - of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting an authentic environment - and the sense that the setting is not merely "background", but contains a significance beyond the realm of mundane "realism".

In Mona Lisa's Lover, the importance of the interplay of setting with other elements in the novel is established right from the opening pages. In this book, I attempted to create a vivid, memorable setting which appeals to the reader's senses, but which should not be judged simply in terms of realistic accuracy, but rather in terms of what it accomplishes for the novel as a whole. While it is true that the creation of my setting was often inspired by a personal delight in the imaginative reconstruction

of the world of Renaissance Florence, it was never relegated to the position in which it became "primarily a method for the display of descriptive powers in fine writing."⁵⁹ From the outset of the book, I determined that description of setting should never be used as an end unto itself. I saw that the piling up of details for their own sake would be tedious and irrelevant. For this reason, I always tried to select the significant items for presentation. When describing setting, I tried to create a world which is recognizable, and which is rendered vividly, but I avoided superfluous, merely picturesque detail.

In Mona Lisa's Lover, description of setting is often symbolically related to the theme of the story. The settings of many of the scenes can be accepted at a straight, realistic level but, to the perceptive reader, they should appear as symbolic also. I tried to create my novel so that it would be vivid with a sense of place and character but, at the same time, I realized that it was necessary to select and conventionalize those parts of the setting which most strongly appealed to my imagination, for the purpose of strengthening the effect of my novel's over-all design. Thus, specific settings were chosen both for their potential to provide a realistic milieu, and for their capacity to produce symbolic reverberations. The initial choice of the city of Renaissance Florence as the main setting for the novel provides a physical, cultural and symbolic location in which the story unfolds, and the choice of settings for particular scenes - Leonardo's studio, the Great Market Square, the rich merchants' quarter, the park on the outskirts of the poorer quarter, and the Ponte Trinita, for example, - provide the locales in which the characters move. It is only by rendering these specific locales vividly that the walled city itself can be brought to life and be made to appear symbolic - as a metaphor with universal connotations.

STYLE

The style of a novel is rather a difficult quality to define with exactitude. In its most general sense, it can be said to be "the manner in

which the words of a novel are arranged in order to best express the individuality of the author and the ideas and intent in the author's mind."⁶⁰ For, certainly, "the best style, for any given purpose, is that which most nearly approximates a perfect adaptation of one's language to one's ideas."⁶¹ Yet, this definition remains a bit vague. To be sure, in its broadest sense, style must be considered to be the overall approach which the writer takes in dealing with his material, but specific elements of a work must first be considered as component parts of a writer's individual style if the critic is to define with any precision what distinguishes one author's method of presentation from that of another.

The way in which the writer arranges his ideas is the most fundamental structural element in his style. In Mona Lisa's Lover, I organized my material both within an historical framework and within the framework of the five stages of well-built tragedy. Yet, while staying within these perimeters, I used my imagination to develop a method of presentation which was specifically adapted to the kind of effect which I was trying to achieve. Guided by the idea that historical accuracy was of secondary importance to aesthetic form, I attempted to create a work of art which, when finished, would be a whole greater than the sum of its parts. This I did by carefully planning the narrative so that the dynamic tension between all parts of the artistic structure make it analogous to an organism. Whatever "life" the novel has is derived from the tension between the various parts.

As well as being the way in which the writer arranges his ideas, style is also the means by which he displays his feeling for the possibilities of language. If the novelist hopes to create "a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture"⁶², he must craft language with infinite care. This implies that he must have the capacity for self-criticism which allows him to produce a fiction which is workmanlike, intelligible, and free from clichés and grammatical mistakes. Yet, it also implies much more. It implies that he must make very conscious decisions about what sort of diction to use; about how to structure sentences; and about how to use image and metaphor. This is all necessary because, as Joseph Conrad eloquently writes:

It is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words.⁶³

In Mona Lisa's Lover, I took great care to construct well-made sentences, to choose diction which was appropriate for the voices of the narrator and of the other characters, and to use images and metaphors in keeping with the setting and theme of the work. Yet, all the while, I also tried to remember that too much style is, in itself, a pitfall to be avoided. I strove towards the "art which conceals art."⁶⁴ I tried to invest my prose with vitality by keeping it, for the most part, simple and clear. Although, at times, I aspired to write a subtly "poetic prose", for the most part I concentrated on keeping the narrative intelligible and harmonious.

THEME

The theme of a novel is the central or dominating idea found in the work. It is "the abstract concept which is made concrete through its representation in person, action, and image."⁶⁵ In other words, theme is what is made of the topic which the artist chooses to write about, and it is the comment on the topic that is implied by the story. The writer must always keep his theme in mind, and use the other techniques of fiction as the means by which he expresses his chosen subject. When all is said and done, theme is the essential reason for a story's existence. The attitude toward life which the story embodies - its portrayal of human experience - is of central importance to its significance as a work of art.

In a novel, the representation of human experience always involves, directly or indirectly, some comment on values and human conduct, on good and bad, on the true and the false. It always involves some conception of

what the human place is in the world. After reading a novel, one is always left with the question: "What does it all add up to? What does it mean?" We like to observe a story working itself out to a unity. As Cleanth Brooks notes, "just as we instinctively demand the logic of cause and effect, the logic of motivation in fiction, so we demand that there be a logic of theme - a thematic structure into which the various elements are fitted and in terms of which they achieve unity."⁶⁶ Brooks also goes on to note that "it is not any moralizing aspect of theme that comes first to mind; it is the structural necessity."⁶⁷ He rightly reminds us that "if there is no satisfactorily developed theme, all our other interests, no matter how intense they may be, tend to evaporate."⁶⁸

In accordance with these critical ideas about theme, when writing Mona Lisa's Lover, I tried to create a work which evokes a sense of an independent world in which characters act and are acted upon, and which, as one event leads to another, compels the reader to become more and more aware of the significance of the whole. This is to say, I attempted to write a novel in which the reader gradually senses a developing theme. The attitude toward life which is consistently developed throughout my novel is perhaps most easily determined by looking at the pattern of the plot and seeing what significant repetitions appear. The motifs in the novel are all intended to lead the reader toward a perception of the theme. Also, the final chapter is of crucial significance to the theme of the whole, since, while it follows logically from the body of the story, it works retrospectively to put the rest of the novel in a wider moral perspective. Mona Lisa's Lover is, at least to a large degree, an open-ended work. It demands that the reader carefully consider the tone of the narrative, and it demands that he be attentive to irony. Only through paying attention to these facets of the work will the reader be able to discern the novel's intended significance.

Mona Lisa's Lover was written to teach as well as to delight, but the book does not end with a neat moral tag. In fact, the novel avoids focusing narrowly upon a single, particular meaning, but rather strives to reflect the ambiguities of the human condition and of the universe itself. In this book, I illustrate the classic themes of love, loneliness, revenge,

betrayal and self-discovery. Yet, no definitive, unqualifiable conclusions are reached. In Mona Lisa's Lover, good and evil are interfused, and this is the main theme. Throughout the work, I try to allow meaning to arise out of paradox and ambiguity. This approach to novel-writing was taken because, as in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne,

the author...considered it hardly worth his while...relentlessly to impale the story with its moral...as by sticking a pin through a butterfly...thus at once depriving it of life, and causing it to stiffen in an ungainly and unnatural attitude.⁶⁹

In planning the composition of Mona Lisa's Lover, my object was to ask questions, not to solve them. Certainly, the work has a moral purpose, but, in meeting that purpose, it attempts to convey a more natural truth than that which can be achieved by stern didacticism. In writing this novel, I tried to maintain artistic detachment. I wanted to show that life is so complex that no one ever triumphs unambiguously. I saw that the writer's responsibility was "to engage the reader with a shared reality, which creates in him expectations and values, sympathies and repulsions, appropriate to the comprehension of that reality."⁷⁰ To this end, I created a work with a theme complex enough that the reader will be forced to respond to the world which is being presented to him. I want him to judge, estimate and evaluate what is being urged on him.

In a very real sense, Mona Lisa's Lover portrays Francesco's passage from adolescence to maturity. It illustrates his growth into an artist and humanist in a world robbed of faith as a guiding principle of life. Yet, the meaning of the work is ambiguous. Upon completion of the book, the reader will hopefully feel compelled to ask: "What exactly has the protagonist learned?" If the reader finds the only answer possible is that Francesco has learned that the truth about life is not simple to pin down, hopefully he will not be disappointed. If he sees that the only view which the novel offers is that the moral world is a murky place, hopefully he will not feel defrauded, but rather take a critical interest in the ambiguity which the combinations and conflicts of interests in the work

imply. Finally, if the reader discovers that it is difficult to judge any of my characters as wholly admirable or wholly contemptible, hopefully he will not feel disquieted, but rather judge the work by the success it achieves in its goal of portraying a world in which moral choices are equivocal.

ENDNOTES

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³Cleanth Brooks, Understanding Fiction (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), p. 26.

⁴Feuchtwanger, p. 144.

⁵Feuchtwanger, p. 13.

⁶Feuchtwanger, p. 129.

⁷Feuchtwanger, p. 140.

⁸Feuchtwanger, p. 139.

⁹Feuchtwanger, p. 140.

¹⁰Feuchtwanger, p. 145.

¹¹Feuchtwanger, p. 144.

¹²Feuchtwanger, p. 144.

¹³Aristotle, Poetics, trans. S.H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 68.

¹⁴Brooks, p. 27.

¹⁵Brooks, p. 27.

¹⁶Feuchtwanger, p. 28.

¹⁷Aristotle, p. 63.

¹⁸Aristotle, p. 63.

¹⁹Aristotle, p. 63.

²⁰Aristotle, p. 65.

²¹Aristotle, p. 66.

²²E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, ed. Oliver Stallybrass.
(London: Edward Arnold, 1927), p.60.

²³Forster, p. 60.

²⁴Henry James, Preface to The Spoils of Poynton (1897); quoted in
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1959), p. 76.

²⁵Henry James, quoted in Allott, p. 76.

²⁶Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel (London: Routledge and
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²⁷Brooks, p. 81.

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³²Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), p. 62.

³³Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 156.

³⁴Booth, p. 156.

³⁵Booth, p. 158.

³⁶Booth, p. 158.

³⁷Brooks, p. 148.

³⁸Brooks, p. 148.

³⁹Hetty Clews, The Only Teller (Victoria, British Columbia: Sons Nils Press, 1985), p. 168.

⁴⁰Clews, p. 169.

⁴¹Clews, p. 169.

⁴²Clews, p. 169.

⁴³Clews, p. 171.

⁴⁴Forster, p. 33.

⁴⁵Allott, p. 197.

⁴⁶Allott, p. 198.

⁴⁷Allott, p. 6.

⁴⁸Allott, p. 200.

⁴⁹Allott, p. 6.

⁵⁰Allott, p. 8.

⁵¹Allott, p. 203.

⁵²Aristotle, p. 81.

⁵³Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (1883), Chapter xii; quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 295.

⁵⁴Booth, p. 154.

⁵⁵Booth, p. 155.

⁵⁶Booth, p. 8.

⁵⁷Henry James, Preface to The Awkward Age (1899); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 297.

⁵⁸Allott, p. 216.

⁵⁹Allott, p. 218.

⁶⁰Holman, p. 432.

⁶¹Holman, p. 432.

⁶²Robert Louis Stevenson, The Art of Writing (1919); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 319.

⁶³Joseph Conrad, Preface to Nigger of the Narcissus (1897); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 321.

⁶⁴Holman, p. 432.

⁶⁵Holman, p. 443.

⁶⁶Brooks, p. 272.

⁶⁷Brooks, p. 274.

⁶⁸Brooks, p. 274.

⁶⁹Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to The House of the Seven Gables (1851); quoted in Mirium Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p. 93.

⁷⁰Brooks, p. 275.

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MONA LISA'S LOVER

PART I

CHAPTER 1

If I could only remember how it all began, remember it from the very beginning, perhaps it would help me now. Once memories have been ordered, then surely the rest becomes much simpler.

It must be nearly a whole year ago now that my life's trouble began. It was early one hot spring morning. I was mixing the paints for my master's palette - carefully blending the smooth, chalky white and bloody black pigments in the way I know is to his satisfaction - when Salai bounded into the studio. He was singing one of those vulgar drinking songs he always sings so loudly when our master is away. He learns them from the ruffians he drinks and gambles with all night. The night before last he tried to sneak back from one of their filthy wine cellars after curfew, but the night-watch patrol caught him hiding in the shadows of the city wall, and my master had to go to the jail in the morning and pay for his release. It is not the first time that Salai has caused trouble, but my master only ever gives him an insincere scolding and then laughs, saying "Ah, Salai! You were born a devil and will most certainly die a devil's death."

My master always forgives Salai. He loves Salai more than all the others. He says that Salai is the most beautiful young man in all of Florence. I love only my lady, Lisa, yet I cannot help but feel ready to

explode with rage when I think that my master, a man of most remarkable abilities and capable of the most delicate perceptions of life and beauty, should be unable to discern the stupidity of his handsome Apollo. I know that Salai is a thief, a liar, and a glutton, but my master knows only his own sweet Salai.

It is true that I am not a beautiful young man like Salai. I am plain and long-faced. I have a too-big nose and my eyes are so grey that they can only be described as colorless. Yet I am not jealous of Salai. That is a lie! Why should I be jealous of him with his fleshy lips and the muscles my master so loves to draw? No, I am not jealous of my master's other apprentice. He is an oaf. Still, I cannot bear it when he and my master are together. It is always "today I have five florins for Salai to buy a new shirt" or "here are three gold ducats which Salai said he wanted for a pair of rose-colored hose with their trimming." I cannot bear Leonardo's affection for his Salai. He is shameless to play with Salai the game in the behind that Florentines love so much, yet I am powerless to tell my feelings to my master. I have only my Lisa to confide my secrets to, and now she is gone from me.

My Lisa is lost to me! My thoughts stray too easily. I must think back to that first day, the day it all began. Yes, and so it was that Salai came into the studio, singing his filthy song while I sat working, mixing the paints, refusing to look up and acknowledge his presence, but Salai can never let himself be ignored. His clumsy hand fell on my shoulder.

"Francesco, the master is not here. Why do you work this morning?" he said.

"No, Salai, our master is not here, but I choose to work. I must prepare this palette for when he returns. He will arrive soon," I said.

"No, you are wrong, my friend," said Salai. "The maestro sent me to tell you that he will not return until late today. He has been to the hot baths and is now on his way to the hospital San Dominico. They have given him another corpse to cut apart. That knave who was hanged yesterday. Ah, it was a glorious hanging! He will be in bits before long!"

"It is for the sake of science that our master investigates the human

body, when will you ever learn that, Salai?" I said, putting down the palette. "But why didn't you hurry back to tell me this? These paints will be ruined by the time Leonardo arrives. But tell me now, have you any other news?"

"Yes..." said Salai, teasingly.

"Well?" I said, but Salai didn't continue. He is a prankster. He likes to play tricks on people. My master, too, likes to invent elaborate tricks to astonish people. My master's tricks are the workings of a powerful mind that cannot rest. One time he spent weeks trying to devise a way to make it thunder and to make lightening appear at the banquet hall of the Duke. My master was the guest of honour at the feast and he thought that thunder and lightening would be a fitting accompaniment to his entrance. In the end he was disgraced because he could find no way to make either thunder or lightening. He had wasted all his time and had not finished the painting which the Duke had commissioned and was to be presented to the court during the feast. Salai's tricks, however, are nothing like my master's. They too are often failures; but much pettier failures. He is not bright enough to try to invent anything. He is merely a buffoon.

And so Salai sauntered carelessly about the studio, waiting for me to beg him for the message from my master. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. First he would walk over to one painting, lift the cloth cover off it and, standing back to give the appearance of one appreciating the masterful technique that makes a work of art, nod his head approvingly. He would then put the cover back on and go to another painting and repeat the whole spectacle. My master's studio is filled with unfinished paintings, so Salai could have continued all day in this fashion. Yet, he was not really interested in the paintings, he was only trying to force me to ask again for the news from my master. Soon he became sulky and gave up the pretence of being an art connoisseur. He knows I perceive that his interest lies not in art, but in adoration. He wants only to be looked upon as beautiful, he cares nothing for any beauty outside of himself. And so he sauntered back over to where I was cleaning brushes in a pail of water.

"Francesco, do you not want to know the other news?" he said.

"I will not play your game, Salai," I said. "Tell me the message."

"I would not try to keep the master's orders from you," said Salai, trying to look offended. "You had only to ask."

"Tell me," I said.

"Very well! You are to go to the home of Francesco Giocundo, the wealthy silk merchant," said Salai. "That is the master's message."

"But he must have said why I am to go there," I said.

"You ask why?" said Salai, now with a sly grin on his lips. "You are to go there because at that house you will find a certain Florentine lady whom you are to escort here. The master is to paint a portrait of her. Her name is Mona Lisa."

The name meant nothing to me at that time. It was only Salai who derived some childish excitement from the fact that I was to escort a lady to my master's studio. I thought nothing of it. It is not unusual for my master to require me to do errands of diplomacy for him. He never orders Salai to do such errands. Salai cannot be trusted to be civil. He is never diplomatic. And so naturally I was the one who had been chosen to escort Giocundo's wife, the lady Lisa, to my master's studio.

After having cleaned my master's brushes, and completed my other morning tasks about the studio, I prepared to depart for the home of Francesco Giocundo, thinking at the time, "Why has that man my same Christian name, yet I have not his same earthly wealth?" Telling myself to be rid of such jealous thoughts, I put on my sandals and brushed off my best cloak, which I reserve for times when I must present an image of well-being to public eyes. I then stepped out into the street.

I began walking through the dusty, meandering streets of our quarter in the direction which leads to Giocundo's home. I knew that his home was built on the other side of the Great Market Square in the quarter where the richest merchants of Florence live. Giocundo's mansion is the grandest in the quarter. He is known throughout Florence as a man of enormous wealth and he has considerable influence over the city governors. He is said to be a man of fiery temper, without mercy for his enemies. There is a story about Giocundo: When he was a much younger man he had a rival in the silk industry, a fellow named Zanobi di Cela. One season Giocundo was competing

with Zanobi for a cargo of rare silk worms which had just arrived by caravan from the Orient. The caravan was stopping for only one night in Florence. Giocundo was bargaining for the worms, but Zanobi's competition made the worm merchant keep the price very high. Giocundo was furious. The story ends with the mystery of Zanobi's death. He and his new bride were found together in bed on the morning the caravan left. Both their throats had been cut. It is not without guile that Giocundo has become the richest silk merchant in all of Florence.

After my walk through the narrow, winding streets which lead from our quarter into the Great Market Square, it was something of a relief to be in the open space which the Square provides. Even so, the thick, motley throng of market people soon made me feel once more closed in by the city walls. I seldom venture into the streets of Florence. I prefer to stay and work in my master's studio. The crowded streets only remind me of my loneliness. I am a stranger here and so for me these city streets are filled with cold, stoney faces.

And so it was that I pushed and jostled my way through the crowd that day. The Great Square was alive with the energy of a new spring season. There were all the usual merchants shouting the nature and the price of their wares: fishmongers and poultry vendors, sellers of glassware and china, butchers with their whole suckling pigs to sell by the pound, and old peasant women selling the vegetables they had sold all their lives. There were also young peasant women with their baskets of chestnuts and pears. There were pilgrims on their way to Rome and pickpockets attracted by the large crowds and bulging purses. There were sellers of Mongol slaves from the Black Sea region and artisans from the neighboring villages. Prostitutes and their pimps, beggars and thieves, bankers and sorcerers - all these people found the source of their being in the life which made the Market Square the pulsing heart of Florence. But my blood does not flow from this same heart. I am a stranger in this city and I see the crowds with the eyes of a stranger. I cut my way through the life of the market crowd and continued my way to the home of Giocundo.

It was not long before I arrived. The sun was now high overhead and I

was hot from my walk through the dusty streets. The Giocundo servant-girl brought me water while I waited in the front hall for her mistress to appear. The hall was cool, with a lofty ceiling, great marble pillars and beautiful tapestries on the walls. It was the hall of a man who wishes his visitors to be awed by his wealth and fine taste.

After waiting for a considerable amount of time, just as I was beginning to become impatient with my forced idleness, I heard footsteps approaching down the hallway. A moment later, a young lady appeared. I stood and bowed to her.

"You are to be my escort?" she asked.

"I am," I replied.

"Let us depart," she said.

I wondered immediately why this enchanting young woman was speaking in such an abrupt manner and why she seemed to be so upset. "What could be disturbing her?" I thought. She was such a lovely young woman, wearing a simple dress, with her dark brown hair falling in little curls about her shoulders. "Her life should be filled with only happiness," I thought. Then I looked into her eyes, and I saw a tear - the tear that shall remain forever frozen in my mind - as it fell to the cold marble floor.

CHAPTER 2

I had no time to voice my concern at the young lady's distraught state. True enough, at that time it was not my place to inquire into the personal problems of a woman whom I had never met before. But that did not matter. Before I could collect my thoughts or utter a word, Giocundo's wife discreetly wiped away a lingering tear and motioned that we should depart. Although I had almost fully regained my outward composure after the initial shock of seeing Lisa's distress, my mind was racing with a flurry of questions. Even while I tried to convince myself that whatever was disturbing her was none of my business, I couldn't help but feel an interest in the affair. What has happened to upset her? I wondered. Does she know I saw the tears she tried to hide? Will the lady continue to try to conceal her all too obvious despair? Or will she try to find sympathy from whoever offers it, perhaps even from a complete stranger?

As these questions formed in my mind, I realized that I was experiencing a strong surge of compassion for this woman who was suffering some mysterious pain. And then, looking at her shapely full figure as she drew her street cloak about her shoulders, I recognized, with not a small portion of astonishment, that my compassion was accompanied by another sort of emotion. This emotion was felt as a surging flame burning deep in my loins. I understood with a strange mixture of surprise and horror that I was very strongly attracted to the wife of the wealthy and ruthless merchant, Giocundo.

Obediently I followed the lady Giocundo out of the great house. We passed in silence through the courtyard which separated the front of the mansion from the street. To the side of the courtyard were manicured cypress and olive trees. The heat of the courtyard paving stones burned through the hardened leather of my sandals. I momentarily wished to be

back once again in the cool of Giocundo's hall. Then I remembered the task at hand. I turned my attention to Mona Lisa.

I guided the lady at a brisk walk through the hot, empty streets of the residential quarter. Though her cheeks were still flushed, she seemed content to be in the open street, away from the confining walls of Giocundo's palace. Her tears soon stopped. Only an occasional sob betrayed the fact that she had been crying heavily for a long while. I determined that, before reaching the studio where Salai and perhaps my master also would be waiting, I would engage the lady Lisa in conversation. I hoped to gain some clue as to what had upset her. Also, I wanted to establish myself as more than merely an anonymous escort. I wanted to prove that I was more than just the silent servant of Maestro Da Vinci.

When, after a few moments, I spoke, my voice startled the lady Giocundo.

"Forgive me for intruding upon your meditations," I said. "But I have remarked that you are much upset by something. If there is anything I can do to ease your troubles, I would be honoured to be of service."

Mona Lisa looked at me with curious, attentive eyes. She was squinting slightly because of the glare from the sun. The air was utterly still. No breeze gave relief from the close, stifling heat. Only the measured rhythm of a blacksmith's hammer from somewhere in the next block indicated that the city contained any life other than ourselves. As usual, Florence seemed empty at that time of day when her citizens rested in the cool interiors of their homes after the afternoon meal. Although I knew that in just another hour the streets would once again be crowded with people, at that moment there were only we two strangers walking in the mid-day sun.

After having first addressed her, I waited a few moments for Lisa to speak. She walked on, however, as if ignoring the fact that I had spoken. I cleared my throat and spoke again.

"If you share your troubles with someone, they will perhaps soon seem lighter," I said.

Lisa hesitated, remaining silent for a minute. She looked at me with

a poisonous glare. She obviously did not appreciate my attempt at confidential communication.

"You are a most modest-looking young man, yet evidently you are capable of extravagant impertinence," she said.

I knew that this was a crucial moment. I was faced with a critical choice. I could apologize for forgetting my proper place, beg the lady's forgiveness and implore her to say nothing about my conduct to her husband or my master. Alternatively, I could risk all and demand that she speak honestly to me about whatever was distressing her. I decided to take the risk. Yet, I proceeded with caution.

"Though I am only a humble servant, my lady, You would do well to consider me also as... your friend," I said.

"I see no reason for friendship between us," she replied.

"Must friendship always be grounded in reason?" I asked.

"No, perhaps not always," she answered. "And your offer is kind." Then in a soft voice, almost as if murmuring to herself, she added, "but do you promise never to be false?"

Upon hearing this, I understood that, despite her aloofness and seeming arrogance toward me, this young woman craved compassion. She was reluctant to speak for fear that her confessions would be betrayed.

"I have only the deepest respect for your trust," I said.

Mona Lisa gave me a quick, sidelong glance. But she said nothing immediately.

For several minutes we walked on in silence.

The noon heat burned. A lone market merchant driving a small donkey over-laden with bundles of cloth passed us, going in the opposite direction. The man's face was hidden by his hat brim which was pulled down to afford protection from the sun. Impatient to find shelter in the shade, the merchant beat the struggling donkey on its tender underflanks with a wooden switch. He cursed their slow progress. The donkey fought desperately to obey the sharp command of the whip, but he could not move any faster under the weight of his load. A trickle of blood dripped in the dust of the donkey's path as he plodded on and finally turned into a shaded sidestreet.

After the merchant and his donkey had passed, my attention was suddenly re-focused when Mona Lisa grasped my arm. With her hand tightly clutching me, she looked searchingly into my eyes.

"I am a prisoner in Giocundo's house," she said. "I will not return there." Startled by this sudden revelation, I nevertheless tried to return the steady gaze of Lisa's eyes. But, somehow unable to endure their desperate quality, I soon lowered my own.

I now realized that while Lisa was risking much by talking openly with me, I too risked much by encouraging a relationship between us. Any deep involvement with this woman carried with it dangers which would destroy the peace and stability of my life. I feared change. Suddenly I was terribly afraid of saying anything more which might prompt Lisa to reveal further secrets to me. I now wished to regain the anonymity which I had so very recently despised. I wanted to repel Lisa, yet I dared not. I knew that any attempt to retract my offer of friendship would seem a terrible insult. I had flattered Lisa's vanity. She was aware of her personal charms and not blind to their effect on me. Before I had a chance to say something which might have freed me from any further commitment, Lisa spoke again.

"Do not misunderstand me," she said. "Giocundo has shown me great kindness. He protects me. Yet, although I am grateful to him, I can only think of him as a horrible old man."

"But you must remember that he is your husband," I said.

"I feel a bond of loyalty, not as a wife to her husband, but as a slave to its master," she replied. "Until now I have despaired. I could do nothing other than continue in misery and servitude under Giocundo's roof. But now you have come."

"But I have so little to offer you," I replied. "In place of the splendor of Giocundo's mansion, I have only a small loft room which I rent from Messer Da Vinci."

"That does not matter," Lisa said. "Don't you understand? Giocundo may be rich and respected, but I am much too poorly loved. If you promise to love me, I will gladly forsake Giocundo's wealth for your affection."

Not knowing what to reply, I walked on in silence.

CHAPTER 3

Lisa was brooding when we arrived at my master's studio. Perhaps she was angry because I had refused to reciprocate her sudden commitment of love. Perhaps she was ashamed at having exposed her weakness. While I was interested to know precisely why Lisa's mood had become so reserved and anxious (I later learned that the reason was entirely different from anything I might have imagined), my most pressing concern was that she should not reveal the impropriety of my conduct to Maestro Da Vinci. As I opened the gate of the courtyard which fronts my master's studio and sets it back from the street, I was tempted to take hold of Lisa's hand. However, I resisted this impulse. I was preparing to re-adopt the role of servant to the genius, Da Vinci.

The studio door was ajar, half open. "Please enter," I said, ushering Lisa before me. She entered hesitatingly, pausing in the threshold. I led her down the hall from the foyer. The cool darkness inside instantly set a contrasting mood to the one which had developed during our walk. Without the heat and glare of the sun's fierce rays, emotions seemed less urgent, less necessary.

When we reached the doorway to Leonardo's main studio, I saw him sitting at his worktable. He was bent over some project, studying with intense absorption. His appearance forbids interruption when he is at work. I stood and waited. In a moment he looked up. On his face, which is covered with deep furrows of old age, was the expression of profound thought. Maestro Da Vinci often seems lost in contemplation. Even just looking at a simple rock, he seems to see wonders. His is a world which does not admit the presence of other men. Often he orders Salai and me to leave the workshop when he must concentrate. We distract him. He tells us that when there is another person in the room he no longer feels alone.

And Leonardo often needs to be alone. I believe that he is not happy in the world of men. Sometimes I think that he fears it, and that is why he prefers his loneliness.

Eventually, after I had silently waited several minutes for Leonardo to acknowledge my presence, I made a slight sound to attract his attention. He looked up from his work. As his eyes fell upon me, they slowly grew dim as they drained of whatever marvelous vision had held his imagination. His face, with its long, grizzled beard, regained its familiar composure.

"Francesco, where have you been? Why are you standing there dumb? Have you something to report?" he asked, his voice strong, yet displaying its characteristic high, almost feminine tenor.

"I have just returned from the Giocundo household," I said. "I have brought Giocundo's wife here as you requested."

"Ah, yes. That is fine," said Leonardo. "Bring her into the studio immediately. I will be ready to begin the painting in a few minutes. You will prepare the necessary oils. And bring my new brushes from the tray in the back studio. Be quick about it! If we must paint rich men's wives to put bread on our table, let us at least do it swiftly!"

CHAPTER 4

The interview that afternoon had been uncommonly brief. When Lisa entered the studio, my master observed her. He studied her face with a pensive gaze which became more and more contemplative, as though seeking something there. He stood up and went over to her. He lifted her chin with his long, slender forefinger. Lisa, rather than curtseying as is the custom of young Florentine ladies, stepped back and held out her hand. Her eyes met Leonardo's without faltering. A curious, almost imperceptible smile was on her lips. A strange spark of intimacy seemed to pass between them. For an extended moment, neither one spoke. Then Leonardo said:

"I see, Madam Giocundo, that you are a lady quite different from the usual procession of spoiled young wives who tramp through my studio in their powdered faces and garish finery. Your smile reflects a mystery that intrigues me. Please tell me about yourself."

"I have little to tell, Messer Da Vinci," said Lisa. "I am here at my husband's command. You are to execute the portrait which has been commissioned. I may then return to my daily life. I did not wish to come here. Now that I am here, however, I see that my time may be spent in a fashion more interesting than I had anticipated. I have heard your talents as an artist are somewhat extraordinary; yet I wonder if you can capture the truths of my soul with your brushes and canvas."

"You wish to mock the powers of my art, Madam, but you must submit to my will if I am to create a portrait which reflects your inner light and your darkness also. My painting shall mirror your soul, and you will believe that my brush is the instrument of truth."

"We shall see, Messer Da Vinci, whether your words are mere shallow pools, or whether they promise something of interest. For now I am intrigued. I shall submit to your will and place my trust in you. But you must be warned. You may paint my face, but I shall guard closely the secrets of my soul."

After this brief dialogue, which I must admit perplexed me somewhat at the time, Leonardo abruptly cancelled the sitting. "We shall postpone beginning," he said "to a more suitable day." He needed to be more properly prepared. I was told to return the lady to her home.

The afternoon was now drawing to a close. The sun was less fierce overhead, and at first it appeared that the walk back to Giocundo's mansion would be more comfortable and less eventful than our earlier trip. Lisa held her reserve toward me, and I kept my eyes on the cracked red clay of the dusty road. Soon we neared the city center. We passed under the shadows of the Cathedral Santa Maria and the Medici Palace. Peasants with their empty wooden push-carts were travelling in the opposite direction. The market day was over and when we reached the Great Square it seemed almost deserted compared to the press of the earlier afternoon crowd. City street cleaners with huge iron buckets of steaming water were washing down the great slabs of pavement stone. The multitude of Florentines who swarmed to this core were by now in their homes, resting before the evening meal. The only reminder of the day's long bartering was the brownish stream of oozings from the bruised and discarded fruit which had been trodden underfoot and now flowed into the run-off gutters.

Immediately after we passed the stall of the street dentist, who was packing the last of his worn instruments in the dirty felt wrappings to which they returned every evening, Lisa suddenly stopped. Something had caught her eye. She was looking deep in the midst of heaps of cloth which lay strewn in bundles on the counter of a rag-vendor's cart. There sat a battered wire cage inside which perched a tiny golden bird. Lisa stood, mesmerized. Evidently this dilapidated cart belonged to a squat old peasant woman who was sitting beside it on a small wooden stool. The woman's gnarled hands were busily stitching a torn piece of black shawl as her sunken eyes watched us. Her tangled web of silver hair and her toothless grin warned me that she clearly was of that host of Florentine poor who are nourished on a diet of too little soup and too much cheap wine. I wished we were on our way, but this was not to be. Just as I reached to turn Lisa toward the street, the old woman spoke to us. She had a voice that was wheezing and cracked with age and dissipation.

"You are admiring my bird," she said. "Do his feathers not shine like the sun? A pretty finch, my young ones. A perfect gift for lovers! At day's end he will sing you to sleep; at dawn's break he will wake you to joy. For a few silver florins you may buy this pretty finch to hold cupped in the palms of your hands. You will feel the pulse of its tiny heart, wonder at the softness of its feathers! It is a softness finer than silk. Secure the lady's love, good sir!" said the old woman, looking cunningly at me. "This bird is a gift that will bring a sweet song of freedom to your mistress's chamber."

Needless to say, I was astonished and embarrassed by the unwanted outburst of this chattering old woman. For her part, Lisa may have blushed, but her eyes remained hypnotized by the golden-yellow finch perched in its cage. From time to time the bird would sing a short, pretty melody and then fly about in a tight, frantic circle. It ruffled its feathers and fluttered its wings against the rusted wire cage. When it did so, Lisa's eyes blinked momentarily and then lit with pleasure. She smiled in amusement at the tiny bird's play. She was absorbed in this spectacle, and seemed unaware of the old woman and myself.

Unaccustomed to scenes such as this, I did not at first know what to do. The old woman's assumption that Lisa and I were lovers had put me off balance. I wanted to urge Lisa that we should depart and leave this old woman to jabber at the next set of strangers who passed by. Obviously that is what I should have done, but something deep inside of me sought to appease the look of longing in Lisa's eye. I thought that if I could buy her this present it might be received as a humble token of my esteem. I also thought it might make amends for our earlier confrontation. Yet I lacked the courage to buy this gift and brazenly present it to Lisa in the open space of the Market Square. This I considered far too impulsive and unseemingly forward. So instead, I touched Lisa's arm and beckoned that we should leave. I told her that I was expected back at my master's studio. I insisted that I must escort her the remaining distance to her home.

Lisa lowered her eyes as we turned to go. The old rag-vendor woman was now silent. She seemed to read my thoughts; she knew that as I passed

through the Square on my way back to Leonardo's I would return to purchase the tiny finch in its battered silver cage. She stood, watching us with her lively, crow-black eyes and smiling her toothless grin, as we continued our journey to Giocundo's mansion.

CHAPTER 5

It was past twilight when I finally returned to my master's studio, having seen Lisa safely through the front gates of Giocundo's courtyard. As I silently mounted the dark, winding stairs to my room on the second floor, I could hear Salai and his loutish friends laughing in the kitchen below. The lamp was still lit in the front room where Leonardo was working. With one hand trailing the worm-eaten banister and the other balancing the canary's wire cage, I held my breath and prayed that I would reach my bedchamber unnoticed.

Now that I had bought the golden finch, I felt sure I had committed a dreadful mistake. It was absurd of me to suppose that I could deliver this gift to the Lady Giocundo. If my master discovered my intentions, he would be furious. If Salai found me out he would bait me relentlessly. Perhaps, I considered, I could hide the golden bird in my chamber. Later I would decide upon a course of action. After all, how could I, a mere artist's apprentice, presume to offer gifts to a rich merchant's wife? The very idea would be construed as an attack on Giocundo's honour. And the gift itself, now that I had brought it within the threadbare confines of Leonardo's studio, seemed to me insignificant and dull. It was wanting the air of romance it had acquired with the ardor of the rag-vendor's words.

I managed to reach my chamber without drawing the attention of Leonardo or Salai. I entered my small room and searched about for a candle to light. Having lit the candle, I quickly found a length of cord and knotted a loop. I then hung the battered silver cage from an exposed overhead beam in the back of the attic storeroom adjacent to my chamber.

The golden finch was sleeping, its sharp, tiny beak tucked under its wing. I resolved to forget about it until next morning when I would decide what to do.

Tired from the day's events, I sat down at the small wooden desk set against one wall of my chamber. I lit a fresh candle from the stub of the first which, as it died in its socket, was causing shadows to dance and flicker. The flame of the new candle created a wider circle of light and the objects in my chamber became visible.

My room has always been sparsely furnished. There is a hard, narrow bed set against the wall opposite my desk. Beside the bed, on a small rickety table, there stands a white porcelain wash-basin and chipped blue water jug. There is a square woolen carpet in the middle of the otherwise bare wooden floor. On the end wall a brown wooden crucifix hangs on a nail. This crucifix has been with me since I was a boy of fourteen. It was a parting gift from my mother when I left my family home in the mountain countryside of Bologna. At night, before sleep, I once prayed to the image of the Saviour carved in these sticks. I prayed for his guidance. Though it now sounds unmeaning, it brought me comfort. I defended myself from the Devil's whisperings with a simple cross and prayers.

Aside from these few furnishings, the sole object in my chamber is a lean, bronze statue of a pipe-playing satyr. It stands, nearly two feet tall, in the darkest far corner of my room. It dances on one leg as it plays its pipe. It was a gift from Salai on my last birthday. In emulation of the late Lorenzo Medici, there has grown amongst the merchant class a lust for collecting such heathen idols of classical antiquity. Salai knows I disapprove of this irreligious Florentine fashion. He gave me this gift to prick my conscience. I would destroy the leering satyr in a moment if I didn't know that Salai would jump at the chance to jeer and accuse me of prudery. The statue is with me still, and how I loathe it. I avoid the glint of its taunting, mischievous eyes.

Although I would have gladly prepared for sleep at this time, the

I goose-quill pen lying beside my papers reminded me that the day's duties were still not complete. The parchment leaves scattered about my room represent but a small part of the volumes of Leonardo's notes, which it is my self-appointed task to assemble. My master is incorrigibly haphazard in his work habits; if I did not take the initiative these notes would soon go torn and lost. Yet, that evening I could not immediately face another long night of deciphering Da Vinci's peculiar script. My eyes were already heavy and strained. My bones ached. I felt weary beyond my years. I stood up and went over to the one large window with which my room is blessed. I opened wider the shutters and breathed deeply the evening air. A faint, teasing breeze promised a night slightly cooler than many previous ones. To Florence, that spring brought no delight. Trapped within the walls of the city, we prayed for relief from the heat. It was not much past Easter and already it was as if a cloud of hot mist had settled over the city. While the peasants were free to return to the fresh country air, we in the city suffocated.

As I looked out of my window over the tiled roofs of Florence, I could see the great river Arno flowing beneath the Ponte Trinita, the central bridge which connects the two halves of this city. As I watched the river's swirling eddies, my thoughts were drawn along its currents to memories of my past. When I closed my eyes, I could see once again the small house on the mountain San Gervaso, where I was raised. I could see my father digging in the vineyards; his white shirt billowing in the wind. I could see again the olive trees he tended with such care. I could hear the clucking of fat chickens in the courtyard, and I could smell the aroma of hot vermicelli cooking on the stove. I could almost taste again the nutty tang of cinnamon, which seems such a vital part of my childhood. I could even remember how I would lie awake and listen to the swollen drops of rain splash in the courtyard below as my family slept secure in their beds.

As I remember these sensations now, I realize that it has been nearly thirteen years since I last saw my family. My childhood days are long past; then answers were simple, the questions left unasked. When I departed from my home to come to study in this city, my father said to me,

"If you would lose your soul, Francesco, then go to Florence and Messer Leonardo." He had heard the old men's tales of Da Vinci. It was said in those days that Leonardo's mind was darkened with Satanic pride; that he sought to penetrate the mysteries of nature by steeping himself in mathematics and the arts of black magic. Perhaps some of this was true. It was not my place to judge. I had worked hard at the rudiments of perspective and rule, which I believed lay at the heart of the artist's craft. I had learned these rudiments under the guiding hands of the Franciscan monks in my village school. Yet I yearned to learn more. Despite the love that I knew there, I desperately needed to break from my family home. I knew that Florence was the place for me to go. I, too, had heard the tales about Da Vinci. However, all of this matters little now. Leonardo has aged greatly since then. Now despair is often seen in his pale-blue, enigmatic eyes. Yet, even if my life has turned out much differently from my dreams, perhaps I have learned from Leonardo's many failures. People have come to talk of him now as a pitiful and impotent old man. However, this, as with all things, I believe to be true only in part.

The sound of the Cathedral bells ringing brought me back to the present. I returned to my desk and sat down. Just as I picked up my pen to begin work, the door handle clicked and Salai stuck his head into the room. Fire flashed from his dark green eyes. I knew he had important news to tempt me with. I restrained myself from rising to anger at his having entered my chamber without knocking.

"Francesco," he said, "why are you cooped up in your dingy little room? Why aren't you scampering off to evening vespers? Did you not hear the clanging Cathedral bells? Have you no faith? They say Fra Girolamo is to preach the sermon tonight. Fire and Brimstone! Plague and Pestilence! You must not miss it. The master and I rely on you to pray for our sins. Have you no sense of Christian duty?"

I said nothing. I refused to let Salai get the better of me.

"Come now, Francesco," he continued, striding over to the window-sill

where he sat down. "Do not be so morose. Have you not heard? There is to be a bonfire tomorrow night. All the vanities Girolamo's collectors have been piling up these past weeks are soon to be torched. We are getting drunk downstairs to celebrate. If this ridiculous priest insists on burning our trinkets, who are we to yowl in despair? I handed over my best plum-colored tunic, and a mirror and ivory comb to boot! You have sacrificed nothing. You own nothing! You should be proud. Who else in Florence is so eagerly virtuous as our very own Francesco?"

Saying this last, Salai lifted his cup of wine. With malicious mirth, he looked straight into my eyes. His face was fixed in one broad smile. His contempt for me was almost palpable.

"Salai, can you not leave me in peace?" I said. "I have no desire to defend once again the righteousness of Fra Girolamo's words. We have gnawed this question to the bone. If you choose not to repent your ways, that is your own ill-fortune. I believe that Fra Girolamo is just. This city is corrupt with heathen worship and idle luxury. Girolamo perceives this iniquity. He has rallied the people to his cause. You are angry because you have been obliged to sacrifice a few of your precious possessions for a cause you do not believe in. But it is for the best, Salai. Sometimes sinners need help to relieve themselves of the pagan trappings of vanity."

"How dare you preach to me, you self-righteous toad!" said Salai, his face darkening with frustration and anger. "You beware of your own sins. You are a simpleton and an ass! I'll see you yet in hell. You and Girolamo both. Poor fool! You have caught the fever of his delirium. You are no better than the thick-skulled peasants who tremble and quake before his cursed visions. But I tell you he is just another black-minded priest, clutching his crucifix as a drunkard clutches his bottle. I, for one, shall pay him no heed."

"But you dare not renounce him!" I said.

"If I do not renounce him in public, that is because I have no wish to be flogged. But inwardly, I laugh at his prophecies! And while I still have breath, I shall go on singing and drinking. Tonight let us feast, for tomorrow we die!"

I sat quite still, avoiding the threatening gleam in Salai's eyes. He was challenging me to defend my position. He knew full well how precarious that position was. How could I, who committed myself to the irreligious arts of Leonardo with far greater zeal than Salai had ever shown, also expect to present myself as a true disciple of the Church. Was Da Vinci, with his constant meddling with science, not considered the very enemy of God? How could I explain my devotion to these contrary forces? As Salai knew I could never hope to answer this question in a satisfactory manner. Many sleepless nights I had spent examining my situation from every conceivable angle. And still I was tortured by self-doubts which strove to cleave my mind in two. I had no clear answers. I could only resolve that this was a form of penance which I must suffer in payment for my inability to choose one path or the other in an age which demanded that men must take sides.

Salai had still not accomplished what he had come to do. With the news of the bonfire of vanities, which all of Florence had been expecting, he had re-lit our disagreements about Fra Girolamo Savonarola. Yet I knew he held in reserve a tid-bit of gossip or scandal which would touch me deeper than the usual goading over Girolamo. Having uttered his last speech, Salai grew quiet. He sat on the window-sill, whistling softly and sadly as he looked at the stars. He was pretending to be in a contemplative, philosophical mood.

I knew his game, however, and I refused to play it his way.

"Salai," I said. "If that is all you have to say, kindly leave now. I am busy with the master's notebooks, and unable to go to vespers this evening. Anyway, this is none of your business. Hadn't you better get back downstairs before your greedy-mouthed friends drink all the wine?"

"But Francesco," said Salai, not looking at me, but still at the stars, "I really came up here to tell you some other news. My friend Rudolfo just arrived at my little party. His lover, Maria, is a maid-servant in Messer Giocundo's household. Maria tells us that soon after the lady Giocundo arrived home this evening, she had a terrible fight

with her husband. Giocundo ordered her locked in her bedchamber. When Maria went in to bring the lady comfort, she found her lying on the floor beside her great satin bed."

Saying this, Salai paused and turned to face me.

"Maria says that her one wrist was immersed in a basin of bloody water. A jewelled knife, glistening with rubies, was still in her other hand, which lay open on her breast. Giocundo's men-servants used the private enclosed coach to rush the lady to the hospital of San Dominico. But of course she's made a mess of it. The whole town will soon know. They bandaged her wrists and with her luck she'll probably live to be an old woman of one hundred long years!"

Salai said these last words with a characteristic sneer and a toss of his golden head. He emptied his wine cup. Then, clapping me merrily on the shoulder, he strode out of my chamber, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER 6

It was several weeks later before next I met Lisa. These weeks had passed slowly, though the days were eventful. It was now the third week in May. The city, still enveloped in a cloud of heat, had continued to function in a listless routine under the sun's watchful eye. I longed for the birds and the grass in the meadows, but I had little time for such pastoral thoughts. Florence was abuzz with all manner of intrigue. Though perhaps my memory plays me tricks, it all seemed to follow hard upon the night of the bonfire of vanities.

I remember that night vividly. I can still picture Fra Girolamo in his black flowing robes, his sharp, yellow face emaciated from fasting. I can see his thick, purple lips spitting out prayers, his misshapen jaw snapping the air. His fiery, coal-black eyes still burn in my mind. I remember the crowd in the Square that night, tremendous and pulsing. People were shoving and pushing forward in an effort to get closer to Girolamo's altar. The bells of the great Cathedral clanged continuously. Above all this din, I can still hear the piercing cries of Girolamo himself. His right hand was raised, clutching the crucifix. His neck sinews were corded tight from screaming his prophecies. He cried to us of floods and war, pestilence and hunger. He chastized Florence and Italy; he cursed us for our sins. He lifted open arms toward heaven, pleading for mercy and forgiveness. In a half-circle behind Girolamo stood his torch-bearing disciples, their faces hidden inside their black cowls. And in the center, the pyre, stacked high with vanities, wooden carvings of pagan idols piled on a bed of lesser iniquities. The crowd began chanting a hymn in slow rhythm to Girolamo's frenzied lead. I remember the fury of the fire's close heat, the hissing and crackling flames. And, finally, the thick smoke, grey, then blackening, as it rose in coils toward heaven.

Soon after that night, two fateful items of news came to Florence. The first was a vague rumor from the East of a plague so virulent that men who were healthy at sun-up fell dead before nightfall. The second news, much more immediately alarming, was that Charles VIII, bastard king of France, had taken up arms and was marching to conquer the divided states of Italy. Panic spread throughout the city. In the minds of the people, Girolamo's prophecies were being fulfilled. The priest was raised high on his altar and, for a time, his words governed Florence. Even the Duke himself dared not make policy before consulting Girolamo as his first counsel. Girolamo's visions were given all rightful credence. Florence clung to his words. We prayed for salvation.

Despite my interest in these affairs of church and state, my thoughts during this time were focused mostly on private concerns. My daily routine in my master's studio continued uninterrupted. Together with my regular duties, I now had the added responsibility of bringing seed and water to the golden finch, whose cage still hung in the attic storeroom. I did not know what to do with this creature, which had grown silent and merely pecked at its food when I brought it. During this period, I also thought much about Lisa. I reflected on the conversation of our first meeting. I tried to shake out of my head the image of her blood-stained hands. I told myself that I certainly was not to blame for her act. I considered going unannounced to Giocundo's home to speak with the lady, but I knew this to be impossible. And then, just when I had firmly resolved that I would do my best to forget all about her and concentrate on the silver-point studies which Leonardo deemed vital to my education, Lisa reached out to me once again.

It was one afternoon, during the lunch hour. I was busy at my easel in the studio, putting the last finishing touches to my umpteenth effort at a scaled-down, full skeletal anatomy study. The windows were open and the streets were quiet. I could hear the shop-woman singing in the bakery across the road. I was enjoying the peacefulness of working alone in the studio. Salai was off on one of his junkets to Rome. There he whored and gambles, staying away sometimes for more than a week. He comes back bleary-eyed and sleeps as if dead for two nights and two days. Leonardo

was at another appointment at the castle of the Duke. With the threat of the bastard Charles reaching over the Alps to snatch at Italy, the old man Da Vinci had once again found useful service. He was employed in the design of war-machines to help defend the Duke. I had seen the sketches of his "Exploding Devices" and "Armoured Fortifications". That May afternoon, I was thinking about how it was that Leonardo cared nothing for the Duke himself. Rather, he willingly drew his plans to save this city which contains so much of his making. Also, he naturally wanted to see his ideas put into form. I was absorbed in these thoughts - imagining the wheels and pulleys and blades of Leonardo's toy-size drawings cast in the larger, solid proportions of timber and steel - when a faint knocking at the back door of the studio interrupted my reflections. I put down my sharp-tipped silver-point pen and went to answer.

Standing on the doorstep was a fine-featured girl of about seventeen years. Her cheeks were colored a russet-tan, and her auburn hair was tied in loose, beaded braids. She wore a light cotton servant-girl's dress. Two thin silver bracelets jangled on one of her wrists. Her azure eyes, flecked with tints of yellow, sparkled as she smiled shyly at me.

"May I help you?" I asked.

"Although you do not know me, Messer Francesco," she said, "my name is Maria. I am a maid in the household of the merchant, Giocundo. I have come here on behalf of my mistress. She wishes for her portrait to be re-commenced at Messer Da Vinci's earliest convenience."

The thought of what it would mean to see Lisa again flared in my mind. Yet I retained my composure.

"I am afraid that the Maestro is much preoccupied with concerns of state at this time," I said. "However, I will deliver your message to my master and he will decide if a sitting is possible."

"Thank you for your courtesy," said the house-girl, bobbing politely. Then, just as she seemed about to leave, she smiled again and looked knowingly at me. It was as if she could clearly hear my heart thumping its quick rhythm beneath my thin ribs.

"And you, Messer Francesco," she said, "did you have... a personal message you would like delivered to my mistress?"

My blank face must have given her the answer she required. With a short, lilting laugh, Maria turned on her heels and left me standing dumb on the doorstep.

Needless to say, I was greatly surprised when, upon being informed of Giocundo's wish to have his wife's portrait started again, my master assented immediately.

"Yes, yes," he said. "She was a most perplexing young woman. And how peculiar to have so feared beginning the painting that she went to such lengths to postpone it. Quite remarkable... indeed."

This was the first time I had heard my master speak of Lisa's action. His interpretation of the incident disturbed me and gave me pause.

"Yes, it promises to be interesting work," said Da Vinci with a thoughtful gleam in his eye. "We shall begin in three days."

I soon found out these three days would be put to good use. My master had Salai and me prepare the front octagonal studio in a special way. We were told to paint the walls black, and to secure thick canvas curtains to dull the sun's light. Leonardo said that these measures would give a special charm to the face of the Lady Giocundo. He said that this was the perfect light, when shadows seemed to float underwater. I was told to set up his best three-legged easel in the middle of the room. A chair of smooth, dark mahogany was set out for Lisa. Later, Leonardo's white cat would be brought in for the lady to hold in her lap to help distract her from boredom. Salai was told to tune his gilded lyre and sit in the background, playing his saddest sweet love songs.

"We shall attempt," said Leonardo, "to mirror in these surroundings the deep currents of the lady's dark heart." Then, setting down the sketch of the Madonna he was working on, he looked wearily out of the window at the night sky and, in a softening voice, he added, "This may be the last portrait I paint in my lifetime. Yes...I shall make it... my last."

CHAPTER 7

On the morning of the third day, having prepared the studio to Leonardo's liking, I was sent to escort Lisa from her home.

Before setting out for Giocundo's mansion that morning, I took care to shave closely and to comb and oil my hair. I put on my best leather tunic and I rubbed the copper buckle on my street-cloak till it gleamed. I even stole into Salai's room when he was not there and splashed on my face a moderate amount of the perfume which he keeps on his dresser. I looked at myself one last time in the hand-mirror beside Salai's bed, and then, treading softly down the stairs, I went out the front door and into the street.

It had rained the previous night - a short shower-burst that, for a time, relieved our parched throats - and the day seemed slightly fresher than usual. My mood that morning was open and genial. I could not help but enjoy my surroundings. It was a Saturday morning, and children played on the steps outside their homes in the poorer quarter where Leonardo's studio lay. Old men sat talking and smoking pipes of tobacco under colorful awnings which hung over doorways. From the sidewalk bistros percolated the aroma of strong coffee. Overhead, the narrow strip of white sky between the rooftops unraveled like a thread into the distance.

After about twenty minutes walk through the streets, I came to a small park that lay on the outskirts of our district. There were then a few such patches of green left within the two hundred acres circumscribed by the walls of this city. Sometimes I went out of my way to visit that park when I needed to walk and think alone. I entered the main gardens by a winding footpath. On either side were olive trees whose under-leaves blew silver in the rippling wind. As was my custom, I had stopped at a confectioner's booth to purchase a sac of crusts to feed to the pair of swans which glided

on the blue pond nestled in one corner of the park. I walked along the side of the pond, scattering the crusts to the stately white birds. I talked to them softly. They arched their proud necks and, nipping at a group of mottled ducks which had paddled over, they greedily ate the bits of bread which floated on the water's surface. I watched these birds preen for several more minutes and then, having rinsed my hands at the water's edge, I continued on my way to Giocundo's.

As I walked out of the park, my thoughts were light and pleasant. Having spent two sleepless nights thinking anxiously about seeing Lisa again, I felt strangely carefree once the time arrived to fetch her. After a while, I neared the city core. Soon I crossed the bright Palazzo Vecchio where the upstart Angelo's "David" stands. Despite my master's rivalry with this rough-hewn young sculptor who knows nothing of decorum and manners, I could not help but admire the fine workmanship of the statue's smooth limbs. As I passed beneath its pedestal, my hand reached out to touch the cool, grey marble. However, I refused to allow thoughts of Da Vinci's rivalries to spoil my good humour. The day was mild and my mood was the same. Anyway, I reflected, my artistic loyalties to Leonardo remained steadfast, even if my deepest convictions sometimes were otherwise.

Although I tried to still my mind, as I drew nearer to the rich merchants' quarter, my thoughts ran ahead of me. Once again, for the thousandth time, I tried to anticipate how Lisa would act toward me. Also, I thought of how I should act toward her. I began to realize that perhaps I was foolish to hope that all could be well between us. After all, the circumstances of our first meeting had been rather unusual. As I walked the last short distance along the paved streets of the merchants' quarter, I felt again an uncertain dread creeping over me. There was an emptiness in the pit of my stomach. When I turned into Giocundo's courtyard, I kicked a loose stone at a ground lizard which was sleeping lazily in the morning sun. Its yellow eyes sprang open, and it scurried into the shadow of a large red rock wedged between the roots of a cypress tree. I told myself to be calm as I walked the last few steps to Giocundo's front door.

As I had hoped might happen, the maid-servant Maria answered to the sound of Giocundo's silver door chimes. With averted eyes, she asked me kindly to wait for her mistress. I sat on the same wooden bench which I had occupied on my first visit. Once again I admired the grandeur of the cool, lofty hall. Absentmindedly, I noted beside me a fan of peacock feathers set in a blue Damascan vase. This was a new addition to the splendors of Giocundo's home. As I waited, I ran my forefinger along the strong spine of one of the feathers. After enduring this idleness for nearly ten minutes, I heard voices approaching from the corridor which leads to Giocundo's back garden. In a few minutes, Lisa and her husband arrived in the hallway. They evidently didn't see me at first as I was partially hidden behind the fan of peacock feathers. I sat frozen. Perhaps unreasonably, it had not occurred to me that Giocundo might be here. Confronted by this fact, I was momentarily stunned. While my limbs twitched and then went numb, my mind registered Giocundo's appearance. He was a short, balding man with tired brown eyes beneath which sagged puffed pouches of skin. Though well past middle age, the merchant's thick-shouldered build showed that he had once been as strong as a bull. Even now, somewhat unstable on his feet, he still commanded a certain respect. His voice had a menacing edge to it. He took off his embroidered felt hat as he and Lisa crossed the wide hall toward me.

"A morning walk in my gardens is always most refreshing," said Giocundo. "But now I must be off to my warehouses. Affairs cannot be run without me. The city tax collectors and notaries await me this morning to discuss my contribution to the Duke's war effort. I must not be late or they will appropriate some unspeakable sum that will serve to ruin me."

"Yes, of course," said Lisa.

"Once again, I am pleased that you have decided to resume the portrait with Maestro Da Vinci," said Giocundo. "It will be another pretty ornament for my home."

"Yes," said Lisa.

At this moment, I stood up to announce my presence.

"Ah," said Giocundo, "here is your escort, my dear. Leave me now. And do not expect me for supper as I shall dine with Messer Martuccio this evening. We are to discuss the insurance finances for a cargo of silk worms from Mecca. I must prepare the necessary papers before I depart."

Having said these words, Giocundo turned and entered his study. I felt my face redden. Considering me a mere servant, not once had Giocundo addressed me directly. With obvious contempt, he had seen me as too insignificant to warrant his slightest attention. I felt the tips of my ears burning crimson. My eyes refused to look upwards as Lisa crossed the hall toward me.

"We may depart now," she said, taking her street-cloak from Maria, who had hurried forward when the heavy oak door to Giocundo's study closed with a muffled thud.

"Yes, Madam," I said, as I ushered the Lady Giocundo before me. I nodded politely to Maria, who suddenly looked timid and quickly turned to return to her duties.

Once out in the street, Lisa and I walked quietly for some time. Not a word was spoken between us until we passed out of the merchants' quarter, where the houses of the great families of Florence vie for standing by the height of their towers. Lisa walked by my side with her eyes fixed straight in front. The silence began to grow brittle. We continued on in this fashion for nearly another whole block. A fat man riding a sturdy horse doffed his cap to us as he passed, going in the opposite direction. From the rich embroidery of his apparel and the polish of his saddle, it was clear that he was one of Giocundo's neighbours. Even after this man had passed, Lisa still did not seem to want to speak. Her lips were pressed tightly together. Despite my fear of re-igniting the tinderbox of our first conversation, I decided that it would be wise to clear up any misunderstanding between Lisa and myself. I screwed up my courage, and spoke the first words.

"Do you not find the day much more temperate than when last we met?" I said.

But Lisa said nothing.

"And these past weeks, have you been...well, Madam?" I asked.

Lisa's steps hesitated for a moment, but then she went on walking in silence.

Soon we reached the walls of the Porta Maria, which leads to the Ponte Trinita - the central bridge of Florence which Lisa and I had to cross to reach my master's studio. On the street which ran parallel below the hill-side road along which we travelled, densely packed tenements were built close to the banks of the great river Arno. These dilapidated dwellings stood on sturdy wooden stilt-like supports. The rooftops of the houses were cut at all different levels. Many of the serrated, red and brown roof tiles were broken and loose. Disfigured wooden sheds were wedged in the spaces between dwellings. Even from a distance, I could see the mud-colored water which flowed freely in the gutters. Here in this district lived the countless number of men and women employed in producing the wool and fine cloth which are this city's main export. I had never ventured into this quarter which I knew to be dangerous to walk through even in daylight. In certain parts of the district, the rooftops leaned so closely together that they blocked out the sun. In those streets, I reflected, even a modestly dressed stranger would soon be stabbed in the back for his purse. I shuddered at this thought, and unconsciously quickened my steps.

When I did so, Mona Lisa suddenly stopped in her tracks. Without turning her head - standing really quite still - she said to me in a voice that was almost a whisper, "I was born down there, you know."

I was too surprised by this abrupt revelation to say anything at all.

"My father first worked washing and carding wool, and then later as a supervisor in Giocundo's first factory," said Lisa. "My mother died when I was very young and Papa worked hard all his life to erase her memory. Like all others who work at such tasks, he slowly choked to death inhaling the wool-fibers in the warehouses. My two younger brothers now work at Giocundo's factories, but before they are old they too will choke on the fibers."

"I am sorry," I said.

"Oh, do not be sorry," said Lisa. "I do not seek your pity. I need nobody's sympathy."

Lisa then paused; she lowered her eyes.

"But you have it in your power to do me a great service, which will cost you nothing," she said.

Naturally I was astonished and secretly delighted at these words.

"And how may I be of service, Mistress Lisa?" I inquired.

"First, I must warn you of one thing," said Lisa. "What I am about to tell you, beware of repeating a single word of it to anyone."

"May God be my witness!" I said.

We walked on slowly. The sharp cries of scavenger birds feeding on the remains of fish sounded from the cloth mills by the riverside. Lisa did not seem to hear their distant screeches.

"I have escaped from the life of this district," she said. "At seventeen, I left my home a virgin to be given away in marriage to Messer Giocundo. He had seen the deaths of two wives already. Whether it was my luck or misfortune, I cannot say, but Giocundo was taken with my face one day and I was chosen to be lifted from one cruel existence to another with entirely different concerns."

"Surely you have been most fortunate," I said.

"Perhaps," said Lisa. "But I disappoint my husband. I may yet finish my days as an old women turning one of the wooden handles which churn the wool in the dying vats."

"I do not understand why you are telling me these things," I said, as we stopped at a high bluff from which the road we were on descended in a sloping grade to connect with several others leading to the Ponte Trinita.

"I am telling you because I wish for you to understand," said Lisa, looking directly into my eyes. "As you can see, I am a woman. When I first met you that afternoon several weeks past, I sensed your ardor for me. Unfortunately, that day I was greatly distressed. That morning, my husband had renewed his threats to me with increased violence. I must apologize if I proceeded in a fashion too impulsive; but I am sometimes driven to despair. I hate Giocundo for the life he forces me to endure. Despite Fra Girolamo's campaign, our house is filled with ornaments of luxury. I am but another ornament in my husband's collection. I am trapped like a fly in crystal. I have no means of escape. Giocundo will not admit to himself that he is the one incapable of producing a child. He

accuses me of depriving him of my one useful service." Lisa now lowered her eyes. "That, Francesco," she said "is why I so impulsively determined to have you for my lover. Even now I would have you before any other man in the world if you will promise to be true to my wishes."

Understandably, I was shocked by these words. I told myself that, if Lisa was a virtuous woman, there would be no one she loved or cherished more than her husband. Yet here she was offering to commit adultery with me. And yet again, I was in love with her. I had never known the customary arts for winning the favor of a lady and, put into these circumstances, I was at my wit's end. Ignorant of how to conquer my passion, yet finding it beyond the scope of my conscience to consider her proposal, I was split in two on the double-edged blade of Lisa's love.

Everything was hushed except for a silver ringing in my ears. I knew that if I let this opportunity slip, it would not offer itself again. I silenced my conscience and made up my mind to take it, come what may.

I reached out and took Lisa's hand in mine. I began to caress it. She turned and embraced me; a sweet, lingering kiss with her soft rose-petal lips. I held her warm body in my arms. My mind raced with a flurry of strange new sensations. I looked down into Lisa's upturned face. Her eyes were closed. For a moment, I understood what the poets were trying to say in their sonnets. Then Lisa pulled away. For a full ten seconds, I stood dumb as a post. Then I reached out to pull her toward me again.

"No, listen to what I have to tell you before you come closer!" said Lisa. "I want you to come to my chamber this evening. Come without raising suspicion. I will give you the key to the gardener's gate at the rear of our house. My husband will be away until the early hours of morning. He and Don Martuccio will undoubtedly drink too much wine as they always do. My husband is easily tempted to become a sot."

"But Madam, your plan is far too risky," I said. "How would I get into the house? What if the servants were to see me?"

"That will present no difficulty," said Lisa. "You can easily climb the trestle which runs up the house beside my balcony. The moon is in its lowest phase tonight, so you will be safe and unseen in the shadows."

Although I would certainly have protested this arrangement had I had a few moments to think things out, Lisa gave me no such opportunity. She squeezed my hand, then suggested that we had better hurry along to Maestro Da Vinci's studio since the first sitting was to begin before noon. Unable to order my thoughts or emotions, I meekly acquiesced. At a brisk pace, Lisa and I walked down the hill toward the Ponte Trinita. As I watched the gaily-painted gondolas passing on the swift waters under the eroding stone arches of the great central bridge, I silently cursed my own inability to alter my course. All that I truly desired at that moment was to make sense of my life amidst the reigning confusion of that fair and wretched Tuscan city.

PART II

CHAPTER 8

Far into the night I lie awake examining the question of what I must do next. I turn it over in my mind. I explore it from every possible perspective. And yet, I am strangely blinded. The mist still surrounds me. My tale attempts to gather together the facts of the matter, yet memory is often elusive. Most assuredly, my pen will continue to scrawl its black ink over this eggshell parchment. Only thereby can I set down my history for all men to see. But even if I get it straight, will my dull soul be unburdened? And if I perceive the answer, will I act?

Doubtless, the evening when I went to see Lisa again marked a significant change in my life. I remember that night all too well. It was still and warm. The moon hung like a Turk's silver scimitar in the black velvet sky. As I wound my way through the dark narrow streets, the shapes of buildings could barely be distinguished in the distance. There was a thin, noxious mist in the air, and I coughed occasionally as I breathed in the fog. In the streets and alleyways around me, Florentines hurried to reach their homes before the midnight curfew took effect. They disappeared like phantoms into doorways. Carrying the golden finch's cage, which I had wrapped in a brown burlap sac, I too walked as quickly as I could. My eyes strained to see through the mist as I hurried on my way toward the safety of Giocundo's garden gate.

As I reflect upon it now, I realize that that evening has always remained with me because of its nightmarish uncertainty. My heartbeat still quickens when I think of it. I try to erase it from my mind. But,

in reality, the fearful sight which I saw might have been nothing at all. The darkness of that night could have conjured up its own images. Even so, I have never been able to cross the Ponte Trinita since then without feeling a shiver run down my spine. Of course, I hardly gave a second's thought to the commonplace sight of the great central bridge as I approached it enroute to Giocundo's mansion that night. The bridge itself was barely visible in the distance until I came well within earshot of the powerful, groaning great river Arno. Clouds passed in front of the curved blade of the moon. For several minutes, I walked in complete darkness. I listened to my sandals clapping the wet pavement as I crossed the Great Market Square. Then, without warning, the Ponte Trinita rose before me as I had never seen it before. Its humpbacked frame arched across the breadth of the Arno like the colossal spine of some prehistoric beast. Just at that moment, the golden finch sang a faint note of despair. For the first time in my life, a sense of helplessness swept over me. At that moment, I knew I was lost. I could not bring myself to traverse this bridge which I had crossed without thinking so many times before. My limbs were frozen. My mind was numbed. My spirit was as blank as the starless night sky.

Precisely how long I remained in this condition, I cannot say. After some time, however, I managed to summon enough courage to dispel my groundless disquietude. I clenched my teeth and forced my feet to continue. With my eyes fixed straight in front, I crossed the Ponte Trinita. I dared look to neither the left nor the right. Most of all, I did not dare to look down.

When at last I arrived at Giocundo's back gate, my pulse was racing. I unlocked the latch. The gate closed behind me with a soft, hollow click. I began to walk up the footpath toward Giocundo's back courtyard. My eyes were straining to see ahead of me. The paving stones of the footpath were damp from the mist, and my sandals were wet and slippery. Holding the finch's cage aloft, I walked slowly and carefully as I approached the house which I soon knew to be just up ahead. To my right, a stone boundary wall about eight feet high guided my way. To my left, I could see the twisted branches of fig trees in a small orchard at the back of Giocundo's property. As I neared the house, I passed several statues and fountains in

the smaller gardens. Though my curiosity was aroused, their features remained indistinguishable in the gloom. Eventually, I came to the square courtyard which lay right behind the house. I noted, in the center of its alabaster paving stones, a private well which supplied water for the household. Although I was perspiring and thirsty, I did not dare to haul up a pail of water for fear of waking the servants.

For quite some time, I stood silently in the courtyard. My eyes were fixed on the large window of a marble balcony above me. The wooden shutters were closed. I had anticipated the possibility that Lisa would not be ready to greet me, and I was seized with uncertainty. I cursed myself for having let Lisa convince me to follow this dangerous course. Having thrown caution to the wind, I had been led into temptation and sin. My skull was throbbing. My very consciousness pained me. I wished I was asleep in my bed. I thought of what a ridiculous figure I cut, standing in the pallid moonlight. I knew that this was immoral behavior. Yet having come this far, I could not bear to turn back.

"God be with me!" I muttered to myself, as it occurred to me what I should do next. Setting down the finch's cage, I stooped and picked up a handful of smooth, round pebbles from Giocundo's flower-bed. After a moment's hesitation, I began tossing them singly at the balcony window above. After three or four throws, the shutters of the window opened. Lisa peered out.

"Francesco?" she asked.

She could not see me below in the deep shadow. She was holding a lamp. My eyes beheld her, dressed in a translucent, white robe with tight-fitting sleeves. Aloft in the lamplight, she was like a celestial virgin, the most beautiful of angels.

"It is I," I replied in my loudest whisper.

"I expected you sooner," said Lisa.

"The tower bells have only just struck midnight," I said.

"Yes, well you must climb up the vine trestle beside the balcony. Be careful, but hurry!" said Lisa.

Unable to think of any alternative, I slung the loop of the rope

attached to the finch's cage over one shoulder and crept furtively to the base of the ladder. I looked up and saw that it was just barely close enough to the balcony to allow me to climb into the window. I began mounting the vine-ladder. My hands and feet clung to the rungs of the wooden frames which bent under my weight. The brick wall was inches from my face and it glowed dusty red in the lamplight. The strong sweet perfume of rose blossoms was almost overpowering as I climbed to the second story balcony. An occasional thorn pulled at my street-cloak; once, the covering on the finch's cage caught and I had to stop to free it. When I reached the lip of the balcony, my teeth were chattering. I was filled with fear and desire. I reached out and managed to jump onto the balcony without slipping. Lisa quickly drew me into the room, securing the shutters behind her.

From between the shutter slats, the moonlight shone on Lisa's neck and body. Her robe was undone. She led me over to her huge satin bed. Then she turned and crossed to the other side of the room. Seating myself on the bed, I took in my surroundings. In the flickering lamplight, I could see the heavy silken curtains on Lisa's windows. There were fine goat-skin carpets on her floors. A red cross glistening with set jewels hung over her dressing table. Apart from this cross, the walls were bare. On Lisa's dresser there was one small portrait whose face I couldn't immediately determine in the poor light. Sitting in that room, I began to feel sinful; like a typical, love-sick Florentine fool. Lisa lowered the flame in the lantern and placed it on a small table beside the door. Then she came back over and sat down beside me. Neither of us said anything for a long, tense moment.

Then I remembered the golden finch.

"I have brought you a small present," I said.

"How kind," said Lisa, with a smile.

"Yes," I said, taking the sack-cloth off the bird cage and holding the golden finch out toward her. "I couldn't help but remark that you were most impressed with this pretty finch when we passed through the Market Square on our first meeting. I was in the Market again recently and I decided to buy it for you."

"How kind," said Lisa once again. "I shall treasure it dearly, I'm sure. And if my husband asks me where I got it, I shall tell him that Maria asked me to buy it as a pet."

With these words, Lisa took the finch's cage from me and carried it over to the lamplight. She talked softly to the bird for a few moments, and then set the silver cage on the floor in a dark far corner of the room. She covered it with a heavy silk veil which she picked up from the cushion of a slender-backed chair.

"The bird is asleep," she said. "I will inspect my present more closely in the morning."

"As you wish, Madam," I said with a slight bow.
At that moment, Lisa reached out and slipped her hand into mine.

"You must leave before daybreak, we must not wait," she said, pulling me gently toward her.

"Perhaps there is not enough time," I said. "Were it not better we waited?"

"No," said Lisa, laying her hand softly on my neck.

"But, it is a terrible sin!" I said.

Lisa drew me nearer to her until we were lying entwined on the huge satin bed.

"Well, I will take the sin upon my own soul," she said as she guided my hand to her breast.

My eyes were glued to the passageway door. Beside this entrance, I could see two pale moths in the lamplight, circling the flame.

"But what if your husband discovers us?" I eventually stammered.

But Lisa said nothing. She was breathing softly. I could feel her gentle heartbeat. I could smell the subtle fragrance of her skin. Her lips were warm and quivering as we embraced. Her tongue flickered in search of my own. Soon I was flushed with a strange, delicious excitement. I was joined in Lisa's rhythm. For a minute or more, I closed my eyes tight. Then, suddenly, my body convulsed with pleasure. In wide-eyed horror, I emptied my loins.

After a minute or so, the lamplight sputtered and died. Vanquished, I fell down beside Lisa.

We lay still in the silent, shifting shadows. Only the silver moonbeams which shone between the shutter slats made anything visible. When I turned toward Lisa, I could see the faint smile of contentment on her lips. All was silent for several minutes more. Then, almost without thinking, I jumped out of bed. "Oh, dear God, what have I done?" I muttered to myself. Not daring to look at Lisa, I went over and stood by the window. Without a stitch on my back, I stood naked and shivering in the moonlight. Lisa looked at me with curiosity, not understanding my state of perplexity.

"You have done me a very great service," she said, sitting up on the bed. "I must admit that I was unsure at first whether to invite you here tonight. But, having let you in, you have proved yourself most capable."

"You must not speak to me of it, mistress Lisa," I said, blushing crimson, I'm sure. "While I understand what it must be like for a lovely woman like you to have an old miser for a husband, I am terribly ashamed of my behavior this evening."

"Ah, well that is your concern," said Lisa.

"This must never happen again," I said.

"It is up to you to act as you see fit," said Lisa.

"Yes, it is my trial," I said.

"But remember," said Lisa. "You must keep your word and say nothing. My husband is a jealous man as well as a rich one."

"I am not so crack-brained as to confess my sins openly to the world," I said. "I have no wish to play the gloating trickster. I give you my word."

"Good," said Lisa. "Now come to bed and sleep by my side. We still have two or three hours before dawn, when it will be time enough for you to leave."

The room fell silent. In the distance, a dog began to bark. Having no real alternative at that time of night, I reluctantly consented, and went over to the bed.

CHAPTER 9

The next morning, I was awakened by the sun and by the sound of Cathedral bells and children's voices. I dressed hurriedly while Lisa slept, a tender smile still on her lips. The room was cool and comfortable, yet I thought only of how to get away as quickly as possible. In my heart boiled a mixture of love and confusion. I needed desperately to be alone to think.

Having descended the vine trestle, I found that outside the dawn was grey and mild. My head was spinning and my thoughts flew in tight circles. As I scurried down the footpath through Giocundo's back gardens, I breathed deeply the perfume of fruits and herbs. On either side of the footpath grew ashen-white and lead-black mulberry trees. Silky-throated swallows twittered in their branches. Looking at the blending colors of leaves, my thoughts wandered to tales I'd heard of gnomish alchemists who consumed their entire lives searching for something they called the philosopher's stone. I involuntarily shuddered to think that I could end my own life as one of their kind. Thinking these odd thoughts, I locked Giocundo's garden gate. Walking as quickly as possible, I left Lisa and the mansion behind me.

As I walked along, I might have continued thinking my guilt-ridden thoughts had my attention not been suddenly brought back to the present. Just as I was nearing the end of the main street of the residential quarter, I saw coming toward me Lisa's husband, the merchant Giocundo. I immediately noticed that he was wobbling drunkenly on his black mule. His face was bloated and red. He was attended by two servants. The one leading the mule by the reins was a giant, clumsy bear of a man with a huge, shaggy head and a black patch over one eye. The other man was a small, wasp-like Florentine with narrow slit eyes and a carefully trimmed

beard. He hummed about the inattentive merchant in the manner of an overly solicitous valet. As they approached, I lowered my glance and stepped quickly to the gutter side of the road to allow Giocundo and his servants to pass. I held my breath and prayed that the merchant would not recognize me. Fortunately, however, he passed me by without an inkling of suspicion. I breathed a sigh of relief. Without further ado, I hurried through the white-washed streets of the rich merchants' quarter. I then followed the long, straight Canale Navegerio northward as I sought the seclusion of my master's studio.

When I arrived back at the studio, Leonardo was already at his writing desk. I quickly mounted the stairs to my room where I changed into my coarse linen work shirt and tanned leather apron. I then went immediately downstairs. By this time, Leonardo had finished at his desk and was now sitting before his easel. He was beginning a sketch of an angel. Salai was sitting on the window-sill, whistling. He was wearing a new green-feathered cap and red velvet slippers. My master was using his profile to draw from. Without saying a word, I quickly went over to the wooden panel and frame which served as my own easel. Leonardo hardly noticed my entrance. He merely glanced at me from under his thick, overhanging eyebrows. Then he turned his gaze back to Salai. As for Salai, he deliberately stared at me with a mischievous grin. He gave me a sly wink. Then he resumed his characteristic posture of apathy and conceit - a posture which our master has always mistaken for a rare and precious innocence. Grateful that Leonardo was too preoccupied to address me, I went directly to my own work area at the back of the studio.

It was Sunday morning, yet I knew that I could not go to early mass at the Cathedral as was my custom. I needed first to sort out my thoughts. I had always had my self respect to rely upon. My life of regular prayer and absolution had brought ease and comfort to my soul. Now I feared to confess even to myself my recent iniquity. My shameful appetite had conquered my best intentions. Lisa's words about taking the sin upon her own soul echoed in my head, yet they sounded terribly hollow. I knew that I had brought this disgrace upon myself, and that any child born of such an unholy union was at least half my responsibility. However, while I told

myself that these were the facts of the matter, a small voice deep inside of me whispered that if Giocundo found out that I had usurped his place, my life would not be worth a pittance. In vain I strove to determine a proper course of action. Like a worm slowly burrowing toward the core of an apple, guilt and fear gnawed at my conscience.

After some time, my emotions gradually began to subside. My one consolation in life is that I have always been able to lose myself in my work. As I began to trace lines on the colored drawing paper in front of me, the necessary concentration blocked out all other thoughts. I was copying an anatomical figure and had to pay careful attention to the required dimensions and proportions of the body. I was following as minutely as possible all of Leonardo's rules. His axioms of perspective guided my hand. Yet, I confess, as always my goal eluded me. The more I tried, the less I succeeded. My outlines were coarse and heavy, my shadows remained thick and unnatural. Although the monotony of hard work has always been my only refuge, it is also my greatest burden. I devote myself to the glory of art, yet I lack the inspiration necessary to produce more than merely mediocre work. I have studied the examples of the old masters, and I have contemplated the beauty of Nature herself. Yet my sketches and paintings always appear flat and lifeless. In his teaching sessions, Leonardo says that I distrust myself too much. Along with the exalted science of perspective, he says that I must learn to have faith in my own judgement. Possibly he is right. Perhaps I truly am my own worse enemy. If I cannot change this, I shall never attain the lofty heights of art to which Leonardo so effortlessly soars. Yet, even if this must be so, if I do not despair, might my unrelenting self-criticism not one day enable me to achieve the knowledge of light and shade which I believe to be the primary tools of every fine craftsman? Even if I never become a great painter, might I not at least be allowed to penetrate these most humble mysteries of artifice?

My hopeful musings on my chosen vocation were interrupted by the sound of bells and shouting from the street. At Fra Girolamo's bidding, it had been decreed, soon after the bonfire of vanities, that cripples and lepers, formerly barred from Florence's interior, should henceforth be allowed

within the walls of the city. They were permitted the freedom to beg openly in the streets. Until that Sunday, however, it had never occurred that these lepers found it necessary to canvas the streets of even our poor quarter. The lepers' bells, which they wore on collars welded around their necks, warned the crowds to clear the way as they proceeded. Soon the sound of the bells drew nearer. Out of the back window of the studio, I could see a group of three beggars moving slowly down the street toward my master's studio. All the neighbourhood Florentines threw copper coins into the middle of the road. They then stood as distant as possible, hugging the shadows of walls until the lepers had passed.

Although the approach of these unfortunate beggars created quite a stir outside in the streets, my master noticed nothing at first. Then Salai, who was still sitting at the South window, spoke up.

"Maestro Leonardo!" he said. "Come quickly to look! Here are some truly ugly models for you to draw!"

Hardly believing the impudence of Salai's ridiculous remark, at first I paid no special attention to his outburst. But then I felt a twinge of revulsion in the pit of my stomach when, leaving the picture of the angel unfinished, Leonardo stood up and went over to the window.

"Exquisite!" he said. "Call to them Salai! Invite them into the studio. Offer them some wine and small money."

Disbelieving that my master could possibly be serious, I spoke up.

"But master Da Vinci," I said, "surely you jest! You cannot truly desire to draw these foul wretches."

"Hold your peace, Francesco," said Leonardo. With a wave of his hand, he silenced me and then bid Salai once again to ask the lepers into our house. Salai looked at me with a confident sneer. My face whitened.

"But master, do you...think it best?" I stammered.

"Silence!" said Leonardo.

Soon Salai had ushered the trio of beggars into the front studio. He seated them in one corner, beside the chimney. Two of the beggars were men, the other one was a wrinkled old woman. All had gaping mouths and swollen, purple tongues. Spittle drooled from the split lip of the oldest

man, who was the most wasted with disease. A spreading, cancerous wart, which sprouted hairs, grew on the face of the other man, whom the two others treated as their leader. The old woman was a humpbacked crone with withered dugs and a face which was all but consumed by her disease. All three of these lepers had stuffed scraps of cloth into their festering wounds to help stop the scabs from bleeding. Surrounding all three was a sharp, biting odor reminiscent of rodent droppings. I looked at this party with horror and revulsion. Involuntarily, I shuddered.

Once these unfortunate grotesques were seated in the studio, Leonardo's eyes lit up.

"Give them some wine to drink," he said, motioning impatiently at me. When I returned with the wine, Leonardo poured it himself. At first the beggars were restive and suspicious, not knowing why they had been brought. But Leonardo sat down with them and soon elicited their good will with amiable, empty words. After a short time, all three were slightly drunk, laughing and making the most horrible faces. Leonardo watched them closely, his cold gaze filled with deep and eager curiosity. When their hideousness reached its height, he took out his silver-point pen and began to draw. I restrained myself and said nothing. By this time, the old hag had started licking the fallen crumbs from the table. I was disgusted and looked away.

Salai kept refilling the beggars' goblets with wine. In less than an hour, my master had completed several drawings. As I stood behind him, awaiting instructions, I could finally hold my peace no longer.

"Master, how is it possible to see the slightest beauty in such deformity?" I whispered to him.

Leonardo did not even take his eyes off of his work.

"Great deformity is as rare as great beauty, Francesco," he said in a low voice. "As I have told you many times, only mediocrity is negligible."

Stung by these words, I felt my blood begin to rise. Unable to respond, I clenched my teeth tightly until my jaws ached. Yet, although I said nothing out loud, at that moment I vowed to myself that, in due course, I would impress my master enough so that he would come to admire my

abilities as an apprentice. I swore that before I was through I would somehow gain Leonardo's respect.

CHAPTER 10

For the next several weeks, Lisa came to the studio almost daily. Sometimes she was escorted by Maria, other times I was sent to fetch her. During this period, the lady Giocundo and I spoke little to each other. Lisa seemed unwilling to discuss the night we had spent together, and I was grateful that the subject was never broached. When I look back on it now, I realize that we were both equally stubborn and prideful. Lisa was a clever woman and knew how to suspend moments indefinitely. She smiled benignly. She skirted the theme and then refused to pursue it. Although I found this most exacerbatng, I must in truth also admit that I was secretly delighted. These circumstances afforded me the opportunity to continue my liaison with Lisa without having to deal with it directly. I was eager to play the role of the dark, mysterious lover without having responsibilities attached. Still, oftentimes I cudgeled my brains. I was certain that there was something I had missed - something yet unlearned.

During this period, Leonardo worked with unprecedented zeal and devotion. Lisa arrived daily for her session at noon. She sat in the middle of the large, octagonal front studio which slowly filled with soft liquid shadows. My master worked at her portrait until early evening light faded into darkness. As I went about my duties in the studio, I watched the portrait's progress.

Evidently, it was to be a painting of modest size. Leonardo had ordered me to stretch, frame and pumice the canvas. I had also prepared and applied an undercoat of egg-shell paste to aid in preservation. While I worked at these tasks, Leonardo drew many preliminary charcoal sketches of Lisa. He already knew that it was to be a full frontal portrait, and so

he did not bother to sketch Lisa's profiles, or to examine his subject from various vantage points. Time and time again, he drew her face as directly as possible. Leonardo worked on these sketches every afternoon for nearly a full fortnight. He slowly shaded Lisa's face into life. But when he came to the details of her features, he laid aside his silver-point pen and sat silently, looking into Lisa's face with an intentness, mixed with perturbation. My master discarded many of these preliminary sketches, telling me to take them away and burn them. All this while, Lisa sat seemingly calm and submissive. She always wore the same dark dress with a transparent black veil covering her hair. She sat poised in her carved mahogany chair, slowly stroking the long, silky fur of Leonardo's white Persian cat which lay curled in her lap, licking its paws.

During these sessions, Lisa hardly ever initiated conversation. Sometimes Leonardo would speak; but then only to demand small bits of information from the lady Giocundo, or to give orders to Salai or me. Usually the artist and his subject acted as veritable strangers toward each other. Yet they seemed to share a secret, unspoken trust.

For the first week of the preliminary work on the portrait, it was pleasant enough in the quiet atmosphere of the studio. Even Salai seemed content and subdued by Mona Lisa's presence. He sat in the background, playing soft tunes on his silver lyre. He had curtailed his carousing to the evening hours, and was almost always in attendance. He sat on a cushioned chair in one corner and played interminably. While Lisa posed for Leonardo, oblivious to her surroundings, Salai plucked mellow notes and strummed brilliant arpeggios on his lamb-gut strings. I believe he was perplexed that Lisa seemed not to notice him. Salai was used to being pampered and flattered by all the young Florentine ladies, and to his chagrin Lisa appeared to perceive his existence as something purely ornamental.

The second week of preliminary studies for the portrait was much more stressful than the first. Leonardo grew frustrated with his inability to calculate the exact measurements for the painting's ideal point of perspective. I recall that he worked in an agitated, impatient manner,

drawing innumerable brief sketches of Lisa's lips and eyes. This went on for several afternoons, until one day, toward the end of the fortnight, Leonardo abruptly closed the cover of his sketch-book and stood up. He slowly replaced the cap to his silver-point pen. It was only shortly after the beginning of the session, so Lisa, Salai and I turned in surprise to see what was matter.

"Madam Giocundo," Leonardo said. "You are as beautiful of form and feature as any woman alive, but it seems to me that you are weighed down by a burden which is much too heavy to bear."

"What do you mean?" said Lisa.

"Well, you live with your husband in the midst of such luxury, and yet I perceive that you are deeply troubled by something. You are too sensitive to speak, yet there is always the slightest hint of sadness in your smile. You must speak to me of it!"

"I warned you before we started that you would not be permitted access to the secrets of my soul," said Lisa, lowering her eyes. "You must paint the portrait as best you are able. I shall pose as you require."

"If you are resolved not to reveal your secret, I shall respect your silence," said Leonardo. "However, your manner and attitude will continue to puzzle me, and the painting will never be started, never mind completed."

"As I have told you," said Lisa, "that is your own concern."

"But, I cannot...be...defeated once again," said Leonardo, in a dark, trembling voice.

Although Lisa paid little heed to Leonardo's grim countenance, I knew the importance of these words. So many of the projects which my master spent his lifetime creating were already beginning to disintegrate: There were the many half-finished paintings and sketches stored in the attic of the studio. Also, there were the many parchment leaves of notes which he scribbled and then discarded. There was his great equestrian statue, the "Cavello", for which the bronze needed for finishing was far too expensive for even the Duke to afford. And there was his "Last Supper", which was already bubbling with mold because he had impulsively painted directly on the walls of the Convent instead of using a canvas stretched on a frame.

Finally, of course, there was the flying machine which was Leonardo's greatest disappointment and most haunting failure. Knowing these things, I understood the desperate quality in my master's voice as he thought of painting this portrait which was to be his last bid for immortality. He could no doubt feel Death's cold breath on his neck. He knew that the time left to him was too short to allow for hesitation. I could see that my master was determined to capture this last elusive vision so that he could still his guilty conscience, and die in peace.

After their brief dialogue, Leonardo's gaze locked into Lisa's in a glaring battle of defiance. Salai stopped playing his lyre. There was a long moment of terrible silence in the studio. Then Leonardo suddenly turned his back on Lisa. Turning to me, he ordered that the very best paints should be immediately prepared.

Having anticipated this moment, I quickly set to work. Even though he was undoubtedly certain of my competence, Leonardo watched over my shoulder as I mixed and measured in separate bowls the dark oily hues and the pasty ash-white flesh tones which he required. I mixed each basic mixture with a compound of arabic gum. Then I heated the potions over a candle flame. Once they had achieved the correct consistency, I divided the result into six smaller bowls. To these bowls, I added the various ground minerals, strained liquids and sifted powders to make the necessary different shades. This was slow work which demanded a steady hand and careful concentration. Once this had been accomplished, however, I quickly prepared a suitable palette which I proudly presented to my master. I then took out of a drawer three new paint brushes which I offered to him. Leonardo chose one with fine, long bristles. With a wide, sweeping gesture of his arm, he then ordered me to draw the canvas curtains to dull the sun's afternoon light. It was time, he said, for the real painting to begin.

CHAPTER 11

Although many incidents occurred during the days and weeks that followed the commencement of Lisa's portrait, these facts seem all but irrelevant now. Certainly, life went on in the usual fashion: Leonardo painted, I worked at my studies and small tasks about the studio, and Salai continued his characteristic pranks and merry mischief. This was my immediate world. Outside of this world, events unfolded as they inevitably will: News that the bastard Charles and his army had taken Milan reached our city during the early days of June. Fear and panic gradually heightened as Florentines anticipated the imminent invasion of their streets. Also, during this time factions led by certain Franciscan friars began to grow within the city. Neighbours and families split over their opinions of Fra Girolamo and his rigid Dominican precepts. As if this was not enough trouble to contend with, during this period superstition also gripped the citizens of Florence. This was due to the fact that toward the middle of the month a merchant ship drifted into the main port of the city, its entire crew dead of some peculiar pox which even the Duke's physicians were unable to explain.

These, then, were the circumstances of the time. Yet, although these facts are perhaps significant in and of themselves, they are really important now only insofar as they form the backdrop of my history, most of the battles of which were fought within the confines of my skull. When I think of that time now, I believe that, as far as my personal history is concerned, it is best explained by one recurring dream which continued right up until the June nights shortly before Summer Solstice. It was on one morning following this dream that finally, driven beyond my limits of endurance, I took my fate into my own hands and acted in a manner directly opposed to that which my conscience demanded.

In my dream, I am greatly aged - an old man in his seventies at least. When the dream begins, I am walking slowly, lost in thought, through the narrow, deserted city streets. My sense of balance has begun to fail, and I am unsteady on my feet. My joints creak as I walk, and I am bone-tired and scant of breath. Because of my poor eyesight, I cannot see far ahead. I have no idea where I am walking to since I have never travelled through this particular quarter before.

"You are lost," a voice in my head whispers.

And, indeed, there are no signs of human life. As I look around me, I am certain that any building I may enter will prove to be uninhabited and abandoned.

"You are lost!" the voice whispers again. "You are lost, and you are mad, and you are going to die!"

Yet, my sandaled feet shuffle onward.

Leaning heavily on my walking stick, I navigate the unfamiliar streets and alleyways, past the deserted dwellings. Already it is near sunset. Although I am wizened and bent with years, my shadow stretches out before me, enormous and elongated.

"Call on the demon to punish her!" whispers the voice in my head. "Call on the demons, and have your revenge!"

"I shall not," I mutter aloud. "It was so long ago. Now it is almost forgotten. It does not matter any more. The sin is surely forgiven."

In the distance, I hear the rumbling thunder of an approaching storm. For an extended moment, the city is lit with fire as streak lightning flashes across the sky. Mindful of the first hesitant drops of rain, I hobble onward in search of a likely place to take shelter.

The voices in my head are now several.

"There is no escape," the voices whisper. "No one escapes! Here there are no longer choices to be made about which path to follow. There is no possibility of redemption. You are a prisoner! But then you were always a prisoner. Did you not choose to sacrifice your freedom for a mere moment of pleasure?"

I say nothing. It is impossible to reply.

After some time, I come to the steps of what appears in my dream to be the Cathedral Santa Maria. Already the city has begun to darken. A feeling of helplessness wells up inside me. Unsteadily, I climb the steep stone steps toward the huge iron-studded oak doors which loom above me. The doors open slowly with a sigh.

The Cathedral is empty. I hesitate for a moment in the threshold, my eyes adjusting to the deep gloom inside. I shake the dust off my sandals. Slowly I begin to walk up the main aisle, my eyes fixed on the empty wooden pulpit ahead.

"Despair!" the whispers cry in my head. "Soon to be still. Ashes scattered in darkness. Despair!"

Yet the cool air under the great arches of the Cathedral ceiling seems comforting. I stop beside a huge grey marble pillar. I touch the smooth stone, and its surface consoles me.

For a moment, the whispering voices subside.

Despite my stiff limbs, I genuflect and enter a pew. For some time, I kneel in silent prayer. Then I sit back on the polished hardwood bench. For a lingering moment, I admire a spiral rosette which is set in one of the Cathedral's multi-colored stained glass windows. This window still glows slightly as the evening sun sinks in the west. I close my eyes.

Gradually, I become aware that the silence is being disrupted as the Cathedral organ begins to play a faint, somber fugue. I slowly become

aware of the organ, yet my thoughts do not linger on it. As the music builds, however, I become filled with an unspeakable barrenness.

The chorus of voices in my head now returns.

"Yes, that is right!" the voices whisper. "You must now understand. Blind, and yet seeing. Yet no longer to touch! Above all, understand! Here there is no multi-foliate rose to behold. Here only the silence blossoms. Here darkness prevails!"

As I sit all alone in the empty Cathedral, I can no longer escape the truth. I become aware that this dream is an enactment of my death. I sit guilty and ashamed. My soul is like the dried out husk of an insect. I have been justly condemned; I am greatly afraid to watch the proceedings.

"But what man is not guilty of sin?" I absentmindedly mutter. "Who is there that does not share my great sorrow and shame?"

Yet, although I reprimand myself for having allowed my life to pass out of my control, I am not entirely penitent. As I view my moment of death, I am relieved that the truth of my life will be buried forever. I am content that this should be so. I am prepared to suffer even eternal damnation to guard the jealous secret close to my heart.

What happens next is perhaps merely a vision resulting from my brewing disquietude, but still it lives in my mind as if real. In my dream, the bells in the Cathedral spire begin to toll. They soon drown out both the sound of the organ, and the voices in my head which continue to whisper. Slowly, I become aware that the darkness surrounding the altar is broken by the glow of candlelight. I see that there are two black-robed figures preparing the Eucharist. At this moment, I hear the sound of fluttering wings. When I look upward, I see that there is a huge black raven perched on one of the wooden rafters supporting the domed ceiling. The bird's glittering eyes flash in my head. Its caws echo in my ears. Suddenly, it rises from its perch. Slowly, it swoops in diminishing spirals down toward the altar. It lands with fluttering wings and piercing cries on the

shoulder of the high priest, who is occupied with the chalice. This priest, who appears as a hollow, faceless figure, takes out a handful of black rice and feeds his loyal pet. Then the priest and his server move forward toward the altar-rail, where the faithful usually kneel to await communion. The two figures stand there. Instinctively, I know that it is me they are waiting for. The raven flies in circles above me. This I take as a sign that I am to walk toward the altar.

As I slowly proceed up the main aisle, my lips feverishly mutter the disjointed lines of a psalm which I sang by heart as a boy. Soon I am kneeling on the hard marble step in front of the altar-rail. My trembling hands are clasped tightly in front of me. As the two priests approach, I open my mouth to receive the blessed communion, but when the high priest lowers the golden chalice in his hand, I see that it is filled, not with white-wafer hosts, but with burning black embers. With a pair of long, silver tongs, this priest lifts a glowing coal from the chalice. Although I want to cry outloud, he places the red-hot stone on my tongue, and I am committed to everlasting silence.

CHAPTER 12

Every morning after my dream, I awoke shivering in a cold sweat; my body curled in a tight ball, my knees tucked closely against my throbbing chest. I tried to erase the dream from my mind. I shunned sleep, fearing its consequences. I knew that I had to rectify the direction of my sinful life. Yet now contrition seemed impossible. I knew that above all I had to see Lisa alone in her room once again. For better or for worse, I had chosen my path. Despite the forbidding premonitions of my dream, I was complacently prepared to accept the consequences of damnation. Seeing only what I wanted to see, I followed the ungodly course of my increasingly wayward, unscrupulous nature.

I was obsessed with regaining access to Lisa's honeyed favors. I had fallen victim to her charms. Oftentimes, I was overwhelmed with fits of passion. During those last days in the final weeks of June, Florence was suffering in a sweltering heat which foreshadowed the scorching summer months ahead. Yet, at the time I hardly noticed the intemperance of the weather. My soul was suffering from a far more painful fire which smoldered deep in my loins. As I toiled and sweated for my master in our studio, I secretly plotted how to pursue my liaison with Lisa. Flesh and blood is weak. Blessedness or damnation aside, I was no longer full of the peculiar scruples of which Salai so often accused me. I was soft-headed enough to suppose that Lisa could be persuaded to share a moment of fleeting passion with me once again.

Yet, despite my infernal longing to re-establish intimate contact with Mona Lisa, I did not know how to speak to her in the oily, smooth-tongued manner which I had often heard Salai successfully practice with the fashionable ladies. When I escorted Lisa to or from her home, I stammered feeble responses to her occasional, unimportant questions. Sometimes we

passed idle pleasantries. Other times we even exchanged furtive, knowing glances. But neither of us ever uttered a serious word concerning the love-child that was surely growing within her womb. Although I am still unable to measure the exact balance in which desire and faith struggled for possession of my soul during my time with Lisa, I now make no bones about revealing my great love for her. The sight of Lisa sitting quietly composed during the long afternoons of the portrait's progress drove all whispers of indecision and renunciation from my mind. During these times, I had only one central concern: How was I to arrange to see the Lady Giocundo alone once again?

The answer to this question came to me in an unexpected, fortuitous manner. It happened on the Summer Solstice holiday, on the last Sunday in June. Having told my master that I was going to high mass at the Cathedral, I went instead to feed the white swans which swam on the blue pond in the small park on the outskirts of our quarter. To my great surprise, while I was dreamily feeding the swans, I saw the Lady Giocundo and her maid-servant, Maria, enter the park. Although my first instinct was to hide or to draw up my cloak and scurry away, I girded my loins and bravely resolved to approach the ladies. I told myself that I would be casual and gallant. I convinced myself that it was time to prove my self-assurance as a lover. By this time, it was too late to flee, even if I still wanted to. Lisa and her maid-servant were now strolling over toward the pond, and it was impossible for me to escape their notice.

The two ladies walked slowly through the park's terraced flower gardens. They stopped for a few moments to admire the beds of pale-blue irises and deep red roses. Soon they passed beneath the overhanging branches of a grove of ancient willow trees which bordered one side of the clear blue pond. I stood on the grassy bank opposite, holding a bag of stale crusts in my hand. Lisa noticed me standing there, and I sheepishly waved in greeting. Just at that moment a bird, flushed from the foliage by a small animal, flew out from the bushes beside me. Startled, I dropped the sac of crusts into the shallow water at the pond's edge. Before I regained my wits enough to bend over to salvage what I could of the crusts, the pair of waiting long-necked swans quickly paddled over and began greedily to devour the floating bits of bread.

When the Lady Giocundo and Maria approached within speaking distance, I took off my motley cap.

"Good day, Mesdames," I said clumsily, my tongue feeling swollen and dry in my mouth.

Maria lowered her eyes and stood shyly behind and to one side of her mistress while Lisa addressed me.

"Messer Francesco, are you also out taking a walk for your leisure?" said Lisa, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"Yes, I am," I said with a slight bow, trying with difficulty to maintain my casual composure.

During these first few seconds of conversation, my eyes registered Lisa's appearance. I saw that instead of the black dress and veil which she habitually wore when sitting for my master, this Sunday Lisa was wearing a light silken dress, with a rich red scarf draped over her shoulders. The ruby and emerald rings on her fingers sparkled in the sunlight. As I admired the white skin of her bare neck and arms, my passion was rekindled anew. Hoping to make a good impression, I sought words to compliment her beauty.

"You look most radiant and lovely today, Madam," I said. However, Lisa chose to ignore my bold remark. Apparently she was reluctant to speak while Maria was still in our company.

At this point in our conversation, a breath of cool wind blew through the park, and a few first hesitant drops of rain began to fall. With a wave of her hand, Lisa dismissed Maria, who walked a short way off, soon disappearing between the rustling white and black leaves of the mulberry trees which grew at one end of the park. Once Maria was out of sight, Lisa motioned that we should take shelter under the roof of a nearby pagoda.

For several minutes, Lisa sat quietly on the wicker bench which ran along one wall of the pagoda. The warbling of sweet-throated birds drifted over from a small grove of pear trees, and we listened to their songs.

After several false starts, which dissipated into idle pleasantries, I ordered my thoughts and cut to the heart of the matter.

"Mistress Lisa," I said, "I do not want you to have any doubt of my good intentions. However, I find that I can no longer remain faithful to the staunch resolution which I made after our last intimate meeting."

"What do you mean, Francesco?" said Lisa.

"I mean to say that I have discovered that my feelings for you are more than mere desire of the flesh," I said. "Although it may be my gravest misfortune, I find that I am unable to resist your charms. I pray of you, ease my wretchedness! Promise me that I may soon once again be allowed access to your riches!"

"You are indeed a most fervent young man," said Lisa, looking deep into my eyes. "Last time we met intimately you solemnly swore that it would never happen again. If your conscience is so easily disturbed, do you not think it unwise to fall into the same trap again?"

"Please spare me the piercing arrows of your irony, mistress Lisa," I said. "Can you not show me some small mercy? Do you not love me even a little?"

"I... do not believe in such things," said Lisa with a shrug of her shoulders. "They do not concern me."

"God help us!" I exclaimed. "Have you no sense of propriety? Are we not together responsible for the child that is growing within you?"

"Please, let us not quarrel," said Lisa, looking away. "I am willing to meet you again if you think it is necessary, but I refuse to linger over the details of our last encounter. I shall see you, but do not forget that you swore a vow of secrecy. In this regard, you must be most careful not to betray me. Remember, my husband has a suspicious nature and an unruly temper. We must be careful not to arouse him."

"You can depend on me," I said. "I shall not betray your confidence."

"Very good," said Lisa. "Well, you still have the key to our garden gate. You may come to my room again in two nights time. My husband has a business engagement in Pisa, and it will be safe. But again, I warn you, take every precaution and raise no suspicions."

"Of course not," I said. "I have given you my word!"

Presently, the light rain-shower stopped, and Maria returned. The

Lady Giocundo and her maid-servant immediately departed. Satisfied, and perhaps inwardly smug with my success, I too soon left the park and began the journey back to Leonardo's studio. My feet were light of step, and that day the walk seemed pleasant and short.

CHAPTER 13

When I arrived back at the studio, my master was busy working at his writing desk. I did not dare disturb him, but rather immediately climbed the stairs to my room. There I changed into my work clothes. Then I went back down to the studio. I spent the rest of that afternoon carefully painting the intricate details on the black wing-tips of the smiling angel in Leonardo's "Madonna of the Rocks." I enjoyed this peaceful, therapeutic work. It seemed to soothe my soul. When evening fell, Salai had still not arrived back from his Sunday afternoon's promenade with his crowd of gay, pretty-faced friends. After waiting for a considerable amount of time, Leonardo ordered that supper should be prepared regardless of Salai's absence. Together we sat in silence in the kitchen at the back of our studio. We ate a simple meal of bread, cheese and wine. Our kitchen is rather a large room, with dirty brown walls and a black wood-burning stove in one corner. Leonardo and I sat at opposite ends of the large square table set in the middle of this room. He spoke to me only when he wanted his cup of wine refilled, or when he wanted me to pass the plate of bread and cheese. I was accustomed to the silence and the rudeness of his brusque manner. In truth, I know that oftentimes my master merely tolerates me as an apprentice because of my usefulness as a servant. He does not prize me highly. But then, all his other students have deserted him in his old age, and so I have some merits as a disciple. Above all, I am loyal. Some day, Leonardo will come to appreciate this fact, and he will deeply appreciate my service.

After clearing the few supper dishes from the kitchen table, I went

directly to my room. During dinner, Leonardo had been obviously upset that Salai was not back. I left my master alone in the front studio in order to avoid any conflict that might arise if I were to disturb him. For the duration of the evening, I tried to catch up on my self-appointed task of sorting out Leonardo's notes. I had decided that this was an excellent way to impress my master. I intended to organize and bind in logical order the bulk of these notes. I would then present them to Leonardo, and he would surely admire my worthy industry.

However, as I recall, that evening I was not making much progress in my task. I was thinking, the thousands of loose pages which I have stored in the wooden trunk in my room are overwhelming in their dispersiveness and diversity of subject. They are all in fragments; rough sketches and snatches of writing in such disorder that years will be necessary to sort it all out. Oftentimes, I find that the prospect of accomplishing this task is too daunting to allow me to continue. Yet only in this way can I win Leonardo's respect.

I believe that the reason I am unable to sort out my master's notes is not just due to the difficulty of having to read his script in a mirror. Although this is often cumbersome, and I am able to work only when Salai is gone and his hand-mirror is free, I have grown accustomed to these minor inconveniences. No, the main reason the sorting goes so slowly is that I am constantly distracted by the seeming opposition between theory and practice in Leonardo's work.

As I sort through my master's notebooks, I pay scant heed to the hundreds of parchment leaves filled with calculations and geometrical diagrams. Nor do I pay more than cursory attention to the countless sketches of engines and buildings, or to the thousand fragments of ideas on matters of natural science and anatomy. These things have never sparked my interest. I place all of Leonardo's notes on these subjects together in separate piles, to be dealt with later. On the subject of art and painting, however, I am always curious. I find that my master's views often give me pause. As I sit reading in the mirror by candlelight, his theories force me to reflect on the direction of my own thoughts about the techniques of artifice.

Yet, I am powerless to express my ideas.

There has always been one problem which has perplexed me more than all the others, and it is this: Concerning the exalted science of perspective, it often seems to me that what Leonardo wants more than anything else is to pin his subject to the canvas in the same manner that he pins beetles and butterflies to the pages of the book in which he collects insect specimens. In this approach, it seems to me, something vital is lost to the meaning of art. Perhaps I wonder whether Leonardo's ideal point of perspective even truly exists. After all, is it not possible that the truth can only be seen if viewed in its essence from several different directions at once. Oftentimes, when these ideas press on my mind, I feel that they are trying to fire my imagination. Yet, I am reluctant to voice my ideas. I am certain that my master would disapprove of my dissent.

While I was thinking in this manner, my thoughts were suddenly interrupted when a knock came at my door. I quickly shuffled the papers I was working with back into the drawer of my desk. I managed to accomplish this without a moment to spare. Just as I closed the drawer, the door to my room opened. I saw that Leonardo was standing in the dim light of the hallway. He moved as far as the threshold. For several seconds, he did not utter a word. He was wearing his customary wide-sleeved, brown woolen robe. For the past three years, his old bones have felt the cold even in the hottest weather, and so he had a heavy, purple mantle draped over his shoulders. With one hand, he stroked his long, grey-grizzled beard. He held his white Persian cat nestled in the crook of his other arm. My heart was pumping loudly, and the tips of my ears felt like they were burning. Fervently, I hoped that my master had seen nothing of my clandestine activity. If he discovered my work before it was complete, all my planning would be ruined. However, evidently my master suspected nothing. There were several more moments of silence, during which time Leonardo's tired, pale-blue eyes surveyed the contents of my room. Then they returned to rest on me, and Leonardo spoke.

"Francesco," he said. "We cannot let Salai stay out until all hours again tonight. If the city guard patrols find him in the streets after curfew, he will be imprisoned again for public mischief."

"But master," I said, "I am not Salai's keeper. It hardly seems fitting that as part of my duties I should have to play nurse-maid to him."

"Tomorrow the Lady Giocundo will arrive earlier than usual," said Leonardo. "She smiles in a much sweeter, melancholy fashion when Salai is on form to play the lyre. I want you to go to fetch him."

"He is undoubtedly drinking and gambling in one of the filthy wine cellars with his foul-tongued friends," I said. "I would much prefer not to have to go there at this time of night."

"You do not appear to be doing anything useful," said Leonardo. "Try not to be so petulant. You are always puffed-up with a sense of your own self-importance, but you accomplish so little, cloistered like a fretful monk in this dingy little room of yours. Now go to fetch Salai as I ask! The fresh night air will do you good!"

"I will if I must," I said, "but I protest..."

"Do you propose to argue with me?" said Leonardo.

"No, of course not, master," I said. "I just want you to know that, while I willingly fulfill all your other orders without complaining, I resent enormously having to look after Salai's welfare into the bargain."

"Is that so?" said Leonardo.

"Salai is a cunning rascal, and I loath his fawning, lazy, heedless manners," I said.

"Must you be such a jealous dullard?" said Leonardo. "Salai is perhaps a mischievous rascal, but he is certainly not so notorious a knave as you would make him out to be."

"But master, I tell you..." I began to say.

"Silence!" said Leonardo, "I am tired and going to bed now. It is a simple enough task; see if you can complete it without fouling things up. Show some obedience!"

"Yes, master," I said, bowing my head as Leonardo turned his back on me and walked slowly down the corridor to his own chambers.

After my argument with Leonardo, I was hardly conscious of putting on my cloak or of leaving the studio. However, when I regained some of my

composure, I found myself following the narrow, winding city streets in the direction of the quarter where the filthy wine-cellars of Florence are located. The angry, throbbing pulse in my temples continued as I walked along. With my eyes cast down to the rough cobblestones on which I trod, I hurried through the darkness. When I turned into the roads leading toward the drinking quarter, the flickering light from a street-corner torch aroused me from my stupor. I saw that a small group of city guards was standing under the light of the torch. They were dressed in silver-plated, hard, leather tunics, and they wore heavy, bronze helmets on their heads. The captain of the guards was leaning on his spear, and the others were laughing and rough-housing amongst themselves. As I walked past them, their jesting subsided for a moment as they watched me. I lowered my glance, and prayed that they would not bother me. Thankfully, however, I was not halted. I sighed with relief, and scurried on my way.

Presently, I turned into a dimly lit alley and descended the steps to the doorway of the wine-cellar which Salai and his bunch frequented. I knew where it was located since Salai often sarcastically invited me along when he and his seedy friends were going there. However, I had never been to this den of iniquity before. As I stood in the open doorway, hesitant to enter, I saw that it was a cavernous place, with a low wood-beam ceiling. Smoke and noise filled the air. The scene was one of bar-room confusion and mayhem. It appeared as a dark cave where workingmen, hooligans, and affluent patrons all mixed together in their various states of drunkenness. There were rough-hewn benches set against the yellowish stone walls and many large, round, wooden tables set in the center of the room. By the light of dim lanterns, which were suspended on brackets at intervals along the walls, I could see clusters of men and women laughing and drinking around the central wooden tables. I was repulsed, but at the same time, I must admit, inwardly fascinated by this scene of Dionysian revelry. As I awkwardly tried to push my way through the crowd, I felt myself drawn into the heart of this bedlam.

I soon spotted Salai. This was not a difficult task since he always laughs too loudly and he naturally stands out in a crowd. As always, our golden boy was at the center of attention. He stood at one end of a dicing

table, his angelic face set in a broad, grinning smile as he shook, kissed, and cast the dice. I started making my way over toward him. However, my mind was soon distracted from my goal. Just as I was jostling my way through a motley bunch of swarthy-skinned Florentines gathered around a barrel-shaped man who was singing a lewd drinking song, I saw out of the corner of my eye the old rag-vendor woman whom I had first met in the market-place several months previous. She was sitting at an empty table at one far end of the room. She was gazing in my direction, however, she seemed to look straight through me. Against my better judgement, I could not resist going over to speak to her. Discounting the voice in my head which began to whisper faint warnings, I detoured over in her direction.

At first the decrepit old rag-vendor woman did not seem to recognize me. But when I sat down beside her, she lifted her tangled head of silver hair and looked at me with her deep-set, crow-black eyes. She then grinned a wide, toothless smile of recognition. But before either of us uttered a word, a lascivious looking barmaid with large, almond-shaped eyes, came over to the table and demanded what we wanted to drink. I ordered a glass of cheap wine for the old rag-vendor woman, but then said that I wanted nothing for myself. However, the barmaid stared at me suspiciously, and so I ordered a goblet of wine to appease her. When the barmaid returned with our wine, the old rag-seller spoke:

"And how is your lover?" the old woman asked. "Is she enjoying her present? Did I not tell you my golden-finch was the perfect gift for lovers?"

"I have not spoken to my mistress about the finch since I gave it to her," I said, evasively, taking a sip of my wine. "I am sure, however, that its songs bring much joy to her heart."

"Do not be so coy with me," said the old woman. "Come, come, young man! You may speak to me in all confidence. Your sins cannot be so great that they will shock me. I am a widow seven times over, and what sins my husbands didn't think of between them will never be invented. Come now, don't be so coy!"

"I see no reason that I should have to explain to you my heart's desire," I said, taking several large swallows of wine. "I admit that the golden-finch has served its purpose precisely as you promised it would,

however, I do not see why that obliges me to reveal the passions which I share with my mistress."

"But have you enjoyed your mistress's favours often?" the old woman asked, with a drunken, drooling snigger. "I know of sins that would shock even an abbot! You cannot surprise me! Come, tell me your secret!"

"I do not see that it is any of your concern," I said, finishing my cup of wine and motioning to the barmaid to bring me another.

"Ah, you are married to your honour," said the old woman. "But surely, because of my finch, your innermost wish has been granted? Do I not deserve some small sign of your gratitude?"

Uncertain of what to say to the persistent old woman, I remained obstinately silent. I quickly gulped down the second goblet of wine which the barmaid brought me. I immediately ordered another, hoping to fortify my nerves with the heady, intoxicating liquid. Although I resisted the idea of talking openly with this strange, old woman, I deeply longed to make my confession to someone. I thought that perhaps it would give some relief to my tortured soul. Only later did I realize that my confession did greatly more harm than ever it did good. For quite some time, I sat motionless, weighed down by wine. Although I pondered my dilemma, I had no voice to speak of my misery and wretchedness. During this time, a great many Florentines drifted out of the bar-room as the midnight curfew drew closer. However, Salai was still at the gaming tables, and I did not feel pressed to leave.

"I want her with all my heart," I heard my slurring voice mutter aloud. "I want her with all my heart, yet my life is a continual hell of passion and fear when I think of her."

"Ah, I see that your heart is sore with delight," said the old woman, snickering drunkenly at my words. "Yes, yes! Just as all moon-struck lovers worship only the stars in the firmament, you have grown giddy with passion my love-sick young friend! But tell me now, have you failed so completely to satisfy your passions? Have you not sealed your secret love with a kiss?"

"Oh, with a kiss and much more," I said.

"Ah, well, that is very good!" said the old woman. "But if this is

true, then what grieves you now? You must tell me of your difficulty. How can I give you solace if you refuse to reveal your distress? Have you been given a key to open your mistress's gate? Have no fear; make your confession!"

"But of course," I said, sure and proud of my proficiency as a lover. "And what is more, I am to go there again in two nights' time!"

"In two nights' time?" said the old woman. "You don't say? Well, enjoy your delight while you can, my young friend! Passion is a candle whose flame burns but briefly. Perhaps your unhappiness is a virtue which brings caution in its wake. Your mistress will not be a young maid forever. Enjoy your good fortune while you can! Cherish your illusions! And so, good-night my fine, over-bold youth!"

With these last words, the old rag-vendor's voice began to trail off into incoherent drunken mutterings. Disturbed by her words, I gulped down the last dregs of my third goblet of wine. Bidding the old woman good-night, I rose unsteadily to my feet and focused my already blurring vision in the direction of the gambling table where Salai and a few last-hangers-on stood laughing, drinking, and rolling the dice.

CHAPTER 14

As I approached the small group of men and women gathered about the dicing table, even through my drunken vision I could see that Salai was having a most successful night. He was luxuriating in the admiration of his onlookers. Yet, I was unable to rouse myself to jealousy. It was all I could do to stand upright, without falling to the floor. In the poorly ventilated room, the air was heavy with the stale odors of tobacco and wine. I was nauseous, and could hardly breathe. I was perspiring freely, and for a moment I thought I was about to faint. When I reached the place where Salai and his group were playing dice, I held myself steady against the edge of the table. For a long moment, nobody noticed my arrival. I stood in a daze, my brain numbed with wine.

When finally I spoke, my tongue felt thick and swollen and I heard my voice utter slow, sluggish words.

"Salai!" I blurted in a loud, belligerent tone. "Time to come home! Past your bedtime! Master says time to come home!"

Salai had not noticed me until that moment. Understandably, he was greatly surprised to see me standing there in my flushed condition. Yet, he said nothing. He gave me an artful wink, and motioned for silence so that he could roll the dice. However, I refused to tolerate his obstinacy. Before he could throw the dice, I reached out and grabbed his wrist. Salai was ruffled by this bold move. For a moment, he glared at me; but then he smiled mischievously, feigning patience and friendliness.

"Why so woeful, Francesco?" he said. "Be a good fellow and hang on for a few minutes while I finish this game."

"No, now...must go, now!" I said, still holding Salai's wrist tightly in my grasp.

"Another cup of cheer for our friend while he waits!" Salai called to the barmaid, seeking to rebuff me.

"No, now!" I said, my courage bolstered with wine and the knowledge that I was expressly serving Leonardo's orders.

But at that moment, Salai wrested his hand free, and I was spun around, almost losing my balance.

In retrospect, looking back on that night, I realize now that my aberrant, aggressive behavior was in large part due to the fact that I was trying absurdly to show an outward display of strength since I felt so terribly out of place. The small group surrounding Salai had stopped their laughing and drinking to stare at me when I grasped Salai's hand to prevent his throwing the dice. One of this group of Salai's admirers was a beefy albino with a shaved head and massive, fat-laden arms which were covered with black tattoos. This man I knew to be named Bulvero. He was one of Salai's most loyal friends. He was known to be a man of little intelligence. His pink eyes glistened with the inherent maliciousness of his nature. Bulvero looked at me, and spat on the ground. When he spoke, it was with a deep, bull-frog voice.

"Scram!" he said. "Salai don't need to go if he don't wanna. He's gonna stay here."

Befuddled by this situation, I sought words to express my distaste for this thick-skulled albino whose slovenly manners were beneath my contempt. However, my tongue was paralyzed by drink. After I stood staring at him for a full minute without speaking, the beefy Bulvero took my silence as the intent to provoke a fight. As I stood there frozen, he flicked open a silver switch-blade knife. When he spoke again, there was venom in his words.

"I told yuh to scram," he said, with a thin, menacing smile. "Yuh want I should stick yuh?"

I was too terrified to say or do anything. My knees felt as if they were about to buckle beneath me. Wine was churning in my belly, and I fought desperately to keep it down. Bulvero, taking my continued silence as a sign of obstinateness, started walking over toward me, brandishing his silver knife.

"I'll carve yuh up!" he said, with a snarl.

At this point, however, Salai stepped forward and put a restraining hand on Bulvero's shoulder.

"Hah!" said Salai, with a grin. "Its okay, Bulvero. Francesco is a harmless chump unused to libations. Let's not sweat over it! I'll go now while my dice are still lucky. I had better guide this jackass home!"

With these words, Bulvero stopped his menacing approach toward me. Though visibly disappointed, he snapped his switch-blade shut.

"Duh, okay. If you say so, Salai," he said. "I wuz only tryin to protect yuh."

Although I was annoyed at having to leave after being so rudely insulted, I was also greatly relieved to reach the door of the wine-cellar unscathed. I followed Salai up the cellar steps into the street.

"I know the best way back," said Salai. "Now be a good fellow, and follow me closely. It's well after curfew, and we'll have to dodge the guard patrols."

I did not respond. I followed Salai in silence for several blocks, refusing to answer his scurvy questions or laugh at his base witticisms. My heart was pounding violently. I was seething with anger and frustration after the scandalous scene in the wine cellar. Yet deep down, I knew that I was as much to blame as Salai and Bulvero were for what had happened. As we skulked through the dark city streets, I silently rebuked myself for allowing events to get so out of hand. Although, for a time, Salai persisted in his attempts to draw me out of my sulky mood, he soon grew annoyed at my ill-humored reticence. When we reached the Great Market Square, he bid me good-riddance. Before I could formulate words to stop him from leaving, he disappeared into the shadows. He did this just as the sound of heavy, marching boots was heard from around the street-corner where he left me.

All I remember next is the fierce glare of torchlight held close to my face. Through my bleary, wine-shot eyes, I saw the glint of the copper-helmeted city patrols. I was vaguely aware that I was being spoken

to, yet all I could do was to curse Salai for leading me into this trap. I heard the frantic chorus of whispers and the silver ringing of bells in my head. Then I felt myself being roughly propelled forward. Suddenly, my face hit the ground. At that instant, sparks of fire burst in my brain, and then everything went black.

PART III

CHAPTER 15

On the morning after my expedition to the wine-cellar, I was awakened by the continuous thud of heavy, marching boots. For quite some time, I lay in a dazed, semi-conscious state. I listened to the rhythmic pain which throbbed in my head. Although I tried desperately, I was unable to move my limbs. I was immobilized by a sickness in the pit of my stomach; a nausea such as I had never before experienced. My sole awareness was of this nausea, and of the bitter-sweet taste of dried blood in my mouth.

Slowly, I became aware of my surroundings. I saw that I was in a cramped, rectangular jail-cell. I was lying on my back, on a pile of straw matting which had been carelessly flung into one corner of the padlocked room. I lifted my head. A chill, fiery shiver ran down my spine. I saw that black, rusty prison bars surrounded me on three sides. On the other side, which faced opposite to the corner where I lay, there was a single small window, which also was barred. Through this window streamed rays of mid-morning sunshine.

Almost as soon as I became aware of my immediate environment, I saw that there was another person in the cell with me. This stranger was a thin-boned, olive-skinned man in his middle years of life. He had a sharp, narrow face and wispy tufts of already greying hair. He was lying across the cell from me, his back leaning against the granite wall. He wore a garment of dark blue cloth which looked threadbare and soiled about the cuffs. The stranger's large, hazel-brown eyes watched me gradually regain consciousness.

I tried to speak, but was unable to. My throat would not utter the words which formed in my brain; my lips were dry and clotted with blood. For an instant, I thought that I was going to lose consciousness again. But then the stranger spoke, and I was forced to gather together my distracted thoughts.

"Do you want some water?" he said.

I managed to nod my head in assent.

The stranger stood up and walked over toward me. He was carrying a brown, earthen jug. He poured some water into a cup, and held it to my lips.

"Drink," he said.

As I swallowed, the water brought cool relief to my parched throat. I drank deeply from the clay cup which the stranger held for me. For a blissful instant, my thirst was slaked by the life-giving liquid. I felt my nerves calm. But then, I looked again in horror at my immediate environment. I suddenly trembled as I contemplated what Leonardo would say when he discovered my previous night's antics and my present predicament. I was sure that I would receive a severe chastising. Nevertheless, I was anxious to return to the studio. Having been arrested by the guard patrols, I felt like a complete and utter fool. Inwardly, I seethed with anger and frustration. More than anything else, I wanted to pay Salai back for the vicious trick which he had played on me. At that moment, I swore that I would have my revenge.

After handing me the cup as soon as I was able to hold it, the disreputable looking stranger - whose name I later learned to be Signor Niccolo Machiavelli - walked slowly back to the other side of the cell. He left the earthen jug of water on the ground beside a simple wooden chair set in the center of the floor. When he reached his place, he sat down as before, with his back against the heavy stone wall. This time, however, he closed his eyes as if he were sleeping, or in deep contemplation.

I believe that for some time I slipped in and out of consciousness.

For precisely how long I lay lost in my nether-world, I am unsure. Eventually, however, with forced concentration, I summoned up enough strength to organize my wits. Though unable to quell the feeling of nausea in my stomach, I spoke:

"Victuals!" I said, thinking instinctively that the gnawing sickness in my belly would be eased if I had something to eat.

Immediately, Signor Niccolo blinked open one eye. "You'll have to wait," he said. "The guard does not come with food until evening. The warden plans it that way to keep the prisoners quiet; too hungry to protest in the daytime, and just full enough to sleep at night. But here, I have some crusts left over from yesterday's meal."

Saying these last lines, Niccolo tossed over to me a few stale pieces of bread which he had wrapped in a red handkerchief and saved in a small leather pouch attached to his belt.

I gnawed at the crusts of bread.

"What are you in here for?" I asked, after a time, not liking the thought that I might be taking food from a filthy, common criminal whose motives I was unaware of.

"I don't think that is any of your concern," said Niccolo. "Let's just say that the city governors do not always agree with my views and prefer to keep me quiet, not knowing the cost of their timidity."

"So, he is a common rabble-rouser," I whispered to myself.

Having regained consciousness to a reasonable degree, at this point my mind registered the low, dull thunder of marching feet and the sounds of shouting in the streets. Niccolo saw the questioning look on my face.

"Soldiers," he said, opening both his eyes. "The French king and his army."

"What is it you say?" I asked.

"The French invaded Florence at dawn. Not a man was killed. There was not even any fighting!" said Niccolo.

"But how did it happen?" I said.

"The French simply battered down the Porta Vincento, and crossed the main draw-bridge without hindrance," said Niccolo.

"But that is impossible!" I said. "My master himself designed the new draw-bridge. It was cast in layers of armor to make it impenetrable."

"I know nothing of what you say," replied Niccolo. "I know only what I heard the guards saying; that the draw-bridge was inoperative because of some broken cog-wheel mechanics which had not been repaired by the Duke's chief engineer."

I did not say anything more, suddenly realizing Leonardo's complicity in these events.

In order to verify the Signor Niccolo's report, I lifted myself up off the stone floor and walked unsteadily over to the window. Immediately, I knew that his words were true. I could see past a large cypress tree which grew just outside our jail-cell window. In its branches several young starlings played noisily, adding to the general confusion of the scene. As I looked from the window, which overlooked the Piazza Vecchio, not more than a hundred feet away, the steps of the Duke's Palace were filling up with marching, uniformed soldiers who arranged themselves in single file. Crowds of Florentines looked on, shouting and bickering amongst themselves. I could see fear in their eyes. They were afraid to hear what sort of servitude this French king intended to impose upon them. In the center of the chaotic crowds and the marching soldiers, stood the bastard, Charles, surrounded by his glittering entourage. From my close vantage point, I could see the thin, dry smile on his lips. His beady, black eyes surveyed the spoils of his conquest. King Charles' ugliness was legendary throughout Italy, though when I saw him in the flesh, it did not quite measure up to the gossip which I had heard in the streets of Florence. Charles stood, slightly deformed by a back which was twisted, smiling sardonically at the people who were now under his power. His hand was on the hilt of his sword. He had never even had to draw it out of its scabbard. In fact, his thin, frail arms looked like they would probably be incapable of performing such an act, even as a mere gesture of victory.

Having verified Signor Niccolo's explanation of the disturbances

outside, I turned away from the window and walked over to the single wooden chair which stood in the middle of our cell. I sat down heavily. Although I felt no sympathy for these no-good Florentines who had allowed the French to invade their city, I shuddered to think that I had been blind-drunk in the gutter a mere few hours before the invasion took place! I felt my heart palpitate at the thought. Inwardly, I grimaced at my folly.

During the rest of the afternoon of that day which I spent in the humiliating confines of the city jail, I sat in silence. Signor Niccolo did not seem to be bothered by my sullen behavior. He sat with his back against the stone wall, busily scribbling notes in a thin, shabby red book which he took, together with a pencil stub, from his leather pouch. When I looked askance at his activity, Signor Niccolo laughed.

"Do not worry," he said. "The guards give me paper and pencils to write with since they know that it is the only way they can keep me quiet. They know that there is little chance anyone will ever read my words."

As the afternoon wore on, the commotion in the streets died down. After making a long speech, in which he made certain that Florence knew she had been well and truly conquered, Charles declared that he and his army would rest in the city for a week or so and then march on to vanquish the other divided states of Italy. He announced that a contingent of soldiers would be left behind, to insure his interests. While I periodically went over to the window to observe the proceedings, Signor Niccolo sat apparently oblivious both to me and to the events outside. So absorbed in his work was he, he scribbled in a manner which had a quality of desperation about it. Although I was curious as to what exactly he was writing, I did not think it appropriate to inquire. Anyway, it seemed certain that it could not be anything of great importance.

As Signor Niccolo said would happen, towards twilight a guard came down the jail passageway with victuals for the prisoners. The meal consisted of a bowl of lukewarm broth, which was supposed to be soup, and one greenish crust of bread for each man. The guard also refilled our earthen water jug. After we ate, darkness soon fell. With not even a tallow candle to light, Signor Niccolo and I lay on our separate piles of

straw matting at opposite corners of the pitch black cell. For quite some time, silence reigned. Then, unable to sleep, I decided to provoke Signor Niccolo to conversation.

"Please tell me what crime you committed to be thrown in here," I said. "You know my circumstances from the drunken state I was in when I was brought here last night, but I know nothing about you, other than that you profess views which the city governors find unpalatable. I would like very much to hear more of your story."

For several minutes, the silence continued. I could not see Signor Niccolo, and so I did not know how he reacted to my words. After some short time, however, hesitatingly at first, from out of the darkness his impassioned voice declaimed the following plea:

"Why have I been imprisoned?" he said. "Perhaps, in general, the reason lies in the fact that those who dissent from official dogma must pay dearly for their views."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I have been incarcerated because, for some time now, I have protested openly in the assembly the way in which we self-professed men of culture and learning fight amongst ourselves and invent ways to kill each other in a manner unknown even to the beasts," said Signor Niccolo. "Florentines know nothing of what is noble and brave! Our governors are weak-willed, lily-livered cowards, and the Duke is no better. Why should these men deserve our loyalty? What Florence needs, what all of Italy needs, is a strong-willed ruler who will stop the petty bickering that divides us."

"But how is that possible?" I said.

"In the book which I am writing at present, I advocate a political system which is under the absolute control of a Prince who must be as strong as a lion, and as sly as a fox," replied Signor Niccolo. "Under such a system of state-craft, we should be able to protect our beloved nation against aggressors, such as these French infidels who have so blithely invaded our land. Instead of fighting amongst ourselves, we should be able to rally together as a people united under one supreme leader, in order to dispel such invasions!"

At the end of this unexpected, passionate speech, Signor Niccolo was

silent for a few moments. When he spoke again, his voice sounded tired, and worn.

"But I talk too much," he said, sighing heavily. "Talk is idle. It grows late. Let us sleep."

Yet, I was unable to sleep for quite some time. I lay on the rough stone floor, thinking about Signor Niccolo's words. He was a man who took fate into his own hands. He acted according to a morality of his own making. He professed a code of behavior which was a balanced mixture of logical cunning and sheer ruthlessness. As I tossed and turned on my bed of straw matting, squirming to find a comfortable position to sleep in, I thought of how Signor Niccolo's story colored the day's events. After all, was it not Italy's own fault that Charles, bastard King of France, was free to exercise his open bid to rule all of Europe with an iron gauntlet? He came as a conqueror. He was the scourge for our sins which Fra Girolamo had promised. Yet, despite the warnings of Fra Girolamo, and despite the words of Signor Machiavelli himself, now that it had happened, the invasion seemed almost anti-climactic. It seemed that not much would change, that life in Florence would go on the same as it always had. Her destiny, it appeared, was unalterable.

As I lay sleepless, contemplating Signor Niccolo's story, I also reflected on my own personal history. I thought about my loyalty to Leonardo, and began, for the first time, to question what sort of mutual bond it was based upon. I also thought a great deal of Lisa; of the secret which we shared, and of my pledge not to forsake her trust. For a fleeting moment, I realized, but did not openly acknowledge to myself, the fact of my drunken self-revelations to the old rag-vendor woman. Lastly, for perhaps the first time ever, I consciously reflected on the indisputable role which Salai played in my life. I recognized that he was a disruptive prankster who delighted in disputing reason; a trickster who loved malice; a rival who goaded me to passion! I knew that it was my sacred duty to rid myself of his devilish influence.

CHAPTER 16

Shortly before noon the next morning, as I had hoped would happen, Leonardo came to bail me out of the city jail. For an instant, as he looked at me through the prison bars, I thought that he was going to turn away in disgust and leave me to spend the entire three day sentence usually given to makers of public mischief. The guard who had led Leonardo down the prison passageway harangued about how there was enough for city officials to contend with in catering to the whims and wishes of King Charles and all his men, without having drunken troublemakers like myself loose in the streets at all hours of night. However, Leonardo ignored the guard's complaints. He looked at me with a hitherto unknown gleam of curiosity in his eyes. My heart was gladdened when my master took out his purse and paid the small fine which was required to free me. He motioned for the guard to unlock the jail-cell. "Come along, Francesco," he said, taking me by the arm.

Just before I left the cell, I turned and nodded a curt good-bye to Signor Machiavelli, who nodded to me in turn, and seemed about to speak a few words in farewell, but then thought better of it and resumed his writing. As the heavy, iron door swung closed, I immediately forgot about Machiavelli's plight. With great contentment, I followed my master down the dim passageway into the streets.

Outside, the day was pleasantly mild. Thick grey clouds overhead shielded the city from the sun's rays. As Leonardo and I walked at a brisk pace through the bustling streets of Florence, I noted the activity around me. I was looking for signs that Charles' invasion had changed the demeanor of the people. However, other than the fact that now and then small groups of thick-set Norman foot-soldiers and lean, sharp-faced Breton archers could be seen lounging in the sidewalk bistros, calling

occasionally to the young Florentine maidens who passed by, life in Florence went on much as always.

On reaching the studio, I immediately went up the stairs to my room, washed my hands and face, and combed my hair. I knew that Lisa would be arriving for her session soon, so I wanted to make myself presentable. I changed into fresh work clothes, and then went down the wooden stairs to the front studio where my master always conducted Lisa's sittings. There, I saw Salai in his usual place. He was tuning the strings of his silver lyre. Sitting before his easel, Leonardo was filling in the background to Lisa's portrait. Painted in dark browns and greys, it suggested some distant, unknown shore. There were two rivers with swirling eddies, lush vegetation, and the outline of a far-off castle concealed in the mist, surrounded by rocky crags.

When he noticed that I had entered the studio, Leonardo asked me to mix some new paints and to prepare his palette for the sitting. This I did with great satisfaction, since Leonardo did not watch over my shoulder. I was still mixing the required paints when Lisa arrived. Salai answered the door and let her in. Lisa was accompanied by Maria, who sat quietly just inside the studio door. Brief pleasantries were passed between Lisa and Leonardo. By the time Lisa was arranged in her chair, I had finished preparing my master's palette. Leonardo then took his seat, and the session officially began.

As usual, Salai played his lyre - on which even I must admit he had become quite expert since he had practised much during the past several weeks. As she was wont to do, Lisa sat calm and complacent, stroking the fur of Leonardo's white Persian cat, which lay contentedly curled in her lap. As for my part, I was set to work varnishing a picture which I thought Leonardo had long finished and forgotten: his painting of Bacchus. Leonardo ordered me to perform this task as a punishment for my irresponsible behavior during the night before last. Until that day, I had always despised this painting, and made certain that it was covered with sack-cloth and stored with all of Leonardo's other unfinished paintings. Naturally, Leonardo had used Salai as his model for this picture. But even

so, as I applied the first coat of varnish to its surface, I could not help but admire the painting's strange allure. In the expression of the mysterious, mythical Bacchus pointing cunningly toward the entrance of a cave, my master had captured the fear in the heart of all unwary innocents. Although I was at first somewhat disturbed by the painting's irreligious, pagan inspiration, I was inwardly pleased to perform my designated labor. Looking back on it now, I realize that I was secretly content not only because this job allowed me to make recompense for my unethical behavior, but also because it allowed me the opportunity to let my eyes caress Lisa for long, lingering moments as I plied my brush.

Ah, indeed to be in love is most splendid! I never knew such contentment as during that brief time of my life which I spent adoring Lisa. Her delicacy of expression mystified me, and drew me irresistibly toward her. As I sat working at my easel that day, performing my penance for Leonardo, Lisa's eyes often met mine, and sparks of fire passed between us. I could see that she had been thinking about me as I had of her, and that she too was eager for the coming night, when we would rendezvous once again in the privacy of her room.

As usual, the afternoon sitting ended only when the shadows in the studio grew too dark for my master to continue painting. After Lisa and her maid-servant departed from the studio, Leonardo stared for a long while at the portrait, and then he stood up and declared that he was leaving to go to the hot baths, and would not be back to sup. Unexpectedly, then, Salai and I were suddenly left alone together in the studio. Although I wanted to make all haste and finish my chores so that I could rest and then prepare myself to go to visit Lisa, I felt compelled to confront Salai for having abandoned me after my ordeal at the wine-cellar. I considered that if he apologized profusely enough, I might even be persuaded to forgive him. If not, my path was clear; I would be justified in pursuing whatever revenge I sought.

Determined to confront him, I strode over to where he was sitting. At first, Salai took no notice of me, but pretended to be absorbed in shining his silver lyre with a cloth of soft lamb's wool. However, I refused to be

taken in by his ruse. I drew a deep breath, and stood rigid, with my hands on my hips.

"Salai," I said. "I believe that you owe me an apology for abandoning me the night before last. You knew very well that the city guard patrol would arrest me; it was a dirty trick you played."

"Oh, come now, Francesco," said Salai, stopping his polishing and looking up at me with a sly expression of innocence on his face. "Forgive me for my mischief, but you deserved to be taught a lesson. I played a merry prank which I thought would perhaps teach you to shake off your constant melancholy. You always seem so morose and glum."

"You have no right to take it upon yourself to criticize my behavior," I said. "You would do well to look to your own conduct; you are guilty of such wickedness that my tongue would burn to speak of it."

"Oh, Francesco," said Salai. "You think that you are so distinguished and respectable, yet you are really an ignorant fool. Why must you always be so anxious to guard your honor and self-serving reputation? You despise me because I live solely for sensual gratification, but what alternative do you offer? You take refuge in a specious, sulky solemnity which I find repulsive."

"How dare you speak to me in this way?" I said, glowing with indignation. "How can you chide me for my desire to admonish vice? I do penance in the name of virtue. You would lay siege to my words of reason, and stir me to passion! You want merely to have another companion in damnation; but I refuse to be attracted by your wiles. I despise the poison of your devilish resolve!"

"Why, Francesco," said Salai. "I truly do not understand why you are so irate. You refute passion with such keen emotion! Is it that you are so unsure of yourself that you find it necessary to protest so? It seems to me that your dogged, self-righteous convictions are becoming more and more of an overbearing nuisance, even to yourself."

"Do not speak to me in this way!" I cried.

"Listen to me," said Salai. "What I tell you is for your own good. Take some delight in life, before it is too late. Seek the company of some sweet lady; find the boldness to take a mistress. Live for intrigue, and for the pleasure of the moment!"

I was silent after Salai uttered these last words. Without knowing it, he had caught me in my sin. As I considered his words, I realized that, in his dull-witted fashion, Salai had pierced the heart of the matter. How could I judge his immoral behavior when I was already guilty of the very depravity which he advocated? Although my relationship with Lisa was no doubt filled with more grace and distinction than the illicit activities which Salai revelled in, it was useless to pretend that it was really any different. My lust was the sort of infamy which Salai would gloat over and sneer about if he discovered its existence. For this reason, my pride was without substance. Despite the promise which I had so recently made, I saw that it would not be easy to rid myself of Salai's influence. In his canny, simple words, he embraced the complex feelings which animated my very spirit at that time. Knowing that my intrigue with Lisa was the driving force in my life, I could no longer retain my prejudice against Salai. Burdened, yet also somehow relieved by this knowledge, I muttered a few empty words to the effect that I was sorry to have taken his good intentions amiss. Then I returned to my duties about the studio, leaving Salai looking pleased, but somewhat dumbfounded, by my inconsistent behavior.

CHAPTER 17

After finishing my appointed tasks about the studio (which included setting Leonardo's painting of Bacchus by an open window so that the first coat of varnish could begin to dry) I reposed in my room for an hour or so in anticipation of the long, all but sleepless night ahead. Upon waking from my pleasant rest, I poured some water into the porcelain basin beside my bedstead and bathed my face with the refreshing water. I then donned my best red leather tunic, which I remarked was getting rather shabby, and would soon need to be replaced. Before leaving the upper floor of the studio, I boldly entered Salai's room to check my appearance in his hand-mirror. I splashed myself liberally with the musk-scented perfume which he keeps in the small, crystal bottle on his dresser. I then felt ready to set out for my rendezvous with Lisa. I descended the front staircase and, feeling fresh and sprightly, I stepped out into the street.

The night was sultry, as were many during those early weeks of mid-summer. The sky was cloudless and full of gay, bright twinkling stars. Although the air was heavy with a stickiness which soon made my tunic cling to the skin on my back, I nevertheless retained my good-natured composure as I began my journey toward Giocundo's mansion. The giant, black, iron hands of Florence's great tower clock were creeping closer to the midnight hour; however, in the streets which I passed through, the laughter of lovers could still be heard coming from the sidewalk bistros and cafes. Evidently, the sweet-mouthed Florentine maidens who frequented these establishments felt absolved from adhering to the midnight curfew due to the presence of their new-found, stalwart French companions. As I passed one of these bistros, I unconsciously noticed the slit-eyed, wasp-like Florentine whom I knew to be Giocundo's valet. He was sitting, stroking his carefully trimmed beard, while talking to an old woman whose back was turned to me, but whose posture resembled that of the old rag-vendor to

whom I had recently revealed my secret in the wine-cellar. Although I thought it strange that Giocundo's valet had not accompanied his master on his trip to Pisa, I dismissed this thought from my mind. Neither did I pursue the notion that this man could actually be conversing with the same old rag-vendor woman from whom I had purchased the golden finch. I knew that a powerful man such as Giocundo would have spies about the town, but it seemed impossible that the decrepit rag-vendor was in cohorts with the merchant. No, these thoughts did not perturb me. I was inflated with my sense of well-being. Indeed, I was almost merry! As I walked along, I thought that Salai was surely right. It was true that I had been too hard on myself of late. I told myself that life was meant for joyful living, and that the night was made for love.

It was not long before I reached Giocundo's back garden gate. Humming a soft tune to myself, I unlocked the gate's latch. Without hesitation, I entered the garden and walked up the footpath toward the house. Overhead, the moon was fat and round as a giant pearl. By its glowing, silver light, I could see that the trees in Giocundo's garden were heavy with figs, and that his vines were laden with clusters of full-ripened grapes. Still humming my cheerful melody, which I had often heard Salai play on his lyre, I continued up the footpath. On reaching the square, alabaster courtyard at the back of the mansion, I saw that the wooden shutters to Lisa's marble balcony were open wide, and that she was standing on the balcony, awash in the pale moonlight, awaiting my arrival. She spoke a few endearing words of encouragement to me, and I quickly ascended the vine-trestle. Not daring to linger too long on the open balcony, lest one of the servants below in the kitchen should come out into the garden to breathe the sweet night air, we embraced briefly and then immediately entered her room, closing the shutters behind us.

Wearing a sheer, silken gown, Lisa was enveloped in the lamplight. As my eyes drank in her enchanting beauty, all feelings of guilt and reluctance were washed from my mind. At that moment, I knew that I could devote myself solely to ensuring her every happiness. No doubt, I had, indeed, been most foolish to subject myself to such monkish rigors in the past. Knowing that I was soon to enjoy Lisa's treasures, I wanted nothing

more. Just seeing the lamplight play on the soft curls of dark brown hair falling about her bare shoulders filled me with delight. My soul was cleansed of despair. If I was no longer the proper, pious, iron-willed youth which I strove to be, at least I was content with my folly. Despite inarticulate, faint twinges of misgiving, I was truly thankful for the good fortune which clearly was mine.

While I was thinking these thoughts, my eyes gradually became accustomed to the surrounding darkness. By the flickering lamplight, I could see that the room was essentially as before, except that now the battered wire-cage in which the tiny golden finch was perched hung by a silver chain in one corner of the room. After securing the shutters and drawing the curtains, Lisa led me over to her canopied bed. While we lay, talking in an idle fashion and making the gestures of frivolous delight, the finch chirruped a pretty song.

"Do you like it this way?" Lisa would ask, first kissing me softly, and then with increasing ardor.

"Most assuredly," I replied.

"Very well, then," said Lisa, speaking in a low voice, caressing me boldly, in search of her pleasure.

Lisa's warm lips tasted of cinnamon. I pulled her closer toward me. As her pale cheeks flushed with pleasure, I undid her silken gown. Throwing off all inhibitions, I was soon inflamed with an uncontrollable passion. My hands caressed Lisa's breasts; my eager mouth sought her red, ripe nipples. As I struggled to take off my tunic, my loins burned with energy. With a swift thrust, I penetrated Lisa, and we were locked in love's embrace. Panting with passion and clinging tightly to one another, we trembled and quivered as we sought to consummate our love. Together we shared a period of mounting emotion until, in a shuddering moment of satiated desire, we exhausted our love and were unable to continue.

For some time, Lisa lay silently with a faint, dreamy smile on her lips. We both knew in our hearts that we were equal partners in the consummation which had just taken place. I was about to speak, when Lisa put one finger on my lips, and bid me listen to her for a moment.

"Francesco," she said, "I have entrusted you with my secret, and you have proven yourself a most worthy companion."

"Thank you, mistress Lisa," I said. "We have shared a moment of passion together once again, and I am content that I have been able to be of service to you."

"Yes, but now, I must speak to you of the child," said Lisa. "I can no longer go on with my plan to tell my husband that it is his. Now that it is certain I am with child, my greatest desire is to escape from this city, to flee from Giocundo."

"You cannot be serious," I said, shocked by Lisa's words.

"I am a prisoner here," said Lisa, a tear forming in her eye. "Let us escape together, Francesco. I will go with you wherever you choose to take me."

"You have not considered what hardships such an adventure would entail," I said. "For my part, I would have to give it much serious thought. Such a great change...such commitment. And we have no money; you will have none of the comforts which you are accustomed to. It is a dreadful sin and bad luck will surely follow wherever we go!"

"But no, Francesco," said Lisa, "all will be well. When we depart from here, we shall not go empty-handed; we shall take my jewels to sell. Maria will accompany us to look after my domestic needs. And we have the golden finch to bring us luck!"

For a moment or two, I hesitated. But, in the after-glow of our love-making, I was overcome by the temptation of Lisa's proposal. I thought that, indeed, it would be sublime to escape from Florence. I longed for the sort of contentment which her plan promised to make possible. I thought to myself, "We shall escape together and leave behind all memories of this blessed, unholy city over which the golden sun shines without giving any human warmth."

"Yes, we shall go together," I finally said to Lisa, unable to resist the pleading look in her eyes. "Now let us sleep, it will all too soon be morning."

CHAPTER 18

For nearly a full fortnight after my second intimate meeting with Lisa, nothing of great significance occurred in my personal life. During this fortnight, I worked about the studio as usual. I applied the second and third coats of varnish to Leonardo's "Bacchus", and I began to burnish a gilded frame in which Leonardo wanted the painting remounted. "We have had an offer for it," he declared one afternoon. "From the servant of an anonymous patron."

During this interval, Salai was rarely seen. Perhaps this is partly why time seemed to move so slowly. Salai had grown strangely melancholy soon after my last conversation with him. For two or three days, he shuffled about the studio, in one of his dark moods. He strove in vain to put on a false smile to mask his unfamiliar disquietude. He spent a night or two carousing wildly about town. Then he announced one evening that Florence was far too dull for him. He and his friends were going off on a junket to Rome. There, he maintained, the wine-cellar patrons knew how to drink and revel in earnest!

As for Leonardo, during this time, he spent the afternoons painting his portrait of Mona Lisa. Late at night, he sat by the window. With desolate eyes, he stared at the stars. On a great, virgin sheet of white lamb-skin parchment, he traced the paths of the heavenly bodies with his silver-point pen.

Apart from my more mundane tasks around the studio, I also worked long hours sorting out Leonardo's notebooks. This was my prime concern and main responsibility. With Salai out of the way, I was able to spend uninterrupted evenings sifting and sorting Leonardo's scraps of scattered genius. As I deciphered and compiled his memorabilia, I thought of how

very proud I would be to present the finished notebooks to him. Yet, I knew that this would have to be accomplished soon if it was to be done before Leonardo began his imminent journey toward the dark castle of Death which impatiently awaited him.

Naturally, during this period, I also thought a great deal about Lisa's proposal to escape from Florence together. I thought of Venice as a likely place for us to flee to. We could hire a small boat to take us down the swift river Arno to the main port of Venice, which lies at the great river's mouth. Once, as a boy, I had seen the city of Venice while accompanying my father on a winter's voyage made from our family's mountain home in the terraced countryside of Bologna. I remembered the warm early morning sun shimmering on the crystal water of the canals. My father had taken me to that floating, island city to show me the splendid sights, and to buy special seeds and other supplies needed for the coming spring season. I remembered the central fish and farmers' market, and I thought that I could perhaps find work there, or close nearby. "Perhaps," I said to myself in an increasingly confident tone, "I could secure employment as an apprentice to a carpenter, or some similar honest tradesman." I envisaged Lisa and I renting a small loft apartment overlooking the canals; perhaps with a view to the Sea. She would care for the child which was to be ours, and I would come home after my day's labor to spend the evenings in the gentle firelight of her loving company. Yes, I thought, with a warm sensation in my heart, in Venice, Lisa and I could live in moderate comfort and continual, heavenly happiness.

But, for the moment, this all seemed like an impossible dream. I saw Lisa only when she came for her afternoon sittings with Leonardo. We were able to exchange only quick, furtive glances for fear that our secret would be revealed to my master. I knew that he would be furious if he discovered our immoral liaison. Sometimes Lisa and I were able to snatch quick kisses in doorways when I escorted her to or from her home. However, this was rare since Maria now usually performed this duty. Not able to resist temptation, Lisa, on her way out of the studio with Maria, brushed up against me whenever the chance arose. I recall that, one day, she passed me a note: "Francesco," its contents read. "Pray tell, when shall we go?

Time is pressing; my husband's suspicions grow new thorns by the hour. My heart is with you! Pray, let me hear from you soon! Your loving Lisa."

I read the words of this note over and over again. Often, I took the small square of crinkled, pink-pomegranate paper out of my desk drawer late at night, when I was supposed to be working on my master's notebooks. "Your loving Lisa." I read these words outloud again and again. They tasted of sweet cinnamon, and rolled trippingly on my tongue.

This, then was my personal sphere of existence. Within this inner-most circle of life, my mind was locked in a state of passive resistance; trying to maintain a balance between passion and the dictates of conscience and reason. Outside of this inner circle were the surrounding events of the public sphere. These events enveloped those of my personal life, yet at the time they seemed unrelated. It is only now, long after the facts themselves occurred, that I am able to draw connections. Even important events appeared merely as events, until they became history.

As I remember it now, after a week or so of occupation, King Charles and his army marched in double file out of Florence. The bastard King rode at the head of his army. Riding a giant white Arabian charger, he was dressed in a ludicrously ornate uniform made from the finest golden silk. Although he tried to fulfill his role as the powerful leader of a conquering army, Charles had trouble reigning in his great war-horse. He tugged at the silver bridle, and bounced about in the leather saddle with the uncontrolled, lunatic gestures of some child's ragamuffin-doll. Behind Charles rode his officers and cavalrymen, all clad in new uniforms of the best Florentine cloth. After these marched the thick-set foot-soldiers. Having raped Florence's maidens, and pillaged and looted the city's churches and homes to their hearts' full content, these soldiers marched out of Florence early one hot morning in mid-July. The sun glinted on their iron helmets, and on the heavy chests filled with silver and gold which Charles called Florence's ransom, and which was carried in brown woolen sacks on the shoulders of the newly sandaled foot-soldiers.

Soon after the departure of Charles and his army, an event which

seemed almost as abrupt as their arrival, more news reached Florence regarding the plague raging in the East. However, although there was some gossip and small talk about this in the streets, and even some debate amongst the city governors, not much was said seriously for quite some time concerning this approaching dilemma. Florence was not yet the grave-digger's paradise which it became in the weeks and months which followed, so for the time being life went on in its usual fashion of blissful ignorance and contented apathy.

For those who witnessed it, the period of the plague will certainly always remain the most gruesome and pitiful memory of their lifetime. This I know now, as I did not know it then. At that time, no one truly understood the rumors of plague in any heart-felt sort of way. Implications seemed distant, and consequences all so remote. There were not yet the daily processions of donkey carts heaped with bodies moving slowly through the streets, crying: "Bring forth your dead!", so little was done to preserve the health of the general populace. The wandering lepers were expelled from the city, but then no further measures were taken. The city governors debated legislation, and the fickle crowd swayed first one way and then the other, forever undecided. No one in Florence realized that her citizens were soon to be faced with the need to pray for nothing less than a miracle to stop the sand-storm of pestilence which was almost upon them. Men yawned and drank coffee in the bistros. Women hung their sheets to dry in the morning sun. Children sang and played on their way to school. Florentines had not yet committed that act of corruption whereby they brought the wrath of God upon them. For a time the mundane routine of everyday life prevailed, and the people of Florence continued to balance their fears and their desires.

The military presence of Charles and his army had ruled out the possibility for internal unrest in Florence. However, with the departure of the army, this impediment was removed and the streets began to buzz with the discontent which had until then been pacified. Inner-city turmoil resumed. Oaths were sworn. Fights broke out. Factions feuded over the central question of the time: whether or not the severe predicts of Fra Girolamo were justified in the eyes of God. It was suggested that he was

perhaps himself an evil omen; that his fervor resembled madness. Franciscans mediated for a more balanced dedication to things solely religious. They pleaded for a sense of faith whereby Florentines would practise good works, first and foremost, and leave the rigors of ritual to take a lesser priority. Self-flagellation, they maintained, was absurd and abhorrent in the eyes of our Maker. Houses divided on the issue, and for some time it appeared that the question would end in a stalemate. Inevitably, however, the tide turned against Girolamo.

At the time, I paid little heartfelt attention to the increasing tension of this fundamentalist debate. However, thinking about it now, I realize that the images of that period are etched on my mind, like the vivid colors of some lurid fresco whose smeared, running oils depict the scenes which follow.

In truth, I had a most mixed reaction to the events which I am about to describe! On the one hand, I was horrified that the people of Florence could turn so cruelly against the prophet whose words they had formerly clung to with such gratitude and veneration. On the other hand, I understood that what was to happen could not be stopped. It had to be. Fra Girolamo only succeeded in frightening the people; they could not tolerate his existence. When the will of the people flared up, Fra Girolamo Savonarola was condemned for his heresies. He was burned at the stake for the dark, unwelcome tone of his warnings.

In recounting these events, I must be wary of giving the erroneous impression that these things happened overnight, without motivation. Indeed, tensions built for quite some time. The multitude, ever fearful of deviating precipitously from the righteousness of God's way, but also desiring to be rid of Girolamo's foreboding presence, quarreled amongst themselves about which path to follow. There was a great deal of bickering before the crisis came to a head. Then a proposal for a solution was found. It was demanded that Fra Girolamo prove his validity as the emissary of God by performing a miracle for everyone to see. It was decreed that he undergo a trial by fire. This, it was declared, would secure the wavering faith of the people.

And so it was that Fra Girolamo's predictions of ruin made him not only the people's possible savior, but also their probable scapegoat. The trial by fire was set up in the Piazza della Signoria, in front of the Cathedral Santa Maria. When the day came, the city guards sealed off the Piazza. The mob gathered to watch Savonarola prove his state of grace, or perish in the flames. The demonstration was to be simple, for all to understand. There would be a lane of fire. Girolamo would walk between the two walls of burning sticks. It was to be proof by ordeal. The delighted crowd cheered Girolamo's entrance. The gaze of Heaven was upon Florence. I knew that I was soon to witness a miracle; to see the repudiation or vindication of the ways of these Florentine sceptics and sinners. The noon bells rang in the Cathedral spire, and a general cry went up to pronounce the commencement of the proceedings.

A young Franciscan, who had issued the original challenge to Fra Girolamo, now moved forward and stood beside the resolved Dominican monk. From my place in the crowd, I could see that his brow was visibly dripping with perspiration. Lacking Girolamo's fervor and conviction, it was clear that this young friar regretted his earlier pledge to show-up the elder monk. However, it was too late for any thoughts of turning back. The crowd's cheers built to a crescendo. At Girolamo's own behest, one of his elected disciples stepped forward, and put a torch to the oil-soaked tunnel of sticks. Then there was an breathless hush as the two priests moved slowly forward toward the burning tunnel.

It was then that the thunder rumbled. Murmurs were heard in the crowd. The heavens darkened. Angry cries went up. Heedless of the people's outcry, a passing storm-cloud burst. Grey rain streamed down, drenching the people in the streets below. Heavy clouds rolled over, and the ensuing fierce but brief downpour made impossible any further attempt to re-ignite the pyre. The miracle was not to be. The rain seemed like some sort of judgement; a sign from heaven that the whole event was disgraceful. Whether or not Girolamo and the young Franciscan both would have turned instantly to ashes, or walked from the flames, we would never know. Fate, it seemed, had played its forestalling hand.

Yet, even fate was powerless to stop the flood of history's irreversible events. That very night, Florentines chose to direct the course of their own fortunes. Distraught by their agony of faith, the mob set out to punish this monk who had promised them a miracle. They laid siege to Girolamo's monastery, and dragged the priest from his cell. With stomping feet, the throng carried Girolamo through the streets, back to the Piazza della Signoria, where both the bonfire of vanities and the trial by fire had taken place. There a new pyre had been built. A tribunal of city governors sat ready. With little pretense toward justice, Girolamo was summarily condemned for heresy and sentenced to death. The impatient crowd pressed forward, shouting curses and demanding that the heretic be burned. Because it was the will of the people, Girolamo was led up the stairs of the make-shift pyre by a hooded executioner. He was strapped to a cross-like scaffold and, without further ado, the executioner descended the ladder. At a signal from the governors, the executioner motioned for the crowd to stand back. He then threw a lighted torch onto the high pile of oil-soaked wood, and a red pillar of flame rushed up toward the heavens.

When the crackling flames reached him, Girolamo twitched with small movements. Almost instantly, his emaciated face melted like yellow candle wax. He died screaming raucously, with a blue, foaming mouth and rabid, black-burning eyes. His sermons had stirred Florentines' ascetic passions, and then their fear and wrath. Unable to perform a miracle to save himself, now he would be forever silent. When the fire was spent, the city guards piled the ashes of Girolamo's remains into a cart, and took them to the Ponte Trinita. From the height of this bridge, they dumped his blackened bones into the deep waters of the great river Arno.

CHAPTER 19

Soon after the burning of Girolamo, the deadly plague broke out in Florence. When it struck, it spread without mercy, causing the deaths of countless human beings. Physicians were unable to stop it; no knowledge was able to control it. Half of Florence's citizens repented on their knees, begging for God's mercy to eradicate the pestilence. The other half feasted and drank with greater fervor than ever, in a desperate effort to wash the bitter taste of plague dust from their mouths. But neither method of escape seemed to be in the least effective. Would-be-saints and unrepentant sinners alike were consumed by the disease. Sons and daughters, husbands and wives watched their relations die. Entire families perished within weeks as the disease raged through every quarter of the city.

The first time I truly realized that the outbreak of the plague was imminent occurred when Salai returned from Rome after only two days absence. His face was crestfallen. The sparkle in his dark green eyes still glowed, but only feebly. His broad grin had been erased. He entered the studio where I was working on the final stages of burnishing the gilded frame in which I was to mount the painting of Bacchus which I had recently finished varnishing. Immediately, I knew something was terribly wrong.

"What is it, Salai?" I asked with alarm.

"The wine-cellars in Rome...are empty," said Salai, in a shaky voice hitherto unknown. "They have all been closed down. All merriment is dead. There are corpses everywhere. The sick and dying wail in the streets. They are all covered with hideous boils and lesions which are said to spread like wildfire. It was horrible, Francesco. Utterly horrible!"

With these last words, Salai's face blanched to a pasty, almond white. Unwilling to speak further about what he had seen in Rome, he turned and

left the front studio to ascend the stairs to his room on the second floor where, he said, he was going to rest.

After Salai left the studio, I continued with my work. Although I would have liked to have had the time to reflect on the implications of Salai's news, my master had told me that the servants of the wealthy, anonymous patron would be arriving that afternoon to take delivery of the painting of Bacchus. It was my duty to have it ready on time. And, indeed, it was fortunate that I did not pause to mull over Salai's bad tidings since, just as I finished setting the varnished painting in its newly gilded frame, I heard someone knocking at the door.

Thinking about it now, I am not sure whom I had expected to see when I opened the front studio door. I had not given any serious thought to who the anonymous buyer of "Bacchus" could be. However, when I opened the door, I received a sudden shock. Instead of the docile face of a single servant of some unknown patron, I was confronted by two figures whose forms I knew all too well. In an instant of startled recognition, I saw standing there on the steps the slit-eyed, wasp-like Florentine and the huge shaggy bear of a man, both of whom I knew to be the personal servants and henchmen of Lisa's husband, the merchant Giocundo. As I stood gape-mouthed, unable to utter a word, the slit-eyed Florentine spoke:

"Ah, Messer Francesco, we have not met, but I have heard much about you," he said with a thin smile, making a staccato clicking sound with his tongue upon finishing his phrase. "You have a painting ready for delivery, I understand?"

"Yes, the painting is ready," I replied, managing to find my voice.

"Excellent," said the wasp-like Florentine. "My master, the worthy merchant Giocundo, asks would you be so kind as to accompany us back to his house? He requires some informed advice about how the painting should be hung to best advantage. Also, I believe, he requires a few words regarding a more personal matter. I'm sure you have no objections."

Naturally, I was unable to refuse Giocundo's servant's request. I knew that my master would be furious if I did anything to foul up the commission. Even without this pressure, I had little choice but to comply

since, after saying his last lines, the wasp-like Florentine motioned to his burly companion to pick up the framed picture of Bacchus, which was waiting by the door, and then motioned to me with a sharp, adamant gesture that we should depart.

I put on my best cloak, and, though reluctant, I accompanied Giocundo's servants through the narrow, winding streets toward the merchant's home. The shaggy bear-like man with the black patch over one eye carried the large painting and walked in mute silence just behind Giocundo's valet and myself. The wasp-like valet was a short man, and I noticed that he had heel-raises on his sandals to give him an extra inch of stature. He occasionally stroked his black, stiletto beard and glanced at me in a curiously threatening manner as we walked along. His every glance increased my nervousness. In the streets around us, signs of the plague's harmful presence could be seen and heard. The bodies of the sick and dying were being dragged about from place to place as the relatives of these victims sought aid in curing the fatal disease. The wasp-like Florentine seemed unperturbed by the scenes of death around us and, in fact, it seemed to me that with his every glance toward me, he was taking some sort of perverse pleasure out of gauging my reaction to the pitiful sights which we witnessed on our journey.

When we reached Giocundo's household, the slit-eyed Florentine bid me follow him. He led me to Giocundo's study door. He knocked on the door, and I was led into the room. Inside, the room was somber. Giocundo sat behind his huge, oak desk. His bald head was bent over the large accounting books spread over the desk's surface. For quite some time, he did not look up. I shuffled back and forth from one foot to the other. I coughed nervously. But still the merchant ignored the fact of my presence in the room. After a minute or so, however, he raised his head. For a long moment, his tired brown eyes looked at me with a pained expression, almost as if he was trying to remember why I had been called there. Then, after this taut moment of silence passed, he spoke:

"So," he said, visibly regaining control of the situation, "I understand that you are an apprentice to the artist, Da Vinci."

"Yes, that is correct," I said, hoping against hope that this was the sole reason why I had been summoned.

"And how is the portrait of my young wife progressing?" asked Giocundo. "Its completion seems to be taking an inordinate amount of time."

"It is slowly nearing its final stages," I said. "My master is now working on the painting's background, and on the details of the lady's features. His methods are most methodical, and that is why it takes so long."

"Ah, yes," said Giocundo, "the Maestro is renowned for his painstaking exactitude. Well then, enough of that for the time being. Let us return to the matter at hand. Have you brought the other painting which I wish to buy? - the "Bacchus" which, through my sources, I have heard is so alluring."

"Yes, I have," I replied.

"Splendid!" said Giocundo. "I shall have it hung together with the portrait of my wife, when that painting is completed. They shall make a marvelous addition to my personal gallery. A most fitting tribute to your master who, I am told, is not long for this world. A most worthy investment, indeed!"

"Quite worthy, I'm sure," I said, momentarily buoyed with hope at this congenial reception.

However, at this moment, Giocundo's face darkened, and his eyes narrowed as he focused more intently upon me. "Now, enough of this banter," he said. "Let us move on to the real reason I have called you here. To put it bluntly, you have soiled my reputation. My sources inform me that you, a miserable artist's apprentice, have had the audacity to take your pleasure with my wife."

I opened my mouth to try to defend myself, but Giocundo raised his hand and bid me not to interrupt him.

"I know that this is true, so do not waste your breath by trying to deny it," he said. "My sources are one hundred percent reliable. My personal valet was told this news by one of my former employees; an old rag-vendor woman who once worked in one of my factories, churning the wool in the dying vats. She knew that she would be paid handsomely for the

information. A few golden florins buys many flasks of wine to help an old woman pass through these troubled times."

Again, I opened my mouth to make some attempt to refute this accusation, but Giocundo raised his hand once more in an impatient gesture for me to remain silent.

"Young man," he said, "do not be such a fool as to add further deceit to your already existent crimes. After receiving a whipping she will not soon forget, my gentle wife has confirmed this information. The question is no longer whether the accusations are true, but rather what am I to do with you now?"

Uncertain whether this question was rhetorical, or whether it demanded an answer, I thought it safest to say nothing. Unable to think in any coherent fashion about how to alleviate the tortuous position I was in, I merely stood dumb, fidgeting with a loose thread which was unwinding from the sleeve cuff of my street cloak. After a long moment of tangled silence, I opened my mouth, hoping that I would somehow spontaneously formulate a denial of Giocundo's accusations. But no words came out. My mouth was dry, and my tongue felt swollen and incapable of articulating even a simple syllable. I knew that everything the merchant said was true. I was beaten. All that remained was for Giocundo to declare in what brutal manner my punishment would be administered. I anticipated him handing me over to his thugs, who would undoubtedly perform his dirty work for him. I shuddered to think that my adventures would end like this. At that moment, however, Giocundo broke my fearful chain of introspection. He spoke now in a low, gravelly voice which gripped my every nerve and riveted my attention.

"So then, what to do with you?" he said again, as if still turning the thought over in his mind. "I have given this question much careful thought. You have attacked my honor by your impertinent behavior. In my younger days such lack of respect would have demanded the severest punishment. But I am an old man now, and I no longer set much store by honor. I am a businessman. As a businessman, I have a proposition to offer to you which may be mutually beneficial. Are you willing to hear

this proposal, or would you rather I followed my first instinct and have one of my trusty servants slit your throat and feed your carcass to my dogs?"

"No, please," I stammered, "do go on! I am most grateful for any opportunity to rectify my wrongs in a manner which will both serve your advantage and keep me from a painful punishment."

"Fine," said Giocundo. "I see that you are a reasonable young man. This then is my proposal: I require an heir to my household; a son to inherit the property and wealth which I have spent my lifetime accumulating. I now know that the child which my wife is bearing is not of my seed. However, no one else need know of this. Now, what I want - what I demand - is for you to swear a bond of secrecy with me. Under this pact, I shall be entitled to the child once it has been born, presuming, of course, that it is a boy-child. In return, you will be free to take young Lisa away with you. She is of no further use to me once her service has been performed, and I could not tolerate her company knowing of her ingratitude and unfaithfulness. The first condition of this pact is that you must say nothing of our bond to Lisa until the child is safely in my possession, since my wife would never consent to such a business proposition. The second condition is that once I have the child in my possession, you and Lisa must leave Florence immediately, since my position here must remain intact."

With these last words, Giocundo sat back in his deep leather chair and waited for me to speak. His impassive brown eyes gazed at me steadily, speaking of hidden cruelties which lay beneath their placid surface. I struggled to order my thoughts. Although horrified by his proposal, I did not dare to say so openly. If I refused to comply, it was certain that the merchant would have his henchmen dispose of me in the ruthless manner which he had detailed in such casual, off-hand terms. Yet if I agreed, would my consent not merely serve to dig me deeper into the mire of immorality into which my initial act of unscrupulousness had led me? How would I later explain the bond to Lisa once the child had been born and Giocundo came to take it from her? How could I live with the knowledge that I was a part of such blatant devilry?

Yet, even as I struggled with these soul-wrenching questions, I knew that I had no other choice but to agree to the merchant's offer. He had promised that Lisa and I would be allowed to escape to freedom together, and again I imagined the sun-filled canals of Venice. Unable to refuse, I nodded my head in silent agreement to Giocundo's terms. After all, I thought to myself at the time, what man can be expected to possess the strength to face head-on the certain cruelties of the present when there exists the promise of future happiness?

Once he was certain of my accord, Giocundo summarily dismissed me from his study. Even before I was out of the room, he had already returned his attention to the columns of sums in his accounting books. Escorted by the merchant's wasp-like valet, I crossed the marble floor of Giocundo's cool, lofty hallway. Cursing the day when I first entered that hallway, I gladly exited through the front door which the valet opened for me. Without looking back, for fear that Lisa might be watching from an upper story window, I quickly left the household behind me as I hurried through the dusty, plague-ridden streets of Florence.

CHAPTER 20

After my interview with Giocundo, my foremost desire was to seek refuge in the tranquil seclusion of my private chamber. I needed time to still my pounding heart so that I could think rationally about the implications of the merchant's abominable proposal.

After hearing Giocundo's words, I was encouraged to think that if I continued to go along with his proposition, Lisa and I could eventually leave Florence behind us and start a new life in Venice together. This gave me courage to go on. At that time, I cared for no one and nothing save Lisa. However, along with my love for Lisa, I had also begun to consider the child which Giocundo spoke so glibly about kidnapping. This child, the innocent target of his extortion, was of my own flesh and blood. I knew that it would be terribly wrong to abandon the child to fulfill the merchant's selfish desire for an heir. Desperately I sought for a solution to the mess in which I seemed so inextricably embroiled.

Understand, it made no difference to me whether Giocundo threatened my own life. However, I knew that if I refused to comply with his wishes, Lisa also would inevitably fall under the weight of her husband's retribution. My options were limited. I could not risk Giocundo's wrath any further. It occurred to me that the merchant would probably have me watched, and that it would be impossible to contact Lisa without his knowing. No matter how I reasoned the situation through, the walls seemed to close in around me, and I could see no possible breach through which to escape. I felt I was doomed; and I could hardly be blamed for this feeling. It is only now, with the comfortable distance of hind-sight, that I am able to see that all of my anxieties meant nothing. Events had a way of happening by themselves. For all my plotting and planning, I floundered like a fish in my efforts to change course. I was swept along in the tide

of history, demonstrating little control over the fates and fortunes of my own destiny.

When I returned to my master's studio, after my first meeting with Giocundo that August afternoon, I found Leonardo gone and Salai alone in the front studio. For some time, I stood in the small courtyard which fronts our studio, and I watched him through the open window before entering. He was moping about, doing nothing in particular. One moment, he would stand idly, with hanging head, muttering softly to himself and looking at the floor. The next moment, he would shuffle about; perhaps stopping to tidy up a pile of scattered papers or to replace the lid on an overturned, empty ink-jar. His shirt-tail hung out of his britches, and his jerkin was stained and torn. During the time of the plague, Salai often walked about like this -- in a state of slothful despond. He seemed burdened by such grief as he had never known before. He had curbed his nightly bouts of debauchery, saying that all was stale to his appetite.

To all outside eyes, it appeared that Salai's solemnity was the result of a new-found capacity for pious introspection. Yet, I knew that in truth he had reformed his roguish ways solely because of the malady which later was named the Black Death. Fear of infection haunted Salai's dreams, and sometimes I heard him crying out in his sleep at night. If he was more fretful than ever before, it was because he dared not go any longer to the taverns of Florence. His pensive melancholy was caused by the knowledge that the already half-empty wine-cellar were the centers of contamination. The grave physicians of Florence had issued public proclamations which told that even by touching a victim's clothes, a person would become infected by the Death. Scared out of his wits by such austere pronouncements, Salai avoided all society. But he was surely not retreating from his former ways! Although some might have believed that such a change was possible, I knew better. Salai's conflicting emotions were all too apparent to my eyes. I saw that he was brooding not because he had learned any profound lesson connected with repentance and holy living, but rather because so many of his friends had already died, and he was astonished that such things could happen. Perversely, he found such a reality terribly unfair. He did not believe that his energy could so easily be sapped. Impatiently,

he was biding his time until he could once again follow the course of his burning desires. I knew all this and so, although Salai was evidently greatly upset and in need of some gesture of kindness, I saw no reason why I should feel it part of my duty to show him even the smallest token of charity. He had enjoyed tormenting me in the past, and, I, in turn, now relished his disquietude.

When I entered the studio, Salai looked at me with listless eyes. He spoke to me immediately.

"Francesco," he said, "our master asked me to give you a message as soon as you got in."

"What is it, Salai?" I asked, taking off my street-cloak, and inwardly hoping that my master had not left instructions for me to do any evening tasks, since I wanted to go to my room to rest and think over how to respond to Giocundo's proposal.

"Our master says that you are to prepare his dissecting table, and make sure that his surgery instruments are at the ready," said Salai. "Also, Maestro Leonardo wants his anatomy charts to be collected together for easy reference."

"But what is all this in aid of?" I asked.

"It is in aid of nothing!" declared Salai, coughing slightly after this outburst, and then falling back into lethargy with his next phrase. "It will help no one, but our master has got it into his head that with his dissection kit he can discover the cause of this plague and concoct a cure to save all of Florence."

"But how does he propose to do that?" I asked.

"That is the thing!" said Salai, his voice rising again. "The city governors have forbid Maestro Leonardo to conduct any experiments. The people have become too superstitious, and there would be a terrific outcry if our master were permitted to tamper with the just retributions of the Almighty."

"So how is he going to obtain the body of a plague victim to dissect?" I asked.

"Maestro Leonardo has given an order," said Salai, hesitating for a moment before going on. "Tonight you and I are to make a trip to the city cemetery to steal an infected corpse from the public grave."

"Surely, you are not serious!" I said. "How are we to accomplish this feat? Does our master not know about the dangers of contamination?"

"Yes, of course, he knows," said Salai, "but he says that we will have to take the risk for the good of Florence. I want nothing to do with it, Francesco! I am deathly afraid of catching the sickness."

"I do not like the idea any better than you, Salai," I said. "But if our master has given the order, we dare not disobey. We shall take whatever precautions are possible, and try to accomplish the task swiftly. If we do not linger around the infected corpses, perhaps we will be safe."

And so it was that Salai and I, after some further small debate, reluctantly set out that very night for the city's main cemetery, to rob the public grave of the plague victims as Leonardo had bade us. We waited until shortly after midnight to begin our journey. Although there were few guards left who were willing to patrol the streets during the pestilence, there was still a curfew in effect and so we needed to be very certain that no one discovered our mission. Under the cover of darkest night, Salai bridled my master's mule and I tied a large brown burlap sack to the beast's back. This was the bag in which we were to stuff the body of our victim. Keeping as much as possible to the alleyways and the smaller, less guarded streets, Salai and I walked hurriedly through the desolate night as we made our way toward the main cemetery.

We soon reached the crowded cemetery. There was a slight wind that night and clouds periodically moved in front of the sickle, harvest moon. In the distance, I could see the rows of marble headstones in the plots where the rich merchants bury their kin. The forms of these monuments appeared and then vanished again as the clouds drifted in front of the moon. All around me, I could hear the buzzing of night insects. Luminous fireflies darted about in the gloom. In the distance, a watchdog began to bark. Handing the reins of the mule to Salai, I lit a screened lantern to guide our way. Once this was accomplished, Salai and I began to walk slowly down the cemetery pathway, which was bordered on both sides by dark cypress trees. Soon we entered the polluted mist which covered the flat ground of the poorer section of the cemetery which lay before us.

Immediately upon walking toward this section of the cemetery, my nostrils were assailed by the stench of the plague victims. About a hundred yards away loomed the mouth of the open pit into which the corpses had been dumped by the plague patrols. At first, these unfortunate victims had been given proper Christian burials, albeit in cheap, coarse-grained coffins. This practice was soon eliminated, however, and now the hundreds of victims who died daily were merely thrown into this giant open grave, which had been dug by one of Leonardo's mechanical shovel devices. These victims of the plague had no mourners at their funerals. They received no benediction. The epidemic fever ravaged Florence to such an extent that little attention was paid to the passing away of individuals. Before approaching the pit, I took out a small bag of oats to keep Leonardo's mule quiet. I tied the beast to a nearby cypress tree and untied the burlap sac from its back. Then Salai and I walked toward the grave.

Around the outskirts of the pit, the ground was dry and the earth crumbled under our feet. By the glow of the lantern which I held, I could see that the sides of the grave were steep and slippery. I could not see the bottom of this black vault. Indeed, it appeared bottomless. As we drew closer, the pervading odor of death was almost overpowering. I was not greatly afraid, but Salai was almost whimpering. When we reached the edge of the pit, he pointed in horror at the pile of corpses below. "I feel dizzy, Francesco!" he declared. I squeezed his arm hard. "Get a grip on yourself, Salai!" I told him. "Do not lose all courage now."

After finding the least steep path by which to reach our quarry, I gave Salai the lantern to carry and told him that I would take the brown burlap sac. Together, we began our descent into the pit. The smell of death almost choked us, so I tied my handkerchief over my mouth and nose to help lessen the stench of corruption. I was nauseated by my proximity to death, yet strangely I also felt calm. My heart ticked in an even, measured rhythm. Salai, however, was made wretched by the situation. He was white and shaking. He kept whispering to me that we should turn back, yet I knew that the sooner we completed our task, the better off we would be. I tried to ignore the stifling smell, and I swallowed the hard lumps of fear which rose in my throat. I was resolved to complete our errand

with the greatest efficiency possible. As distasteful as the task was, I would not allow my master to accuse me of failing to carry out his orders once again.

As Salai and I climbed slowly and carefully down the steep descent of the pit, all was deathly silent. After descending two or three meters, a bat flew up and brushed my face with its wings. "Salai, take heed!" I shouted. "This is the dwelling place of bats!" But already it was too late to speak my warning. That very instant, a whole horde of bats flew up from under the overhanging ledge of the deep grave, and Salai was greatly startled. He slipped on the steep path, and he dropped the lantern which he was carrying. Instantly, we were surrounded by the pitch black of the grave. "Fool!" I cried out to Salai, as our lamp sputtered its last fizz of life and then tumbled into the pit below. Instantly, we were enveloped by the dark night. For a long, terrible moment, everything was silent.

Then Salai began to whimper in the darkness. I could hear his teeth chattering. "Be quiet!" I hissed. "For although there was the roar of blood in my brain, I knew that it would do us no good to lose our heads and panic. And, indeed, I was right. After a minute or so of standing in darkness, clinging to the wall of the pit, our eyes began to adjust to the gloom. Occasionally, as the moon passed overhead, its silver rays penetrated to our depth and illumined the grave. Taking a deep breath, I declared, "Salai, we shall go on." I was adamant that we fulfill Leonardo's orders. Salai soon agreed to continue after I explained to him that he was already closer to the bottom than the top of the pit, so he might just as well go the rest of the distance. "Yes, yes! Alright," he declared. "But I shall wait until you descend to my level before I go on."

Once I had carefully climbed down to where Salai was waiting for me, we went on together. With no further incident, we reached the bottom of the grave. I saw that there were corpses piled one on top of the other. There was mud sticking the bodies together like soft mortar between bricks. Apparently, the grave had been dug so deep that the water-table of the great river Arno leaked into the bottom of the pit. The loathsome stench was indescribable. I could hear the patter and squeaking of the rats which fed on the putrefying corpses. I shoved Salai forward.

"Go on," I said. "Reach down and grab one of the victims by the collar. The sooner we get it over with, the sooner we can get out of here."

"Quit shoving!" cried Salai. "Why must it always be me who goes first?"

"It was you who dropped the lantern," I said.

"Oh, alright," Salai replied. "But just quit pushing at my back!"

As Salai turned to say these last words, he lost his footing once again and, before I could shout to warn him, the rocks beneath his feet gave way. With a muffled scream, he fell from the ledge just above the bottom of the pit.

"Francesco! Help!" he cried.

But I could not at first see where he had fallen to.

"Salai, where are you?" I shouted into the darkness. "You must keep speaking to me so that I can discern where you have fallen to."

"Quickly!" shouted Salai. "I am here just below you. I am sinking into the mud. Quickly save me, or I shall drown!"

Although I smiled for a pleasurable instant at the thought of climbing up the steep path which led out of the pit and leaving Salai to drown in the dark grave below, I rejected this thought and prepared to rescue him. Holding one end of the burlap sac which I was carrying, I used it as a rope to throw to Salai. Once he grabbed onto the other end, I demanded that he secure a plague victim by the collar so that we could fulfill our master's orders. Salai had no choice but to agree. Soon we had the victim stuffed into the burlap sac, and we began our ascent from the pit.

Together, Salai and I dragged the sac up the side of the huge open grave. Digging our fingernails into the grey-green clay of the wall, we climbed slowly toward the lip of the grave. Loose pieces of rock fell down the side of the steep incline as we scrambled higher. Just as we reached the top of the deep culvert, my fingernails lost their grip as they scratched against a patch of black slate. Clinging tightly to the wall, I prayed not to fall into the void. "Be careful now!" I called to Salai, who was climbing right behind me. "The rock here is as slippery as the surface of a looking-glass!"

After some time, Salai and I finally crawled out of the grave and into the silver moonlight. Exhausted, we lay for a minute or two to get our breath. All around us, insects played their frenzied night song. Again, the wings of a bat brushed my face. Yet, now I felt safe. My thoughts raced in an instant of sudden relief as I realized that we had made it safely out of the deep hollow. The image of my master's pleased expression when he found that our mission had been accomplished rose in my mind. In the near distance, the barking of a watchdog could be heard. Wishing only to get out of the cemetery as quickly as possible, I enlisted Salai's help, and together we dragged the body-sac over to where Leonardo's black mule stood, munching the last of its oats. Salai and I then heaved the ragged body-sac over the mule's back. Without delay, we left the cemetery gates behind us. Mud oozed in my leather sandals as we entered the city streets. I was filthy up to my knees, and Salai was covered with slime up to his waist. We did not utter a word to each other as we walked hurriedly through the dark, empty night, returning home with our ill-gotten cargo.

CHAPTER 21

As I reconstruct my story from fragments of memory, the past is pulled slowly up toward the surface of the present. Yet sometimes the images are confused and difficult to hold still in my mind. Just such a time is the period of my delirium. Of that time, I know only that soon after my grave-robbing expedition with Salai, I fell terribly ill, and it was thought that I was going to die. I broke out in red blisters and shivered with the chill sweats which foreshadow the fever of Black Death. All this I have been told since my recovery. Yet, I myself remember nothing of that time. Certainly, I recall no pain. All that exists in my memory are the moving tableaux of a delirium-dream, whose unfolding I must now strive to explain.

Unlike my recurrent vision of the Summer Solstice period, the events of my delirium-dream are not set within the confines of the walls of Florence. Yet the images of this dream seem an extension of my earlier nightmare. However, rather than seeing my death in the dark, realistic terms which have already been described in this chronicle, in the delirium-dream which played slowly in my mind, all has become accentuated, as if I am walking through a lacquered landscape painted in pastel colors. Without thinking consciously about it, I know that this is the land of wayfaring souls; the place to which my spirit will fly after my moment of corporeal death. To this purgatory, I have been consigned to wander until I am released through the munificence of a power which, as of yet, I do not understand.

When the dream begins, I am following a trail of cloven hoof marks which winds down a country footpath. I am carrying a brown clay water pitcher. On either side of the footpath grow aromatic beds of green and azure herbs. The air is fresh, and the wind's light, playful caress

ripples the silver under-leaves of olive trees in the near distance. All is pure and delightful. Puffs of soft, milky cloud float on the horizon. As I watch these clouds slowly drifting, I gradually become aware that this place resembles the mountain San Gervaso, where I was born and raised. I seem to be viewing a lingering memory from when I was a boy, yet I am certain that the events which I am about to describe never truly happened. As I walk along the sandy footpath, which is scattered with smooth, moon-white pebbles, a voice whispers in my head:

"That which you seek is in this direction. Follow your instinct and you shall discover the truth which you would behold! Follow your desire, and all shall be well!"

And so, I wander onward, following the cloven imprints which seem to be the only clue of the direction which I am to follow. Occasionally, white-robed figures pass by me on the path, going in the opposite direction. They are faceless, empty-handed figures whom I know to be lost souls. They pay me no heed. They have been stripped of their senses. For these pale, hollow ghosts, communication is impossible.

After some time, I eventually come to a meadow-like plateau which is nestled on the shoulder of the mountain whose winding footpath I am steadily ascending. As I look out from this resting place, I can see what appear to be the small houses of my boyhood village below. I can see fields of wheat planted in straight-plowed furrows, and long rows of red, ripening tomatoes. Surrounding this scene of pastoral contentment are plots of blazing, yellow mustard. And beyond, scattered groupings of fat, woolly sheep which graze on the lush, green grasses which blanket hills and valleys stretching into the distance as far as the eye can see.

"This is life as you have known it," whispers the voice in my head. "Here all is well, and there is nothing wanting to you. Here lies the peace which you strive to secure for your soul."

Listening to the voice, I nod my head in agreement and satisfaction. After a brief pause at this resting place, I resume my ascent. I breathe

deeply of the wind, and it fills me with confidence. I do not pause to consider that I am moving further and further away from the scene of contentment below. Indeed, I simply think to myself, "These are the familiar surroundings I knew so well as a boy. Here I was blissfully happy in the bosom of Nature." And now, as I dream the vision initiated by my brain fever, I am wholly content with what seems to be my lot in the after-life. My mind is clear; my thoughts are carefree. I know nothing of fear. The soil is moist and cool beneath my bare feet. The air is filled with the strong, pungent odor of fresh herbs. All around me, larks and crickets sing their joyful songs. Onward I wander, seeing the beauty of this world, yet not properly understanding the significance of all these things.

"There will be time to sort out the petty intricacies of these affairs," whispers the voice in my head. "Pay no heed to mundane details of such little consequence. Follow the trail before you, and your quest shall surely be accomplished. The source of truth is the goal which you seek. From this spring you shall fill the earthen jug which you carry."

Having no other option than to obey this voice, I continue on my journey. I do not know whether to trust the voice, yet I am ignorant of what else I can do, except follow where it leads me.

After some time, having climbed to an altitude which appears to be close to the summit of the mountain, I come to the place for which I have been searching. It is a natural fountain; a mercurial spring which is the source of a small brook whose silver-running waters murmur pleasantly in the afternoon sunshine. A short distance from the spring itself lies a glassy, limpid pond. This pond is pure and deep. Around the pond are the green shadows of mossy rocks. Bullfrogs croak their bass-throated songs from amongst lily pads floating on the pond's blue-green surface. Boldly, I move forward to fill my clay water jug from the clear, still reservoir.

But it is at this moment that things go strangely awry.

As I approach the pond, a bird alights on the bough of an elm tree

which shades the opposite bank of the pond. Immediately, I recognize this bird to be the same golden-yellow finch which I gave as a present to Mona Lisa. I stoop to fill my water pitcher from the pond, and the finch begins to sing a mellifluous song. At that moment, I look down into the water. The grey shadow of a fish darts away, creating small wavelets just below the pond's surface. In the rippling water, I see my reflection as if in a mirror of shattered crystal. However, I see that this reflection is not my own, but that of the leering face of Bacchus depicted by my master's painting which I so recently varnished and re-framed. Startled by this unexpected apparition, I lose my balance. Before I can regain my footing, I tumble forward into the pond.

Downward I plunge, spiralling headlong. I am unable to control my descent. I cannot breathe, and I cannot utter the words which form in my feverish brain. I open my mouth to cry out for help, but instantly my words are drowned by the in-rushing waters of the quick-silver pond. As I lose consciousness, I hear the jeering laugh of the Bacchanalian voice in my head. Inwardly, I curse my lack of foresight. I curse this damnable truth which I strove all my lifetime to avoid. Downward I plunge, until liquid silence envelops all.

PART IV

CHAPTER 22

When my fever broke and I woke from my delirium, August had passed and it was almost Autumn. Although my life was no longer in danger, I was still terribly sick for several weeks. I spent much of my time sleeping. During my few waking hours, I watched from the window of my room on the second floor of Leonardo's studio as the green and silver leaves of olive trees dried into tiny, crinkled scrolls which fluttered slowly to the ground in all the neighbourhood courtyards.

Nature, it seemed, was unfolding in her usual fashion. However, although the cycle of the seasons continued in its immutable manner, Florence herself was greatly changed. As I lay awake on the crumpled sheets of my sweat-soaked bed, I noted that there were none of the usual noises of the neighbourhood which used to disturb my rest. There was no sound of children laughing and running while at play. There was no shop-woman's song drifting over from the bakery across the alley from our studio. There were no birds singing in the trees. The streets were empty. Silence prevailed. The city seemed blighted, like a giant apple with its insides hollowed out.

Although this emptiness was the dominant feature of my recovery period, I recall that when I woke from my delirium, my first impression was of the intrusion of noise into my deep, dream world of sleep. I remember the sounds of the open shutters of my room banging in the wind. I recall a familiar voice, which was muffled only slightly, calling to me. Slowly, I surfaced from my sleep like a swimmer struggling in water which is

strangely thick and heavy. My tongue felt swollen and I was unable to reply immediately to the voice which was calling my name, calling me out of slumber, bidding me to rise.

It was only after some time - I do not know exactly how long - that I recognized that the voice calling me from my sleep belonged to none other than Salai. My eyes blinked several times, but at first everything was blurred. Slowly, however, my vision focused. Gradually, I saw that Salai was standing beside my bedstead. As I struggled to become wide-awake, he mopped my brow with a white handkerchief, which he repeatedly dipped in the porcelain wash-basin beside my bed.

"Ah, finally you are awake!" said Salai, as I showed signs of returning to life. "You have been babbling in your sleep like some moon-mad idiot for three full days and nights now. I was beginning to get fed up with your thrashing about all the time. What on earth were you dreaming about to cause you cry out so, as if you were gasping your last breath?"

"Salai, do not speak so loudly," I said in a doleful voice, "Please, show some slight, token pity! Do not pepper me with questions at the moment. I can barely think. My head is filled with such pain that it feels as if it is about to split in two."

"Well, it's not my fault that you have such a weak constitution!" said Salai, tauntingly. "First Leonardo's mule fell sick, and then you. Here I've been nursing you through these past weeks and do you thank me for it? No! The first thing that you do upon waking is to start complaining!"

"Salai, please!" I said. "Just tell me, for how long have I been unconscious?"

"You have been in the grip of the fever for well over a month," said Salai. "You are very lucky to be alive, though personally, I do not understand why you fell ill in the first place. I myself felt a bit wheezy for a few days after our expedition to the cemetery, but I did not contract the sickness as you did!"

"Yes, well that is my double ill-fortune," I said, trying to ignore Salai's grin and his impudent air, yet stirred to passion by his insolent remarks.

"Such ingratitude!" said Salai. "Surely you owe me a pleasant word of thanks for the kind aid I have given to you!"

"I am grateful for any service which you showed me while I was unconscious," I said. "But now I wish that you would leave me in peace so that I may regain my strength as quickly as possible."

"I would be only too glad to leave you to your own devices," said Salai, now with a wicked, mischievous look on his face. "To be honest, I am utterly indifferent to the state of your health and well-being. However, Maestro Leonardo has given me instructions to make you as comfortable as possible while you convalesce."

"I can easily do without you playing nurse-maid to me," I said.

"I wish that were true," said Salai. "Do you think I relish the thought of being cooped up here in the studio catering to your needs?"

"Do not feel that you are under any obligation whatsoever," I said, struggling to lift myself out of bed, but then collapsing because my muscles were as soft as wet wool.

"You see!" said Salai, smiling malevolently. "You lack the power to do anything much by yourself for quite some time yet. You had better just act the angel and accept my aid gracefully, or else I shall see to it that your life is made more miserable than ever you imagined possible!"

With these words, Salai ended our conversation by clapping his hands together, as if in a provocative display of his regained strength and energy. Now I realized that his reasons for helping me in my time of need were anything but pure. But although I wanted to speak out against him, the throbbing pain in my head restrained me from further protest. I emitted a feeble sigh of resignation and then lay quietly. Resuming his innocent act, Salai wrung out the handkerchief he had used to mop my brow. He gave it to me so that I could hold it to my forehead. Then he turned and left the room. I heard his dancing footsteps echo down the corridor.

Left alone in my room, I was at first at a complete loss about what to do. Not wanting to fall asleep, for fear that I might never wake again, I lay with my head propped up on my pillow, reflecting on all that had recently happened to me, and planning for the future.

To begin with, I thought about the necessity of recovering as soon as possible, so that I could arrange to see Lisa once again. I did not know

whether she had been informed of my state of health, and I was certain she must be terribly worried since I had not contacted her during the whole period of my fever. I imagined how I would gently dry the joyful tears which Lisa would cry when she saw that I was alive and well. I greatly looked forward to being with her again. She was my main reason for wanting to recuperate and go on living.

As I lay awake in bed, staring at a jagged crack in my white-washed ceiling and resisting the urge to sleep, I also thought about Giocundo's recent proposition to me. I was loath to comply with the terms of his bargain, yet I saw no way to rebel. I imagined what would happen if I decided to thwart the merchant and it seemed little consolation to me that, if I was caught trying to trick him, it would be said that I died for love. Nevertheless, I resolved that, whatever the cost, I would beseech Lisa to run away with me immediately. "Perhaps," I thought, muttering out loud, "together Lisa and I can escape from Giocundo before it is too late and I will be forced to honor the terms of the bond which I have sworn through my tacit consent to the merchant's proposal."

Upon waking from my delirium-fever that first afternoon, I also thought briefly about my relationship with my master, Leonardo. I thought about how I would humbly accept his praise for the perils which I had undertaken and survived in order to comply with his orders. I thought about how I would adopt a posture of modesty as he thanked me for my keen attention to duty. I wondered whether his dissection of the plague victim which Salai and I had secured would result in the discovery of a way to wipe out the spread of the disease for good. "Perhaps," I even went so far to think, "I shall receive a public commendation for my assistance in saving the population of Florence from complete extinction."

Along with my thoughts about Lisa, Giocundo, and Leonardo, as I lay awake, warding off sleep that first day of my convalescence, I also thought a great deal about Salai. I contemplated with disgust his renewed vigor and vitality. I could not comprehend why he had been spared, while I had been stricken by misfortune. I shuddered to think that he was going to make my torture his pastime for the entire period of my recovery. I could

not bear the thought of having to appease him while I lay invalid, at his mercy. I cringed to think that I would have to continue to abide his pranks and his taunting animosity.

It was at this moment that I first thought of how exquisite it would be to do away with Salai. "Why should I tolerate the scoundrel?" I thought to myself. "How delightful it would be to be rid of him once and for all!" I considered the many different ways I could accomplish this feat. Though, to begin with, I did not think about these things in any real seriousness, the various possibilities seemed delightful. Poison, I mused, would be the most satisfactory method of carrying out my plan. To see Salai writhing on the floor, his belly on fire after swallowing the last drops of a tainted goblet of wine, would be a most fitting revenge for all the trouble he had caused me in the past. "Also," I whispered to myself, "it would be a sure remedy for all the problems he will undoubtedly otherwise bring me in the future!"

For quite some time, I pondered these thoughts, turning this last prospect over in my mind, savoring the spice of its appeal. By keeping my thoughts active, I tried desperately to keep sleep at bay. Eventually, however, my eyelids began to droop and, in spite of myself, I was unable to stay awake. Although I repeatedly shifted my position on the bed, squirming in an effort to maintain consciousness, finally I succumbed to the drowsiness which lay heavily upon me. Lacking the strength to stay awake and watchful, I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 23

On the third week after I regained consciousness, I was finally able to get out of bed and stand on my own two feet and walk. While I still required a crutch, or Salai's shoulder for support, I was able to hobble about, first in my room, and then around the studios downstairs as well. Soon after I became active again, I learned that in Florence, the Black Death had taken a terrible toll. However, I could not bring myself to think about its full horrors. Because of the malady, my very life had hung by a thread. But I had survived the sickness! And that seemed to be all that really mattered. "Later," I thought, "I will offer a prayer of thanksgiving for my good fortune. For the present, I have more pressing concerns to which I must address myself."

Now, my most imperative concern was, of course, to meet with Lisa once again. I had learned from Salai that since the plague became virulent in Florence, Lisa seldom came to the studio for her sittings with Leonardo. As luck would have it, however, on the third day after I started taking my daily exercise, Lisa appeared for one of her infrequent audiences with Maestro Da Vinci. I recall that I had just descended to the bottom of the wooden staircase leading from the upstairs chambers to the ground-floor studios, when I heard someone knocking at the front door. My first thought was that I should not answer the door, since it was not my duty to do so. However, there was no one else about. Salai was nowhere to be seen. After calling his name once or twice, I decided to answer the knocking myself.

Although I had been expecting to see either the usual beggars pleading for kitchen scraps, or perhaps the plague patrols who came through the neighbourhood daily to demand if there were any dead in the household to be buried, neither of these were at the door. Instead, there on the stoop stood Lisa and her maid-servant, Maria.

Instantly, I realized that I should not have answered the door since my swollen, purple face greatly startled Lisa and Maria. I opened my mouth to tell them not to worry, that I was not contagious. Unfortunately, however, as soon as I was about to speak, Salai appeared and immediately stepped in front of me. He greeted the ladies and he ushered them into the hallway.

Once inside the hallway, Maria took her mistress's street-cloak and stood to one side. Salai made small talk. I hovered on the perimeter of activity, watching Lisa. All the while, she averted her eyes from mine. I did not comprehend her aloof behavior and so, despite Salai's protests that I was too sick to be downstairs while company was present, I waited for a minute or two and then followed Lisa into the front studio. This room reeked strongly of the preserving potions which Leonardo had used in his recent dissection experiments. I absentmindedly noticed the various body parts of his victim, which were now in labeled pickle jars arranged on the dissection table at one end of the studio. Inexplicably, I felt a faint twinge of nausea in the pit of my stomach. It was almost as if I recognized something familiar about the dismembered victim. However, I quickly dismissed this absurd notion from my mind. I focused on the matter at hand.

By the time I arrived in the studio, my master had already greeted the Lady Giocundo. It appeared that he had been expecting her arrival. He ordered Salai to prepare the paints. With a sweep of his arm, Leonardo took the dark cloth cover off of Lisa's portrait, which now always stood on his easel. He then immediately sat down to work. He contemplated his subject with a look of careful concentration. In hindsight, however, I wonder how much he truly saw.

To my eyes, Lisa was obviously pregnant. However, her loose-fitting black robes concealed much of the evidence from the eyes of those who were not aware of her secrets, as I was privileged to be. Leonardo, I am certain, never suspected that Lisa was with child. His concerns lay elsewhere, with the precise abstractions of art and its ideal point of perspective.

After a minute or two, Salai brought over the paints. Leonardo thanked him, gazing on him fondly. My master then began to paint with his finest ostrich-hair brush, adding touches of light and shade to his canvas. I saw that in his painting of Lisa's eyes and in the curve of her smile, Leonardo was striving to capture the mysteries of her soul. However, I also saw that he would never succeed. I realized that in a single, frozen moment of focus, the painter can spark imagination, but never fully penetrate the motivations of personality. Through the laws of perspective, he can give a semblance of depth and movement to the canvas but the function of his medium, like the art of instrumental music, is to evoke emotion, not to explain it. Only an artifice of words can do that.

It was at this moment, while I was reflecting on these matters, that Leonardo noticed me standing idle in the doorway. "Francesco, you should be resting," he said. "We expect you to get better as quickly as possible so that you may resume your duties. Now, please get back to your bed! You must conserve your strength!"

Although I would have protested that I wanted to stay, I knew that I had little choice but to obey Leonardo's dismissal. And so, I left the studio. Frustratingly, it appeared that I would not have a chance to communicate with Lisa that day. As I was returning to my room, however, I saw that the front door to our household was ajar, halfway open, and beside this door, sitting on a small wooden stool in the dim hallway, sat Maria. She was looking toward the street, a wistful expression on her face. Outside, the weather was grey and dreary. Gusts of wind picked up dried leaves and whipped them into black whirlpools which swirled about and then lost energy, dissipating into scattered leaves once more. Upon seeing Maria, it immediately struck me what I would do. To contact Lisa I would give a note to the maid to deliver to her mistress.

When I approached her, Maria looked up at me with candid eyes. I explained to her what I wanted her to do, and then I quickly scribbled a plea for Lisa to meet me. Unable to think of anywhere more appropriate on the spur of the moment, I wrote for her to meet me once again on the following Sunday at the small park on the outskirts of our quarter, where

we had met last time by accident. This was the only safe place which I could think of as suitable for a rendezvous. Having written my instructions, I folded the note into a small, tight square and handed it to Maria, who nodded her head to acknowledge my request to deliver the note discreetly, but then lowered her eyes, refusing to accept the small money which I offered in payment for her service.

Eventually, the time for my rendezvous with Lisa arrived. By then, I was walking moderately well. The pasty whiteness of my complexion had given way to a more healthy, ruddy flesh tone and my state of general health was so much better than it had been up to this point in my recovery that I felt more than capable of undertaking the journey to the park, where I hoped to see Lisa once again. The thought of being with her alone was incentive enough for me to endure whatever small suffering my pilgrimage would entail.

I remember that as I walked through the narrow, winding streets of Florence that day, the city appeared almost desolate. Occasionally, small clusters of men and women could be seen huddled together in front of shops the survivors of the plague had looted, but, for the most part, the streets were empty. In the city core, there was refuse piled in the gutters and fat rats scurried about, feasting on the garbage. As I passed along the path on the hill overlooking the stilt-houses of the poor wool-factory workers who live hard on the banks of the great river Arno, many gulls flew in circles overhead, diving to the ground to dine on the stinking scraps of debris left in the wake of the disease.

Although I was repulsed by the sight of these scavengers, as I walked along I reflected that despite the wasted appearance of the city itself, those of us who had survived the worst of the plague were most fortunate, indeed. Later, it was estimated that Florence lost well over half her population during the brief time which the plague took to ravage the city. During the period of my recovery, it seemed that those dark nights were over. "In truth," I reflected, "I am most thankful that this despair has nearly ended. I hope with all my heart that I will continue to be spared from the full impact of these horrors."

When I reached the park on the outside of our poor quarter, I entered the gates and walked down the footpath leading to the pond. All was quiet. There was no wind, no sound of bird-song. Though occasionally I could hear the rumbling of distant thunder, it was too far off to pose the threat of rain. Overhead, the clouds were as white as cotton. Though the threat of rain did not disturb me, however, I soon found the brittle stillness of the park disconcerting. This once pleasant refuge now appeared in a state of destitution. Where once flourished beds of roses, there grew rank weeds. Olive trees were bare and even the foliage on the hardy, coniferous cypresses was dried and falling to the ground. Though it was only mid-October, already it appeared that Florence was in for a harsh winter. There was a chill in the air and a frosty mist hung over the pond where the pair of white swans once swam. For an instant, I felt a pang of guilt when it occurred to me that the swans would be very hungry and I had forgotten to bring a penny-sac of crusts to feed to them.

But then, as I drew closer to the pond, I saw that the crusts would have been useless, even had I remembered to bring them.

I swallowed hard, for I saw that the water of the once-blue pond was now covered with a black, gummy soot. I stood in shock. I saw that the white swans were lying together on the opposite bank. Their feathers were covered with black slime from the pond and their long necks were entwined in what seemed to me to be a last, hopeless embrace before death. At the sight of the birds, I was greatly saddened. I heartily regretted my cynicism toward this city, which I so often thought of as detestable. I experienced a sudden, profound moment of re-evaluation. Desperately, I longed for healing. Yet, I knew that ill-grounded optimism could bring no true consolation to this place. Mere wishful thinking was useless. Responsibility entailed action and there was nothing I could do. Reluctantly, I recognized that it was necessary to suppress the sentimental undulations of my heart, if only for the sake of reason.

For quite some time, I waited for Lisa. When finally she arrived, she walked over to the bank of the pond where I was standing. She saw the swans, yet showed no outward emotion. She was dressed in a dark purple

street-cloak and she wore a sapphire brooch, together with ruby and emerald rings. She kissed me on the cheek in greeting. I could smell her perfume. I longed to hold her in a close embrace, however, I immediately perceived that she seemed moody, treating me almost with antipathy. As we walked together from the pond toward the wicker pagoda, with each passing moment I became more certain that, in some way and for some unknown reason, I had fallen out of favor with Lisa. When we reached the pagoda and sat down, she spoke to me:

"Francesco, I am content that you are well," she said. "When I did not hear from you for over a month after the plague struck Florence, I did not know what to think."

"I am well," I said. "I thank you for your concern. I am sorry that I was unable to communicate with you, however, I have been extremely ill for quite some time."

"Yes, the whole city seems stricken in a most regrettable manner," said Lisa.

"Yes, indeed," I said.

"In this same regard, I am sorry to have to tell you that even the golden finch which you gave me as a gift many months ago is now sick, also," said Lisa. "Maria thinks that the tiny bird might die if it does not soon regain its strength."

"That is regrettable," I said. "However, you must not cry over the fate of the golden finch. There are everywhere greater concerns which must be heeded first!"

"Yes? Do you think so, really?" asked Lisa. "Well, perhaps you are right. Certainly, the fate of the finch is a wearisome topic! Let us talk of something else."

"What subject would you have us discuss?" I asked, thinking it rather strange that Lisa seemed to be acting so abruptly, and wondering why she seemed to have grown so cold toward me.

"Let us discuss a story which my husband first told to me several weeks ago," said Lisa.

"Of what story do you speak?" I asked.

"Of a story about you revealing the secret of our liaison to some strange old woman in a wine-cellar!" Lisa replied. "Tell me, Francesco, does this tale have any truth to it? Did you betray me in such a way?"

"But no! Mistress Lisa, I have kept faithfully my promise to you!" I said, fearing to admit my confession and hoping to cover my sin with a lie.

"If only this were true," said Lisa. "I know, however, that it is not."

"What do you mean to do?" I asked.

"Since I have become privy to this knowledge, I have thought much about our relationship," said Lisa. "In many ways, you are a kind and considerate man. Francesco. You are not a brute, like so many of the other men I have known during my lifetime. I fear, however, that we cannot go on as lovers. It is too dangerous! My husband would undoubtedly discover us if we persisted in our folly. When that happened, we would be punished severely. It is better that we do not see each other anymore. You are unable to keep the secrets which I bid you to guard and you try to cover your guilt with petty falsehoods. You are not a man whom I can love with my whole heart! I cannot trust you fully."

"It is true," I said, lowering my eyes. "All that you say is true. I admit my confession to the old rag-vendor woman. But you do not know the circumstances and they would be impossible to explain properly to you! Please forgive me. Allow me to make amends."

"I am sorry, but I cannot forgive you," said Lisa. "Forgiveness is impossible."

"But my accidental betrayal is hardly important now!" I said. "We must affirm our love. Is my confession really such a great sin that you cannot forgive me? We must put this behind us. This is no time to falter! We must leave Florence together at the soonest opportunity!"

"I have great affection for you, Francesco," said Lisa. "But I do not know any longer whether I love you well enough to go through with our plan to elope together."

"But surely you cannot be so fickle!" I exclaimed, raising my eyes and looking directly into Lisa's.

"And you surely cannot be so naive!" said Lisa. "Knowing that you have betrayed me once, I risk too much by trusting you a second time!"

"Is it that, or is it that you now prefer to stay in the comfort and safety of your husband's fine house?" I said, with a desperate sneer and with obvious anger in my voice.

"Must you always be so suspicious and distrustful?" said Lisa with a sigh.

"Mistress Lisa, I know that your worries are heavy," I said. "But all this trouble will soon be over! Pray, dear lady, escape from this city with me!"

Lisa frowned. I could see that she was greatly reluctant to say anything more. I could think of no words to persuade her further, so I reached out and touched her hand. Still she hesitated, so I gently pulled her toward me and I kissed her full, red lips. Yet her passion remained unstirred. "If only she would say some small word of encouragement, or give me some sign, I would devote my life to her," I thought. But then Lisa pushed me away. She stood up. She hesitated for a moment, but then turned to leave. Without saying anything further to me, she walked away from the pagoda and departed from the park.

For a while after Lisa left, I sat in stunned disbelief. After some time, however, I too vacated the park. As I walked along, I cursed myself for allowing events to follow to this impasse. I tried to reason why it seemed to be my lot to suffer such internal misadventures. The very idea that Lisa could so easily abandon me would, before this latest encounter, have seemed unthinkable. However, now I knew otherwise. Lisa's cruelty astonished me, yet I now recognized that her nature was simply more self-serving than I had thought possible in a woman. Whether Lisa would eventually comply with my continuing wish to flee Florence together was in serious doubt. However, I considered that, in all likelihood, before too long she would relent. "Her desire to escape from her husband will surely overcome her fear of an unknown future with me," I muttered aloud.

Thinking intently in this manner, trying to foresee the probable modulations of Lisa's character, I hurried as quickly as possible through the city streets, returning to my master's studio. Already it was evening. Although the sun had not yet fully set, a pale, quarter moon was visible in the eastern sky. Storm clouds were gathering on the darkening horizon. As I neared the last leg of my journey, I began to feel faint and I realized that I was exhausted from my unaccustomed long walk. Colors swirled in front of my eyes, making me feel quite dizzy. Heartily I longed to reach my chamber, where I could rest and plan what to do next. I knew that I

would have to act swiftly. Just one thing truly mattered now: To escape from Florence with Lisa! Whatever the cost! But to escape!

CHAPTER 24

When I arrived back at our household, Leonardo was working in the front, octagonal studio. When I passed by the doorway, hoping to reach the stairs unnoticed, my master called to me. I saw that he was working at the far end of the room, where he had his dissection table set up. He was standing before the flailed thorax of the corpse of the plague victim which Salai and I had secured at such great risk to our lives. Leonardo was poking about with a pair of pincers, which were part of his surgical instruments.

"Francesco!" he called, when he saw me in the corridor. "I require your assistance for a few moments. Come, give me a hand."

"What is it you require, master?" asked reluctantly, knowing that Leonardo was wont to give tedious, impromptu lessons in anatomy and other such matters of science, yet not having the courage to tell him that I was uninterested in these things.

Having no other option, I entered the studio.

"Come nearer, boy!" said Leonardo, when he saw me hesitate upon approaching the dissection table.

"Yes, master," I said.

"I believe that I have discovered why I can find nothing the matter with this man," said Leonardo, signalling for me to hold the pincers and pull back the skin of the corpse while he rummaged about inside, cutting I knew not what with a long, serrated scalpel.

"Ha!" declared Leonardo, pulling a red, dripping organ out of the body. "Just as I suspected. Your trip to the cemetery was worthless, Francesco! Look at this man's heart. He did not die of the plague!"

"Did not die of the plague? But what do you mean?" I asked.

"The heart is burst!" said Leonardo. "And look at this man's neck. You see the marks? This man died of hanging from the gallows, not of the plague!"

"Hanged!" I exclaimed. "But are you sure?"

"Do not ask impudent questions," said Leonardo. "Of course I am sure. I was investigating the body for signs of disease and I did not stop to think that this man might have died in another way, but now the evidence is clear."

"But then you have learned nothing about the plague, as you set out to do!" I said. "The dissection was for nothing. All our efforts have been in vain."

"Oh, it has been a very interesting dissection, anyway," said Leonardo. "But, yes... unfortunately... of little use in curtailing the spread of the pestilence."

As Leonardo turned his back, leaving me standing next to the corpse with the pincers still in my hand, for the first time I took a close look at the head of the victim. It was in a large jar which was once used to store pickled beets. When I saw the face, I was greatly taken aback. The man in the jar was none other than Signor Niccolo Machiavelli, whom I had met during my overnight stay in the city jail! Fate, it seemed, had decided that I should bear witness to Signor Niccolo's ignoble death.

Seeing that Machiavelli had been hung for his crimes, I realized that his views must have been more important than I had assumed they were when first we met. After all, it seemed to me unlikely that the city governors would have taken the trouble to execute a common rabble-rouser at a time when death ruled the city. And, indeed, this viewpoint was later confirmed. Not long after his death, I heard gossip in the streets about a book written by Signor Niccolo. This book was entitled "The Prince". It was said that it had been smuggled out of prison and printed by some anarchist disciples of the executed Signor Niccolo. Like Dante's "Commedia", Machiavelli's book gained something of a notorious reputation about town when the city governors went to extraordinary lengths to ban its circulation. They claimed that it was written by a mind filled with nothing but notions of despotic devilry; by which they meant plans and

propositions for the overthrow of the state. The debate was inflamed when Signor Niccolo's disciples distributed pamphlets which refuted the governors' assertions and outlined the simple practicality of Signor Niccolo's views. Because of these views, it appeared that Signor Niccolo, like Fra Girolamo before him, had become a scapegoat, sacrificed on the public altar, for the pretended good of the people. The only difference, I reflected, was that one was executed for the shrillness of his ascetic, religious prophecies, the other for the nature of his worldly, political solutions. Although both of these men stirred the passions of the people and earned places in my chronicle through their stature as controversial figures of the day, in hindsight I recognize that neither one of them had any lasting effect on the life of the city. The fate of Florence, as I later learned, was bound to no man's will for salvation.

After our conversation in the studio, Leonardo turned his attention to another project with which he was already preoccupied, having all but forgotten about the dissection which he had just performed to such little avail. Before doing so, however, he declared that if I was well enough to go gallivanting around town all Sunday afternoon, then I must be well enough to resume some of my chores. Since it was already past suppertime, he ordered me to proceed directly into the kitchen, where I was to prepare the evening meal.

Although I wanted to go to my chamber to think about how to win back Lisa's favor, I reluctantly complied with Leonardo's orders. As it turned out, that supper was in several ways significant to the progress of my personal history. For this reason, I shall now attempt to explain the motivations which underlay the actions that it triggered.

We ate, of course, in the familiar surroundings of our household kitchen. I laid three places at the table, even though Salai was still not back from his afternoon's activities. When Leonardo was seated, I ladled soup from the kettle which stood warming on the black wood-burning stove. I placed three bowls of broth on the table, together with a plate of fresh bread and goat-cheese to be shared by all. Just as I finished laying the table, Salai burst through the kitchen door and bounded into the room. He

was wearing a rich burgundy shirt and tight, cream-colored leggings. He stood in the kitchen, a beaming smile on his face. With exaggerated precision, he took off his kid-skin gloves. Despite myself, I coughed self-consciously, adjusting the frayed collar of my coarse work shirt. In Salai's presence, I always became conscious of the ill-tailored cut of my own modest clothing. However, I made an effort to overcome my petty jealousy. I warned myself to guard against sneaking envy.

Since Leonardo was already sitting at table when he arrived, Salai did not bother going upstairs to put away his coat. He draped it over a chair-back and sat down immediately. After a brief pause to get his breath, he began to whisper to Leonardo in an excited tone, which he knew I could hear from the other end of the table. I pretended to take no notice. While Salai whispered in his ear, Leonardo reached out, stroking his curls. I saw the sly grin on Salai's lips and I knew that he was scheming to ingratiate himself with Leonardo. He laughed gaily and looked over at me from time to time, trying to infuriate me. Yet, I refused to be made resentful. Jealousy was beneath me. I considered this blatant affection merely embarrassing, like the popular sonnets written to profess the sickly sentiments of platonic love which Florentines so idealize.

While Leonardo and Salai joked and talked between themselves, I sat in my place, eating in silence. I was used to being neglected in this manner and so I remained calm and moderate. I told myself that I cared nothing for Leonardo's affection for Salai. After some time, I stood up to clear away the soup bowls. As I passed by the open kitchen window, I threw some bits of crust to a solitary magpie, which was perched on the branches of a withered juniper tree in our small back garden. The bird ruffled its black-and-white plumage, chattering loudly to itself all the while. It then flew down to the ground, where it hungrily ate the bread.

After clearing the soup bowls from the table, I served the portions of vermicelli and thin tomato sauce which constituted the main course of our Sunday meal. I then returned to my place. For some time, our meal continued without incident. While I sat in silence, Salai made amicable gestures to Leonardo, refilling his cup of wine and the like. I could see

that, indeed, our golden boy was up to something. Usually, Salai remained apathetic to Leonardo's affections and it was the old man who solicited Salai's smiles. Now, however, I could see that Salai wanted some new favor - perhaps a new silken doublet, or a few florins to buy wine in the recently re-opened wine-cellars. Now that the worst of the plague seemed to have passed, Salai was wanting to celebrate.

Occasionally, Salai directed an idle question toward me. Yet I refused to be drawn into conversation. I kept my lips pressed tightly together. Even when Salai's quips grew more pointed, I refused to be roused by his remarks. Yet, he grew ever more snide. He began to treat me as the domestic servant, demanding that I fetch more wine and scoffing at me rudely when I informed him that there would be no pudding to end the meal. His behavior was irritating, even more so since I knew that I could not expect Leonardo to say anything to stop him. According to Leonardo, there was nothing amiss about this sort of behavior. He merely thought that his precious Salai loved to banter. And so, Salai did exactly as he wished. I could not understand how Leonardo could let it continue! But, of course, it was impossible for me to understand - I, who have always been ignorant of how to earn Leonardo's respect!

It is true, of course, that my intention in compiling my master's notebooks was that he should thereby come to recognize my talent and devotion. Yet, even at that time, I knew that perhaps this was a false hope. Salai, after all, had no great aptitude for learning. I dimly guessed at the truth, yet I hated to admit it openly. To do so, I would have had to acknowledge that it was a mockery to consider Salai and me as apprentices to the great Da Vinci. Indeed, we were his pupils, yet Leonardo's glory days were passed and we were kept for the company which we provided and for our willing deference to his wishes. "Perhaps, in the long run," I reflected, "I shall owe Leonardo less for his tutelage than he shall owe me for my lasting service."

For some time, I sat at table, daydreaming in this fashion, trying to ignore Salai's remarks. Dearly, I would have loved to have had a keen, sharp wit, with which to put him in his place! Yet, while he goaded me I

retained my placid expression, thinking it safer to remain silent. I waxed philosophic and considered that it was against my better nature to condescend to scheme on Salai's level.

Soon, however, I had no choice but to enter into conversation since, after listening to Salai's remarks for some time, my master's inquisitive pale-blue eyes fell on me and he spoke:

"Francesco," he said, "why must you always look so sour? Why do you not join in conversation?"

"I see no reason why I should partake in this idle repartee," I said. "I refuse to be brought down to Salai's level of discourse, only thereby to provide him with a willing target for his jokes!"

"Perhaps it is merely that Francesco lacks a sense of humor and is without the wit to respond in kind," said Salai glibly, his green eyes sparkling with delight.

"I'll make no bones about telling you that I detest this biting sarcasm, which you consider humor," I replied, scarcely believing that Salai would have the audacity to pursue this argument while in our master's presence.

Yet I knew that Salai had an ease in conversation and this allowed him to get away with much. It maddened me to be caught like this. I was filled with frustration. In an attempt to appear brazen, I reached for my cup of wine. This, however, was a mistake. My hand was shaking, and I clumsily tipped the goblet over, spilling red wine all over my lap.

While I mopped up the wine with a napkin, Salai's ill-suppressed laughter continued uninterrupted.

By this time, Leonardo was wearied by our quarreling. Having finished his meal, he rose from the table. As was his habit, he left to go gaze at the stars. He was still pursuing his ambition to chart the laws of the universe. With geometric precision he drew his diagram on the great sheet of lamb-skin parchment, which now looked as if it was covered with a gigantic, black spider's web. Before leaving the table to take his seat by the window, Leonardo ordered me to clear away the supper dishes. He said that it was high time that I resumed my full duties about the studio.

Salai, of course, was delighted by this. He was free to take his leave and follow his wayward whims, while, like some scullery-maid, I cleared the dishes and set the kitchen to rights. Salai's gilded laughter rang down the hallway as he left the studio, headed for the destination of his night's debauchery.

Having grudgingly performed my duties, I went to my room. I sat on the side of my bed, cursing Salai and biting my fingernails down to the quick. I swore to myself that he had made me look a fool for the last time. The time was ripe to take the offensive! I would raise my hand in defiance! If I did not take drastic measures, I knew that his beastly behavior would never stop to give me rest. It infuriated me that he always had to have the last word and that this word was always at my expense. Even though I realized that my bitterness sprang from passion, I also knew that I was obliged to act. Though my reason told me that I could be damning my very soul by this action, I resolved to poison Salai. I knew it prudent to wait, yet the tedium of inaction oppressed me. All that I lacked now was the means to accomplish my plan!

That night, I racked my brains. My scheme seemed simple enough in its basic intent, yet I did not have an inkling how it could be done. Poison potions were not easily come by. I knew of no apothecary who dealt in such wares. Yet, these details seemed petty. What was important was the thrill of anticipation which I felt at the prospect of seeing this pledge fulfilled. My desire to pay back Salai for his wiles was all-consuming. At the very thought of it, my heart pattered quickly, with a skipping rhythm.

Late into the night I lay on my bed, thinking of how to poison Salai and meditating on the stark furnishings in my moonlit chamber. I contemplated the cross on my wall. I pondered the large wooden trunk in which are stored the loose-leaf pages of Leonardo's notebooks. But always my eyes were drawn back to the lean, bronze statue of the dancing satyr which stood in one far corner of the room. Even with my firm intention to see my plan succeed, the statue's smug, silent grin continued to mock my struggle to rid myself of Salai's corrupting influence.

CHAPTER 25

Although I was resolved to murder Salai, for quite some time I was unable to put my plan into effect. I slept fitfully that night, and the next morning, I discovered that I had fallen into a relapse in my recovery from the plague. Subsequently, I spent two or three days wandering about my master's household, doing nothing in particular. Meanwhile, Leonardo spent much time working downstairs in the studio. As for Salai, he flaunted Leonardo's orders, prowling about town every night like some hot-blooded alley cat. Although I told myself that I should be using my days of prolonged convalescence to compile Leonardo's notes, as was my self-sworn task, my general lethargy made me apathetic. I performed a few small domestic chores about the studio, but, for the most part, I stayed in my room, thinking of my commitment to do away with Salai, and staring out of my chamber window as the November winds blew gusts of rain and sleet through the streets of Florence.

After three or four days, what was intended to be a short respite settled into a pleasant routine. Little did I realize that, through my laziness and preoccupation with Salai, my hopes of escaping with Lisa were put into the greatest jeopardy. Indeed, for some time, they seemed all but lost.

It was nearly a week after I last saw Lisa that Giocundo's thugs came for me. I was alone in the studio. Salai was out with his foul-mouthed friends, courting the young painter, Raphael. Leonardo was at the hot baths. Looking back on it now, I am still not sure whether I am thankful or sorry that Leonardo and Salai were not present that day. On the one hand, if they had been there, I might have found an excuse to refuse to accompany Giocundo's men. But on the other hand, their absence ensured that my life with Lisa remained secret. As it was, however, I had no

choice about the matter. Giocundo's slit-eyed valet was emphatic with his orders.

"You shall accompany us," he said to me.

"But where?" I asked.

"Don't play the dunce!" said the valet. "Messer Giocundo wishes to speak to you."

"I have no wish to go," I said.

"Come now," said the valet, making his characteristic clicking noise with his tongue. "Do you wish to accompany us willingly, or shall I have my comrade, Emilio, twist your arm to help persuade you?"

Giocundo's other servant, the bear-like man, lumbered forward upon a signal from the wasp-like valet.

"Very well!" I said, hesitatingly. "If it is imperative, I will go with you."

And so it was that I hastily donned my street-cloak and, followed closely by Giocundo's servants, found myself out in the street. As we walked along, I soon realized that we were not going to Giocundo's house. We were walking east, in the direction of the wool-factories down by the river Arno, not westward in the direction of the rich merchants' quarter. We crossed the Ponte Trinita, then passed through the Great Market Square. With interest, I noticed that although there were not so many Florentines as once gathered in the Square to barter, much of the former activity had resumed. Giocundo's valet stopped for a moment to talk to a lanky, gaunt-faced market man who was holding two scrawny-necked chickens by the feet. This man, it seemed, owed the valet some small sum of money deriving from an unpaid debt to Giocundo. After this brief pause in the Market, we continued our journey. Soon, we came to the outskirts of the poorest quarter of town, where the workers in the wool-factories built their homes.

"Where are we going?! Where are you taking me to?!" I asked in alarm, seeing that we were headed into this disreputable section of the city.

"No need to fret, young urchin," said the slit-eyed valet. "Messer Giocundo awaits us in his office at his main warehouse. Surely, this does not inconvenience you too greatly?"

I ignored the valet's sarcasm. Soon, we passed into the quarter where the wool-factories and the workers' houses are located. Under the stilt-houses, it was dark. At street-corners, lights were necessary to see by, even though it was mid-day. As we passed in front of a black-smith's shop, I saw the albino, Bulvero, who was fixing the wheel from an oxcart. Bulvero's big, meaty arms hammered the iron band of the wheel. Occasionally, he stopped to pump the bellows which made his forge glow white-hot. He seemed not to notice us at first. Then, just when we were right in front of him, he looked up from his labor. For a moment, I thought that he was not going to recognize me, but then I saw a gleam of recognition register in his eyes.

"Hi chump!" Bulvero called to me, laughing loudly, but then saying nothing more.

We continued walking. Giocundo's valet turned to me. "I see that you are well known about town," he said with a smirk.

Feeling rather faint, I said nothing.

Onward we walked, through the dark, winding streets of the poorest quarter of town, where the sounds of squalling children and the general sights and smells of poverty assailed my senses. I did my best not to pay attention to the scenes of desperation which I saw on my way and, for the most part, I succeeded. In fact, the only other important incident which I must relate concerning my journey that day is that, soon after we passed Bulvero's black-smith's shop, we turned into a sidestreet deep in the heart of the quarter where I noticed a run-down apothecary shop tucked in between two dilapidated buildings. The shop front had the appearance of belonging to an owner too poor to deal in morals, one who would be willing to sell a poisonous potion without asking difficult questions. "Just what I have been looking for!" I thought to myself as we passed the shop.

Eventually, we arrived at Giocundo's warehouse. It was a huge building set right down by the river Arno. I felt great trepidation as Giocundo's men led me through the front door of the building. Immediately, my lungs were filled with the smell of fresh wool. We climbed the steep

steps of a dark stair-well. When we arrived in the upstairs offices, Giocundo was sitting at his desk, surrounded by huge account-books and piles of commercial documents.

"Well, well," said the merchant, clapping his ledger shut when I was brought into the room and then sitting back in his chair to look at me. "It seems, young man, that we did not understand each other properly when last we met."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I have been informed that despite my warnings to you concerning the delicate subject of your liaison with my wife, you have had the cheek to see her again without my prior consent. Do you have anything to say for yourself in this regard?" asked Giocundo.

"No, I do not," I replied, knowing that I should have immediately begged Giocundo's pardon, but perversely preferring to stand with my arms folded in front of me, looking as insolent as possible.

"Fool!" said Giocundo. "Must you force me to make you fear in order to have you obey my wishes?"

"I pray you, keep your threats to yourself, sir!" I said, trying to keep my voice firm.

"Bring him this way," said Giocundo, who stood up and motioned to his henchmen to lead me out of the office and along a catwalk which crossed high above the warehouse floor.

From the height of the catwalk, I could see down the main aisle of the warehouse, on either side of which were arranged sacks of raw wool, giant bales of cloth, and fleece samples suspended by hooks secured to an overhead rail. I saw that Giocundo was leading us over toward a huge vat, which was located in one far corner of the warehouse. Presently, we stopped on the scaffolding above the vat.

"This," said Giocundo, "is where we store the corrosive alum which is used in the dying process. If I were to throw a stone into this vat, it would melt. If, by some nasty accident, you were to fall into the vat, all that would ever be found of your remains would be a small bit of sediment at the bottom of the vat when it came time to clean it. "

As I stood above the vat, I looked down and I saw the bubbling green

alum below. Despite my efforts to show no reaction to Giocundo's threats, a feeling of vertigo welled up in my stomach."

"So, young knave!" said Giocundo. "You have fallen in love with my wife and have thereby taken leave of your senses. So be it. But cause me no further trouble! Is that clear? I shall not trouble to warn you again. Do not think that I shall allow you to continue to pursue your affair right under my nose! Swear to respect my wishes!"

"I shall promise nothing," I declared, trying to bluff my way through this situation, but gripping tightly onto the handrail which ran along the catwalk.

Giocundo scrutinized me silently for a moment. Then he signaled to his henchmen. Immediately, the brute named Emilio grabbed me roughly by the arm, and the slit-eyed valet drew a dagger, which he held to my throat. I tried to hide my alarm, but my insides turned to jelly, and my knees began to shake.

"I see that where I would give an inch of leeway, you would take a mile," said Giocundo. "But if you want to live, do not get any fancy ideas. I cannot have you sign a pact, but beware that you do not attempt to thwart me. You will find yourself thrown into this alum vat the next time you are brought before me."

Saying this, Giocundo swatted a buzzing fly which was flying around his head. When it fell onto the handrail, he picked it up and squashed it between his forefinger and thumb. "You will be called to be at my wife's side to keep her calm when the child is born," said Giocundo as he turned his back to leave. "But until then, cause me no further trouble."

Having no other choice, I nodded my head in acquiescence to Giocundo's threat. Upon seeing this, the merchant smiled ever so slightly in approval. He signaled to his men to release me, and, before I knew quite what was happening, I found myself once again out in the street. As I hurried home, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was not such an idiot as to think that Giocundo did not mean what he said. In my heart, I knew that if I did not follow his instructions, he would happily orchestrate my death.

Indeed, I reflected that I had tried his patience severely with my conduct up to this point. But regardless of the threats to my own life, I still thought about rebelling against the merchant. At this point in my adventures, it seemed that nothing worse could befall me, and so it seemed reasonable to entertain further risks. My conscience would not allow me to complacently surrender to Giocundo's blackmail, and so I began to piece together a plan whereby Lisa and I could escape the merchant's grasp. Even though I knew that Lisa could no longer be counted upon to agree immediately with any proposition which I offered, I was determined that, somehow, all should be made well.

CHAPTER 26

After my meeting with Giocundo, nothing of great significance happened in my life for several weeks. During this period, the weather was grey and dreary. Chill November winds blew through the streets of Florence. In order to keep warm, I stayed indoors much of the time. Day after day passed as I sat by the wood-burning fire in our kitchen, drinking hot mugs of mint tea. Although, during this hiatus, I had much occasion to reflect upon my own thoughts, I avoided the pain which I knew this would entail. I preferred to sit complacently by the kitchen fire, getting up only to stoke the embers, or to fetch more wood to burn.

After some time, however, I began to tire of my idleness. In order to stave off boredom, during those long November evenings I continued with my task of compiling Leonardo's notebooks. Although I had come to loathe this duty, I found it necessary to occupy myself somehow. I knew that with boredom lay despondency. And so, I busied myself with my task. Hour after hour, I spent reading by the dim lamplight in my room, organizing the countless pages which represent Leonardo's enterprising, though sometimes overly ambitious nature.

Although I sometimes criticize his eccentricities, I greatly admired Leonardo's brilliance. My master was a true man of his age. He was scornful of oppressive tyranny of any sort, especially, of what he called "the shackles of faith put upon the freedom of man's intellect." In opposition to this medieval mentality, my master was determined to prove man's worth by becoming equally adept in all branches of human learning. "Only in this way," said Leonardo, "can man be reborn and fulfill his destiny."

In accordance with his philosophy that a utopian future could only be

brought about through utilitarian means, Leonardo aspired to be a man of action. He was always ready and willing to put his studies into practice. However, few patrons were willing to finance the maestro's wild, grandiose schemes. Even the Duke and the priors were reluctant to fund expensive, fanciful ventures, such as improved city sanitation, or new canals or dikes. These things, after all, were merely philanthropic. Aside from these princes of the day, there were the middle and upper-class merchants to whom Leonardo appealed for monetary support. However, from these men also, he came away empty-handed. Conventionally-minded, conservative men, the middle and upper-class merchants supported inventors and artisans because it was the fashion of the day and they wanted flattering portraits and paintings to hang in their private galleries to impress their visitors. They were most reluctant to risk their money on any project which was not entirely aimed at gratifying their personal sense of self-worth. After all, they said, business was risky enough without needless additional expenditures!

Scornful of this sort of petty, bourgeois patronage, which sprang up in the wake of more altruistic patrons such as the late Lorenzo Medici, Leonardo increasingly shunned public society. Though aware of his prodigious gifts as a painter and the ready market for his works, he refused to confine his attention solely to the art of painting. Instead, he worked ever more ardently on those many diverse projects which most interested him. He declared that he cared not a jot for public prestige! He pursued more important, personal goals. He strove to satisfy his scientific curiosity. Foresaking a promising career as a wealthy painter of the courtly ilk, Leonardo pursued an illusion, painstakingly pruning the tree of knowledge, from whose branches he hoped he would eventually pluck sweet, ripened fruit.

Despite his lofty aspirations, however, my master was a scatter-brained genius. As I sorted through his notes, I reflected that, during his career, Leonardo had tinkered with all manner of subjects, from plumbing to astronomy. His notebooks were filled with hundreds of mind-wasting exercises. But, despite the diversity of his interests, there was a connecting thread of ambition embroidered throughout the pattern of

his work. What stood out most of all, was my master's lifelong obsession with the question of human flight.

Leonardo's references to this subject date back to the days when he was a much younger man, working on commissions for his noble patrons. First, there come fragments of observations, recorded in the margins of his notebooks on other subjects, where Leonardo studies the flight of birds and the movements of the air. After these observations, there come notes recording the dissections of the bodies of birds to evaluate wing designs. Next, comes Leonardo's desperate period, when he seems to be absorbed with one perpetual question: "If the eagle may sustain itself in the lofty atmosphere, why may not also man, who is a thousand times more noble creature, master the winds?" After this melancholic phase, Leonardo grows ever more hopeful. "One day man shall raise himself on great wings, and fly, like a veritable god in the heavens", I find written in his notes. And then, in a burst of buoyant optimism, "The human bird shall take his first flight, filling the world with wonder, and all writing with its fame; and bringing eternal glory to the nest where it was born."

After his increasingly confident notes on the question of human flight, there is a gap, where Leonardo writes little else concerning this project for quite some time. Then begin his hundreds of designs for a possible flying machine. The evolution of his final prototype is presented in myriad versions. The final version of the machine looks less like a graceful bird than a clumsy, enormous crane. Leonardo worked ceaselessly on this idea. He drew these sketches for possible machines based on all manner of bird flight. My master was a skillful mechanic and it did not take long before he began to construct a working, life-size model of his drawings. He built the thing nearly all by himself, enlisting the aid of Salai or myself only when absolutely necessary.

The skeleton of Leonardo's working model was constructed from thin, curved ribs of cypress wood. Its muscles were made from iron levers and pedal-driven pistons. These were connected by leather tendons to cranks and braces that pumped the two broad wings which were covered with a thin, silk membrane and had a spread of nearly eight feet. There were hand

controls which moved the wing-flaps and a rudder at the back which was meant to help the pilot to steer in a desired direction.

When finally it was completed, this flying contraption was Leonardo's pride and joy. So desperately did he want to be the inventor of first flight, he excluded all other projects for quite some time. He had become obsessed with the notion that only this invention would ensure his reputation. To rise on powerful wings; to fly like an eagle, to conquer the heavens! Such was my master's proud vision, which he pursued heedless of his sneering peers and of the scoffing, penny-pinching patrons whom he approached for sponsorship when he found himself in desperate need of parts to complete his work.

As might be imagined, once he put the finishing touches on the flying machine, Leonardo immediately dismissed his concerns about patronage. With his working model ready for a trial flight, all that my master required was a pilot. As circumstances would have it, the only suitable apprentices for the job were either Salai or myself, since we were the two youngest recruits in my master's workshop. Although both Salai and I were of the appropriate size and weight to fit into the small cockpit of the flying machine, Salai was Leonardo's darling. And so it was that I was chosen to pilot the craft.

I was, quite naturally, reluctant to play such a first-hand part in this enterprise. I was not so ignorant as to be unaware of the risks which such an adventure entailed. However, counter-balancing my better judgement, a part of me considered that the possibility of being the first man in history to fly was, indeed, a most compelling and wonderful prospect. Despite my inherently timid nature, I could sometimes be persuaded to be daring. Inspired by Leonardo's confidence that with this flying machine we would be able to conquer the laws of gravity and of God, I was ready to capitulate. I could hardly be blamed for this sentiment. After all, Leonardo's assertion that man was capable of controlling the heavens was but a sentiment of the age. As it would with any man, it filled me with pride to think that I might gain eternal fame through this enterprise. I would return to my boyhood village to be welcomed as a hero!

The temptation was too great for me to resist. Leonardo spoke of the splendors of flight and I listened to his words. I asked, would it not be too hazardous a venture? But Leonardo dismissed this as mere faint-heartedness. He gave me some protective padding, made from sacks stuffed with cotton. Also, he issued me a helmet which he had constructed from a coconut shell. Since I was the lowliest apprentice in the studio at the time, I had little choice but to comply with Leonardo's orders. All which follows, I did in the line of duty.

I remember that it was a bright, sunny May afternoon when Leonardo, Salai and I set out to make our historic flight come true. With Leonardo's mule dragging the flying machine in tow, we left the main gates of Florence at noon. A crowd of curious onlookers followed us as far as the first main crossroads, but then lost interest when they saw the climb which we were going to have to undertake. Leonardo's intention was to pull the machine to the top of the great mountain overlooking the valley in which Florence lay. He had instructed me that I should sail the craft in the direction of the city, and land, if at all possible, in the Piazza Vecchio, in front of the Palace of the Priors. The Priors had refused to help finance Leonardo's venture and he hoped that they would be held to ridicule when the feat succeeded.

Upon reaching the foothills of the mountain, we began our climb. We made good headway and soon we were high in the thin, crisp air. With some help from the switch, Leonardo's mule hunkered to its task, pulling the flying contraption up the mountain at a steady trot. As we ascended, the vegetation grew thinner and the way was made easier. Soon, there were but a few low-growing shrubs. Leonardo climbed as if he found great exhilaration in the effort. His golden beard blew behind him in the wind. Salai and I followed in our master's footsteps. Salai was greatly enjoying the adventure. With snapping mule-switch in hand, he beamed like a golden cherubim. As we climbed the narrow, winding mountain path, swallows and swifts circled above us, calling to each other in play. The fresh air was invigorating. With every step, we came closer to our goal. Higher and higher we climbed. When I turned to see the view, the entire world was mine to behold. Most breathtakingly of all, Florence could be seen below in the distance, like a gleaming white-marble city.

Eventually, we arrived at the summit. Following Leonardo's orders, we unharnessed the mule and pulled the flying contraption over to the edge of a large, red rock, which jutted out from the mountain-side. Once we got it there, we rested for a few minutes to catch our breath. Then Leonardo announced that it was time to begin the experiment. I crossed myself and said a quick prayer, asking my patron saints to protect me. Then I climbed into the flying machine and put my feet into the stirrups which controlled the pistons which pumped the power to flap the wings. Before I had time to voice any last minute regrets, Leonardo and Salai pushed me off the precipice, and I was all on my own.

I pedaled mightily. The broad wings flapped with great violence. I used the hand controls to maneuver the contraption in the precise manner which Leonardo had prescribed. And, to my amazement, the wind raised the machine into the air.

For an exhilarating moment, I was suspended in the atmosphere. The wind carried me. Currents of hot air filled the wings and I circled higher and higher into the ether. The wind whistled in my ears. I laughed for joy. Up I rose, like a giant, clumsy crane. When I looked down at the city in the valley below, from my bird's-eye view, I could see the top of the dome of the great Cathedral Santa Maria, which shone like a pink pearl in the center of the white-marble city in the distance beneath me. All was grand! All was filled with wonder! All was perfect...until I raised my eyes toward the sun and my vision was blinded by its brilliant light.

The instant before I raised my eyes toward the sun, I felt as though the sky was mine. But then, in a flash, my soul was filled with doubt. Though I continued to pedal furiously, I began to fall. Alas, I soon realized that Leonardo's experiment was ending in failure.

The flying machine plummeted downward in a nosedive, tumbling like a stone through the air. I had no time to think of any maneuver to save myself. The earth was quickly approaching. As I spiralled downward, the ground appeared like a patch-work quilt of green hills, brown fields, white stone walls and dark, pointed cypresses, all rushing up to meet me.

I held my breath, closed my eyes, and prepared to crash.

All that I remember next is the crunch of the flying contraption when it hit the ground. Luckily, I landed on soft, newly manured earth in a farmer's field and, except for the fact that I sprained my foot and banged my head slightly, I was almost entirely unhurt. Leonardo and Salai came running toward me. They dragged me out of the machine. I was understandably in a state of shock from the whole ordeal, but little attention was paid to my condition. Leonardo was silent and glowering. His brow was knit and his eyes were cast to the ground. Evidently, all his work had ended in failure once again. Leaving the wreck of the machine on the mountainside, like the mangled frame of some great, clumsy bird, Leonardo turned his back and began to walk in the direction of our studio, where, I knew, he would return straight to his drawing board to begin his calculations anew.

Following Leonardo as we walked back to the studio that day, I hung my head in shame. I had flown neither like an eagle, nor like a god. By listening to Leonardo's high-blown talk of man's sublime role in the universe and by believing in his aspirations, I had been duped. Yet, although I had been gulled into believing in his nonsense, perhaps the experience was worthwhile in the long run. For, although my illusions were shattered, I learned a valuable lesson from my fall.

From that day forth, I have always perceived the world differently than I saw it before. No longer am I so gullible. Since the failure of my flight, I have become suspicious of lofty sentiments. I have learned that, if I am never to be gulled again, it is wise to be constantly on my guard against misplaced enthusiasm. Now, I know that it is wise to avoid toying with the laws of God and Nature. Now, I know that man shall always remain wingless. Though it may sound bitter, now I am certain that men will never fly, but, while on this earth, always be destined to crawl like worms.

CHAPTER 27

During the following long winter months, time passed slowly. Chill November winds brought December's frost and snow. In the streets outside, the city prepared for the coming Yule-tide season. The first snow fell during the second week of December. While Florentines put wreathes of holly on their doors and stocked their cupboards with what food they could muster for the coming holiday, snow-flakes floated down like white ash, settling in ridges on rooftops, clinging to church spires, and masking saintly statues and grotesque gargoyles alike.

During those early winter months, I saw nothing of Mona Lisa. She no longer came to our studio to sit for Leonardo. My mind was restive and I could not bear to concentrate on painful thoughts of her. I knew that she would be ready to give birth soon, but still I stalled my plan to escape from Florence with her before Giocundo claimed the child. I had begun to develop a plot whereby I would steal into Giocundo's mansion to whisk Lisa and the child away with me. I, hesitated, however, thinking that perhaps it would be safer if I waited until the child was born before informing Lisa of the bond which I had sworn with her husband. I was reluctant to jump into the fire while the coals were still hot. I thought that if I remained quiet and complacent for some small time, Giocundo's suspicions would subside. And so, I shuffled about my master's studio, doing nothing practical. I spent several days mulling over my own thoughts, and stewing in the juices of jealousy, since Salai refused to leave me any peace.

Perhaps I would have been content with sitting by the fire-side by day and working on Leonardo's notebooks by night, if Salai had not made my life a misery. He went out of his way to play dirty tricks on me. He mocked my solitary state when he passed through the kitchen, on his way out for another night of merriment with his fun-loving friends. He taunted me at

mealtimes, sitting with his elbows on the table, smirking at me over the rim of his goblet and eliciting Leonardo's laughter with jokes at my expense. He made sly comments, alluding to my inability to come out from under the dark cloud which seemed to hover over me. He let slip innuendos which pointed to my incompetence with the fashionable ladies. He asked me if I was pouting after some young lady. He scoffed at what he called "the infection of infatuation." He spied on me persistently, demanding to know why I was so sulky. He demanded to know what I spent my time doing locked up in my room every evening? But I evaded all his ruses to draw me out into the open. I escaped his every attempt to poniard my most cherished sentiments.

Then one evening, Salai returned to the studio early from his nightly binge. He barged into my room, tipsy with wine and in the mood for mischief. Instantly, I knew I was caught. It was too late to hide the evidence. Salai had discovered me sitting at my desk, reading Leonardo's notes in the candlelight with his hand-mirror in one hand, and my goose-quill in the other. I sprang to my feet. The hand-mirror slipped, shattering into a thousand shards and slivers on the floor.

"Well, Francesco!" Salai said. "So this is what you do with your time! Aren't you the conscientious one! Sorting out the Maestro's notes then, are you? Well, that's fine, indeed! But tell me, did Maestro Leonardo ask you to do this task? Did he give you his permission to rummage about in his private papers?"

"No, he didn't," I replied. "It is to be a surprise."

"Oh, a surprise!" squealed Salai with delight.

"You must promise to say nothing!" I said. "I wish to present the notebooks to our master only when they have been properly sorted and bound in leather. It is to be a present."

"Oh? Well then, I shall respect your wishes and say nothing of it!" said Salai.

But, of course, Salai did nothing of the sort. He let the information slip out in conversation one suppertime soon thereafter. He thought nothing of it. But to me, after all my work and planning, it was of great importance that I should earn Leonardo's respect and this was the only way

I could think of to do so. I was livid. Salai laughed and told me not to bluster over my petty personal affairs. This was the last straw! Though it went against the grain of my character, I was satisfied that there was only one thing to do. I would search out the apothecary's shop which I had seen on my way to Giocundo's warehouse and I would buy a vial of poison. Salai, I decided, deserved to die!

Perhaps what inflamed me most about Salai's revealing my secret was that when he did so, Leonardo looked at me curiously, but said nothing for a moment. Then all he said was, "That's fine, Francesco, you may continue." Even before my work was complete, all of my effort was damned by Leonardo's faint praise.

For several evenings subsequent to Salai's disclosure of my efforts to ensure Leonardo's place in posterity, I shuffled about the studio, doing very little. A feeling of discontent brewed in my stomach. I felt as if a poniard were pressed against my heart. Then one fine winter's afternoon, I shrugged off my melancholy. Putting on my street-cloak and wrapping my worn squirrel scarf about my neck for warmth, I stepped out into the street. I headed eastward, in the direction of the most disreputable quarter of Florence, where the apothecary's shop lay.

That afternoon, the sun was shining golden and the sky was turquoise blue. Spirals of smoke rose from the chimney-tops of houses and shops. Horses and mules covered with blankets of red cloth pulled carts on sled runners. All these things I noticed as I trudged through ankle-deep snow in the narrow city streets. But although the day was crisp and bright and picture perfect, I was in no temper to admire the beauty of these simple everyday things. All around me, cloaked and muffled Florentines went about their respective businesses, blowing on their fingers to warm them before shaking hands with neighbours and friends whom they met and greeted in passing. The mood in the streets was congenial with pre-Yuletide spirit. However, I did my utmost to ignore the activity around me. I paid little heed to the festive mood of the Florentines who were drinking hot cider in the bistros. I looked at my boot-tips, trying my utmost to keep my thoughts focused only on the task at hand. This worked fine until I passed

over the Ponte Trinita. Then, accidentally still looking downward, I had to shield my eyes from the dazzling sunlight which reflected on the thin layer of ice formed on the great river below.

Reluctant to dawdle on my journey that afternoon, I told myself not to be sidetracked by any distractions. I exercised my will. My feet plodded onward. After I crossed the Ponte Trinita, however, I could not resist halting for just one moment to buy a bag of hot chestnuts from a street vendor. Then onward I marched, munching the steaming chestnuts and enjoying a small token of the festive spirit shared by the Florentines around me. The upcoming festivities, I reflected as I walked, meant nothing for the household of Leonardo, who frowned on all religious and social ceremony. During my apprenticeship with the maestro, I had learned to grow thick-skinned about missing such pleasant times as the Christmas celebrations amongst my family in my boyhood home in San Gervaso.

These were idle thoughts, however. Such things meant nothing now. I had more pressing concerns to attend to than merry-making! Onward I walked, sure of my course and impeded only by a half-frozen mongrel dog which seemed to be taken with the smell of my chestnuts and which - after I made the mistake of feeding him a morsel - followed at my heels.

For twenty minutes more, I trudged through the city streets. Finally, I arrived at the apothecary shop. It was located in a drab, grey-stone building set between a haberdashery and a dilapidated bakery. For quite some time, I lurked outside the establishment, hesitant to go in. I stamped my feet to keep my toes from freezing. The mongrel mutt, which seemed to like me, sat close to my leg, shivering with cold and panting quick puffs of icy vapor. This pooch looked pathetic. Avoiding its doleful eyes, I decided that I could stand outside freezing no longer. I pulled the hood of my cloak further down, crossed the street and entered the apothecary shop.

Inside, the shop was lit only by a dim lamp and a few candles. As I opened the door, the sharp, sickly stench of sulphur immediately assailed my nostrils. The room was filled with pale-blue smoke. Steam hissed from

a bubbling cauldron set on a tripod. Beneath the cauldron burned an orange flame. Gradually, as my eyes became accustomed to the dim light, I saw that the shop was furnished in a most primitive manner. There was a dirty, tiled counter upon which the tripod sat, along with a cluttered assortment of cracked jars containing roots and herbs. Flasks of dark liquids were arranged on shelves behind the counter. When I could see reasonably, I noticed that beside the doorway where I stood, there was a large spider web in which was trapped the dried husks of many flies and other insects.

I called for service, but at first no one came. After a moment, however, I saw a shadow move by the chimney-corner. The figure rose and hobbled unsteadily toward me. I saw that the apothecary was a hump-backed old crone, but at first the realization that the figure was none other than the old rag-vendor woman from whom I had purchased the golden finch did not register in my mind. Then, suddenly, I saw the sunken, coal-black eyes and the wrinkled-prune face which was set in a toothless grin! I was greatly startled upon seeing the old woman again like this and I paled, I am sure. However, I regained my composure as best I could. I tried to pull the hood of my cloak down further to hide my identity; however, the old woman instantly recognized me.

"Well, hello!" said the silver-haired witch. "Fancy seeing you again, my young friend. Welcome to my shop! I have had great luck in setting up this business since last we met. No longer do I deal in rags. How may I help you? Here I have all manner of concoctions to manage all sorts of cures. How may a wanton old woman be of service to you, my fine young gentleman?"

"A toothache," I stammered. "I came in search of a paste to cure a toothache."

"Ah, a common toothache," replied the old woman. "And is that all?"

I said nothing for a few moments. I was once again unsure whether I should proceed with my plan, or exit posthaste from the shop. The old woman's eyes looked at me with piercing curiosity, staring deep into my very soul. She was just two or three feet away from me, on the other side of the counter. Even with the stench of sulphur in the room, I could smell the cheap wine on her breath. Seeing her here like this, I thought it wise

to exercise the utmost prudence. I was sure that she was responsible for my trouble with Lisa and Giocundo. I thought it best to abort my plan to purchase a poison suitable to produce Salai's demise. For an enlightened moment, I realized that my plan was madness. I became alarmed at the prospect that I had stumbled into this shop and I shuddered when I considered the criminal nature of my unbalanced behavior. I told myself that there must be some more moderate way to exorcise Salai's devilish influence.

"Fool! What is it you fear?" said the old woman, seeming to read my thoughts, and startling me out of my reveries. "Why be afraid of the urge to create a little mischief? Do not be such a will-of-the-whisp! Follow your desire!"

The room was growing warm. I loosened my shirt collar. I refused to raise my glance to look the old woman in the face. All was hushed and still for a long, tense moment. Then, a tawny, long-whiskered mouse ran across the filthy tiled floor. For a few moments, the old woman seemed to forget all about me. She snatched up a stiff-bristled broom which stood in one corner of the room and chased the mouse around the room in a flurry of activity, until the small creature escaped into a crevice in the wall. She then turned her attention back to me.

"You are a cunning rascal, but so timid," said the old woman. "How can I help you if you will not tell me what you truly want?"

"Surely you do not expect me to confide in you after you betrayed my confidences last time we spoke?" I demanded in defense of my silence.

"I make no apology," said the silver-haired old woman. "You did not swear me to secrecy."

"Well, if I confide in you now, you must swear to say nothing. Not a whisper of what I tell you to anyone," I said.

"No gossip, I promise," said the old woman, putting a finger to her lips. "Now, do not be a coward! Tell me what you really came here for. More than a mere toothache is upsetting you. There is a devil in your heart!"

I know that, at this point, I should have turned away and revealed nothing further to the old woman, but I could not bring myself to do so. I stood with lowered eyes, absentmindedly scraping with my fingernail a fungus which was growing on the counter-top in front of me.

"I crave to be rid of a golden-haired, green-eyed varmit who tortures me constantly," I heard my voice saying. "He is sly and sensual. He is a boor. His influence torments me like an affliction. Have you a potion which would help me to eliminate such a pest?"

"Yes, yes," said the old woman eagerly. "I can provide you with such a potion. But tell me, do you not fear for your soul? Are you certain that such measures are justified? Are you sure that this is your will?"

"Yes, of course I am sure!" I exclaimed, wringing my hands for fear that the old woman possessed scruples that would not allow her to sell such a potion. But she merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Fine," she said, reaching to an upper shelf and taking down several flasks of liquids. "If you are certain that this is what you wish, then so be it."

With these words, the old woman set to her task, mixing the noxious smelling liquids together in a beaker, simmering the potion in her cauldron for a few moments, then pouring the result into a vial.

"This potion is made from a powerful mixture of hemlock, deadly nightshade, and serpent's venom," she said, putting a cork stopper on the vial. "Be sure that you use it carefully, for whosoever drinks of this potion shall surely die."

"Yes, yes! Well, thank you for your service," I said, taking a handful of silver florins from my purse and giving them to the old woman, whose toothless grin twitched as she counted the coins.

Once she had the money in her hand, the old woman snuffed out the flame beneath the empty cauldron. She then turned and went back to her stool by the chimney corner. She sat down again and disappeared amongst the flickering shadows. Almost immediately, she began to snore. Hoping that this would be the last time that I would encounter this strange old woman, I hurriedly departed from the shop.

It was already close to evening when I left the old apothecary woman. The wind had picked up and snowflakes danced about like sparkling crystals. The mongrel dog was waiting for me when I exited from the shop and it followed me as I made my way homeward. I walked at the quickest possible pace. My limbs were bathed in cold sweat. The blood, however, flowed hot in my veins. I was breathing hard and my heart was pounding. In my head, there was a ringing of silver bells. I thought with exalted glee about the trick which I would play on Salai. Clutching the vial in my pocket, I felt no guilt or shame about my plan. I thought only of how glorious it would be to be rid of Salai's insidious influence. I did not stop to wonder whether my scheme contained any serious flaw. My joy was enough to sustain me. I had no doubt that my plot would succeed!

Fluffy flakes of snow fell all that night, glittering in the soft moonlight and covering the city in a plush blanket of white cotton-wool. Though I would have slept soundly, with an easy conscience, the wretched mongrel which had followed me all day howled and whined outside my window the entire night. In consequence, I slept but a few winks before the dark-violet dawn broke in the east, and it was time to rise.

CHAPTER 28

For several days after I secured the vial of poison, I waited impatiently for the perfect opportunity to use it. I loafed about my master's studio, drinking tea by the fireside and grudgingly doing small tasks when they were demanded of me. I rebelled against intellectual exertion of any kind. My mind was completely occupied in carefully noting Salai's comings and goings. Full of spite, I relished the thought of poisoning him. I bided my time, scheming to find just the right moment to spring my trap. Unfortunately, however, that moment was forestalled. My plot to kill Salai was interrupted by the birth of Lisa's child.

It was on Christmas Eve - a Tuesday in the third week in December - when the Giocundo servant girl, Maria, came to the studio to fetch me. It was shortly past suppertime. Maria informed me that Lisa had gone into labor at three o'clock that afternoon. At Maria's urgent request, I quickly donned my street-cloak and followed her through the snow-choked city streets as she escorted me to the merchant's mansion. Overhead, few stars were visible. A full moon glowed silver behind a bank of clouds; however, its rays illumined little. I pulled my worn squirrel scarf tighter around my neck. Several times, the smooth soles of my boots slipped on the icy sidewalks. "We must hurry, Messer Francesco!" said Maria, urging me onward.

When finally we arrived at Giocundo's mansion, the merchant and his henchmen were waiting for us in the hallway.

"You have been brought to quiet my wife," said Giocundo. "It is proving to be a troublesome birth."

"If I can be of service, I shall be honoured to do what I can," I replied.

"You will do as you are told, and nothing more," said Giocundo. "Come along now."

Escorted by Giocundo and his henchmen, I ascended the stairs. When we reached Lisa's room, the merchant and his servants stood on the threshold of the doorway. At a signal from the merchant, the shaggy bear of a man named Emilio pushed me forward into the room.

Immediately, I saw that Lisa was lying on her back on the great satin bed in the middle of the room. Her belly was swollen and round. The skin looked so tight that it seemed about to burst. There was a mid-wife in attendance, a plump woman dressed in a loose-fitting, spotless white apron. This matron bustled about the room, preparing for the imminent birth. Her hair was tied up in a large bun on the top of her head, where it was secured with several large pins. She regarded my entrance into the room with marked disdain. She tolerated my presence, however, since it soon became clear that I was there to bring comfort to her patient.

I sat on a wooden chair beside the edge of the bed. I looked down into Lisa's face. Her forehead was pale and clear as alabaster, while her cheeks were flushed deep rose. Her brown hair fell in loose curls on her white pillow. Her grave, innocent eyes looked up at me.

"Francesco," she said in between quick, gasping breaths.

"Yes, I am here," I said

"Stay with me," she said.

"Fear not, I shall not betray you," I said.

Lisa gave me a faint smile of gratitude for my kind words. I took her hand. She said nothing more to me, though her lips moved rapidly as she whispered an inaudible prayer.

If her husband came near, Lisa emitted shrill, frightened screams, but in her time of need, she seemed to have forgotten her recent animosity toward me. My presence brought her comfort. I mopped her forehead with a cool, moist flannel. I performed my duty. I kept her calm. Although she was taking her long labor well, at first there was moaning and groaning and tears and perspiration. But then the mid-wife gave Lisa a tongue of leather to bite down upon and the room became quieter.

Now, I had seen the births of calves, and lambs and other such farm animals during my youth, but, until that night, I had never witnessed the birth of a human child. I was a bit squeamish at first, perhaps, but then I watched with increasing fascination.

The matron was competent and forceful. "Push now, deary!" she said to Lisa, whose eyes were wide and whose brow was contracted. In between contractions, there was a brief pause. "Patience, deary!" said the mid-wife. Then, after a minute or two, the cycle would begin again. Lisa's lips were now continuously pressed together. Her head thrashed from side to side on the pillow. She tried to hide any signs of weakness, but her eyes belied the pain which her task entailed. Her fingernails dug into the palm of my hand.

By degrees, the infant's head protruded from the gaping wound between Lisa's legs. Blood and fluid spilled out onto the bed. I was filled with disgust and wonder. For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Then the child cried. The matron cut the umbilical cord. She dipped the child in a basin of tepid water which Maria held ready for her. She washed the infant from head to toe. "A healthy girl-child!" she announced.

The tiny, newborn babe did not wail for long. She was a pretty child, with a well-formed head, perfect miniature limbs and big, limpid, brown eyes with long, dark lashes. She gurgled pleasantly while the matron wrapped her in swaddling cloth made from finest lamb's wool. I gazed on fondly.

How glorious it was to see the birth of this unblemished soul, fresh from her mother's womb! Instantly, I knew that my life had taken on a profound new meaning. The birth of the child meant that new responsibilities were now mine to consider. My own affairs were no longer my sole consideration. As I gazed down at Lisa, it struck me that never before had she appeared so beautiful to me. The sight of her together with the newborn infant kindled a longing in my heart. I knew that all I really needed was to be together with them. If only I could escape from Florence with this, my small family, I knew that I would find happiness!

As I sat beside the bedstead, holding her hand, Lisa looked up at me with her clear, soft eyes. I kissed her lightly on her pale cheek. Then I rose. There was a swelling in my heart. Gingerly, I touched the tiny hand of my baby daughter.

"Isn't she a beautiful child, Francesco?" Lisa murmured, a smile of maternal tenderness on her lips.

"She is an adorable child," I replied.

Lisa was wearied by her ordeal. Weeping faintly, she said, "Francesco, whatever happens, remember always that I loved you truly." And then, in a weakening tone, added "Remember that you promised never to betray me."

At this point, the matron's face became stern. "Out with you all now!" she said. "We must be careful of infection."

I wanted to say something more to Lisa to reassure her of my continuing commitment, but I could think of no words to express my heart-felt sentiments. Together with Giocundo and his men, I was obliged to leave Lisa's bedside. Before I left the room, however, I noticed for the first time the golden finch, which was perched in its cage, watching the proceedings in the room. Although Lisa had said that it was faring poorly, the finch seemed to have recovered from whatever sickness had ailed it. As Lisa closed her eyes and her breathing became more regular and gentle, the golden finch sang a soft, sweet plaintive melody.

Without further ado, I left Lisa's chamber. As we walked down the staircase, Giocundo took hold of my arm.

"You have not fulfilled your contract with me," he said. "A girl-child! Indeed, this is most disappointing!"

"I have fulfilled my part of the bargain," I said, angrily pulling my arm away. "If you could forget your disappointment, I would be most thankful if you would relinquish the child and allow Lisa and me to have our freedom."

"Do not be such a fool!" said Giocundo. "I am a man who is used to having things my own way. From now on, you belong to my service. Until we

come to a satisfactory arrangement, you will wait for my further instructions."

"And if I refuse to comply?" I asked.

"Then the child will die," said Giocundo. "I told you, I am a businessman, and a girl-child is worthless to me. I shall have to consider what measures should be taken next. Perhaps both you and my fair wife have outgrown your usefulness to me."

With these words, we reached the bottom of the staircase. Giocundo motioned to his valet to show me out. With nothing further to say, I departed from the household. As I walked homeward, the North star shone brightly in the night sky. Although what to do to appease Giocundo was a major question, I did not feel like striving to think of some way to pacify his anxiety. I had won Lisa's love and that was all that mattered. It was not my concern if Giocundo was deprived of an heir to the luxuries which he had accumulated. "From now on," I swore to myself, "I shall put all thoughts of Giocundo, Salai and Leonardo behind me. I shall place myself entirely at Lisa's service."

"Now that the child has been born," I thought, "surely all will be made well."

PART V

CHAPTER 29

After the birth of Lisa's child, time seemed to pass swiftly. By mid-January, the worst of winter was over and more temperate days returned to Florence. Although they had endured many hardships during the previous months, Florentines' spirits revived as the sun's golden rays warmed their marble city. Spring was welcome, indeed! The summer's plague and the difficult winter had sapped the strength of many, but with the melting snow in the streets and the annual break-up of ice on the Arno, the citizens cheered. I heard the first robin's song in the third week of February. In the streets and marketplace, people wished each other a pleasant spring - one more tolerable than that of the previous year.

During this time, I continued my tasks about the studio. As well as fulfilling my more routine duties, I also attended to Leonardo, who was quite sick and needed almost constant attention. He shuffled about the studio, muttering to himself of flying machines and other failures. He had lapses of memory and dizzy spells. He dismissed any attempts to help him, refusing to lean on my arm when he lost his balance. Then, one evening on retiring to his chamber, my master lost his footing and fell, reeling backwards, down the front stairs. I was in the kitchen at the time and, upon hearing Leonardo's cry, I rushed into the hallway. I stood over him, not knowing what to do. For a minute or more, Leonardo lay at the bottom of the stairs, clutching his breast and gasping for breath. I looked on, agast. Finally, the fit subsided. After that night, however, my master was never the same. He ordered me to make him a cot in the studio. He refused to climb the front stairs for fear that Death was awaiting him. By

day, Leonardo sat staring at Lisa's portrait which stood, unfinished, on his easel. By night, he sat by the window, gazing at the stars.

For quite some time after the Yule-tide festivities, Salai seemed subdued. As I was concerned with other matters, I thought little of my plan to do away with him. Yet, I guarded the vial of poison in a little black box at the back of my drawer, knowing that an opportunity to use it would inevitably arise.

During the early weeks of spring, I spent as much time away from the studio as possible. Despite Giocundo's threat to make life difficult for Lisa and me, he took no immediate punitive measures. In fact, he seemed to be allowing us the freedom which I had demanded of him. Lisa's child - that is to say, our daughter - was in her second month of life. She was healthy and smiling. As often as possible, I met Lisa in the park, where we strolled together, Lisa cradling the child in her arms. After the contamination brought by the plague, the white swans no longer swam on the pond. Yet, once again, trees and shrubs sprouted green buds. The soil in the flower beds had been weeded, and lilac and wisteria grew in fragrant bushes. Avoiding the wicker pagoda, which we had often used during our first meetings, Lisa and I sat on a wooden bench under the willow trees by the pond bank. Talking very little between ourselves, we watched the strolling passersby. The infant slept, wrapped in fleece to keep it snug. When it woke, Lisa played with the child, making soft cooing sounds to keep it quiet. Lisa was happy, and I, too, was most content. All seemed to be well. Yet, in hindsight, I know that disaster hung on the horizon. I was a fool to be so deluded that I did not see it looming, until it was too late.

My foolish lack of foresight is especially true since, during these weeks of early spring, I was visited by a recurring dream which, in retrospect, I believe was some sort of premonition of the events which followed. Though parts of it puzzle me still, I believe this dream to be essential to my history. For this reason, I shall attempt to trace its pattern as best as I am able.

The dream begins in silence, as if I am inside the hollow shell of an egg. Though it may sound absurd, at first, I have no sense of who or what I am. All that I am aware of is the faint pulsing of my heart. Gradually, however, things become more tangible. As the dream progresses, a soft voice emerges from out of the silence: "Fortune has smiled upon you. Rejoice and be glad!" intones the compassionate voice. "Now is the time for the great secret to be revealed. Now the multi-foliate rose shall unfold!"

At this moment, I instinctively understand where I am. I have escaped from the purgatory of my last recurrent dream. In this present dream, I am filled with a sense of well-being. Slowly, I recognize that my soul has been freed, and that the function of this dream is to allow me to watch its passage into the world hereafter.

In my dream, I awake as a swan.

At first, it is as though I objectively watch this creature sleeping in its nest on the grassy bank of a small pond. Waking, it preens its white feathers with its long, orange, black-tipped beak. I know that it is right that my soul has taken the form of this stately bird.

"All shall be made well," intones the soft voice in my head. "Have faith in your deepest convictions and all shall be well!"

It is at this point in my dream that there develops an intense sense of longing which I share with the swan into which my soul has been transformed. I no longer merely watch the bird objectively, but actually become it. Gradually, I realize that the reason for my sense of longing is that I have lost my swan-mate. In my mind, I picture the long curve of her slender neck and the immaculate white of her feathers. The yearning for my companion is so strong that it compels me to leave the comfort of the nest and to swim about the pond which, even in my dream, I realize to be a replica of the one in the park in Florence where Lisa and I spent our last afternoons together.

"To confess is proper," intones the consoling voice in my head. "Follow the golden thread in the pattern and you shall find the forgiveness which you seek. There shall be a light to lead you to splendor. The love which you search for lies in Venice. Escape from Florence! Follow the light, and you shall see that all can be made well!"

Although, in my dream, I am slightly suspicious of this voice urging me onward, I decide that the only thing to do is to make the journey. Upward I rise on strong wings. Leaving the pond and the park behind me, I fly over the piazzas, the Market Square, and the silk and wool mills of Florence. Slowly gaining altitude, I weave my flight between the towers and cupolas of the city. I soar high over the Ponte Trinita. Soon, I fly over the stone walls surrounding the city. I see Florence in miniature below me. Following a mountain pass, I journey onward, in search of my swan-mate.

On the first leg of my long journey, I enjoy the sense of freedom which my new form allows me. My soul is capable of effortless flight. Below me, I see houses on hilltops and lilies growing in wild profusion in the flowering meadows. Onward I fly, following the mountain pass north-eastward, toward Venice and the Sea.

Gradually, any lingering sense of hesitation about my mission fades from my mind. The sun is sinking in the west, and I know that I must make all possible haste. I concentrate on my task, scanning the Tuscan countryside. Ox-carts and the occasional traveller on foot can be seen on the network of dry mud roads. I think of the dwellers in the red and ruddy-brown roofed houses below. I become aware of my loneliness. I am overwhelmed by the vastness of the sky.

Spying a bare stretch of sand and pebbles along a river bank, I descend and pause to drink. Then, rising on an updraft, I fly onward toward the copper horizon.

An hour after twilight, a quarter, crescent moon rises in the sky. The stars peep out. I am stiff-necked and my strength is beginning to

flag. I crave some morsel of nourishment, yet I do not dare to take the time to fish. I fortify myself with self-resolution. My broad white feathers fan the air. Onward I fly, heedless of hunger.

I fly all night, guided by the moon. There are tiny lights below - lanterns in the yards of farmhouses. I stretch my neck forward. I burn to see Venice, where I am certain that my swan-mate awaits.

For hours, there is nothing but flight. Yet, I am glad. For with the steady rhythm of my wings, my muscles become numb. Time seems to stop. Onward I fly, into the night.

With the slow waking of dawn, the mountain pastures below appear emerald-green. The light above shines golden on my wings. The air glistens, as if touched by God's golden wand. Shortly after dawn, I pass through a white cloud which gives way to calm blue sky. Then, I spy Venice. At the altitude at which I fly, the city first appears veiled in a silvery mist. Slowly, however, my eyes clear and the city becomes visible directly beneath me. I swoop down, a great swan over Venice.

Immediately, I begin searching the sun-filled city for my mate. At first, this seems to be an easy task. Here, there is no maze of dark, narrow streets as in Florence. I fly on shimmering, rarified air, searching the wide, crystal canals which are filled with a light so pure that I am awed by its incandescence.

It is at this point in my dream that the soft voice in my head returns.

"So great a light!" it intones. "In this vale of light, which is closer to God than ever you thought you could be, all is made well. Here is the heaven that is pure light! Here your flight shall be forever glorious! Expand your wings and ascend to the splendor!"

"But I am still searching," I reply. "My swan-mate calls to me piteously, praying that I come to her."

"You shall not find your queen even in this city of light," the voice

intones. "But here you must rest. Only thereby can your soul be made clean. Forget your yearning to follow the moon and the stars. Embrace the love which guides you! In this city of light, your soul will be free! Elsewhere lies only death."

With these last words, the voice falls silent. Swooping down, I land in the garden courtyard of a Palace whose bright stones do not glare like white-washed granite, but shimmer like soft, pink marble. I land on a small pond. I drink the sweet water. I take sustenance from the golden fruit of an apricot tree which grows on the pond bank. While I swallow the ripe fruit, the compassionate voice echoes in my head. "Here you must rest....In this city of light, your soul will be free....Elsewhere lies only death." Still not understanding the significance of this voice, I discount its warning. A sense of blind confusion wells up inside me. Flapping my wings, I rise into the air. Onward, I fly, in search of my dark-eyed goddess. Leaving the sun-filled city of Venice behind me, I fly toward the Sea.

CHAPTER 30

During the month of February, I was greatly preoccupied with trying to understand my Paradiso-dream. For days on end, I lay in bed, lost in lofty contemplation. I had decided that, for once and for all, I must determine upon a course of action whereby to control my own fate. Yet, I did not know how this could be done. My dream seemed to proffer clues, yet it perplexed me. I did not know how to interpret my vision and, although I sought some sign to help me decide what to do, I was reluctant to believe that a mere dream could relate directly to my life. I knew that the dream revealed the passage of my soul, but its conclusion appeared terribly open-ended. Reason told me that there was nothing tangible to act upon. I decided that I would wait for a more concrete indication of what to do next. My destiny was difficult to determine, so I proceeded with caution.

In hindsight, I realize that I would not have had the time to meditate upon such lofty ambitions as directing the course of my own destiny, if Leonardo had not fallen ill. Salai refused to take his turn caring for our master, so I spent a good deal of time about the studio. Although it was sometimes monotonous being cooped up, the warm southern winds of early spring made daily life pleasant enough. Since Leonardo was not much trouble to care for, but rather needed someone present in case an emergency should arise, I had leisure to contemplate my dreams and to plan the direction of my life. Evenings, I opened wide the shutters of my chamber window and whiled away the time meditating in an idle fashion.

Perhaps I was fortunate to have the time for philosophizing, but sometimes it struck me that I had become bored with my life. I no longer took lessons from Leonardo and, in fact, had no real chores left to do about the studio. In truth, Leonardo hardly needed an apprentice anymore. The only work which he did for quite some time was a small self-portrait in

silver-point. While cleaning the front studio one morning, I found the sketch lying on the windowsill, the canvas curling in the sun. For some reason, when I saw my master's mirror-drawing - his desperate eyes, and haughty smile - something cut deep into my heart. It was at this point in my apprenticeship that my relationship with Leonardo changed.

Slowly, my interest turned away from compiling Leonardo's notes. Although I still needed to earn his respect, I decided that I would no longer race to finish the note-books in time to present them to him before he died. I determined that, if he did not recognize my loyalty and my worth as an apprentice through my admirable everyday service, then I would suffer in silence. For some small time, I missed the pleasant, mind-numbing effect which my painstaking scholarly task produced. Yet, in some queer way, I was thankful to Salai for his mean trick of squealing to Leonardo about my after-hours devotion. For, as my loyalty to Leonardo waned, I conceived the idea of writing this personal history.

By degrees, the notion came to me that, by committing my confession to parchment, I could perhaps be brought closer to that central point of understanding which I so desperately sought. I began to plan my chronicle. Instead of devoting all my time and energy to the dreary task of compiling Leonardo's notes, I spent long hours in my room, musing about the events of my recent past and recording my thoughts in a notebook, which I kept exclusively for this purpose. And yet, it was difficult to make a beginning. I did not understand the principles of the word-smith's craft. Gradually, however, it came to me that I would have to relinquish rational control over the workings of my memory if my artifice was to succeed. Slowly, I realized that, if I was to relate the tangled truth of my life's story, I would have to weave and stitch time and place in a manner pleasing to my temper. My goal, I perceived, was to capture the imaginative reality of my experience, even when I departed from fact in detail.

Now, although these questions of art and the responsibilities of studio-life were important to me, they were external to my innermost concern. During those weeks of early spring, as it was since the first day I met her, Mona Lisa was my prime consideration, the focal point around

which all my other thoughts revolved. Whenever possible I met with her in the park, where we had conducted our earlier meetings. She sent messages through Maria to tell me when her husband would be away. It was our custom to enjoy the afternoon sunshine together, talking quietly and watching our tiny girl-child play in her wicker cradle. The infant, who had recently been christened Angelica, smiled endearingly from her crib. Her big, brown eyes gazed at all around her with open, innocent curiosity. Lisa and I spent a pleasant hour or two together once or twice a week in this fashion. After our strolls, I customarily accompanied Lisa and the child back to the Giocundo household, where I took my leave.

All, apparently, was well. Yet, during these weeks, Lisa's mood seemed to fluctuate. Sometimes she was clearly joyful, yet other times she seemed almost despondent. Although I inquired on several occasions about what was upsetting her, she refused to speak to me about it. She murmured incomprehensibly about a feeling of foreboding which often visited her. Sometimes, her mysterious manner frightened me. Yet, she retained her peculiar charm. I was drawn ever closer to her. As the anniversary of our first meeting approached, my desire for Lisa changed from simple passion to something deeper. I wanted to make more resonant the warm vibrations of our secret love. I desired that our hearts should beat in unison.

As I became more and more daring in my love for Lisa, I took greater risks to spend time with her. Giocundo was often absent from his household, and my fear of him gradually receded. Despite Lisa's warnings, I often loitered about Giocundo's mansion, after escorting her home from the park. At first, it was my custom to leave her at the courtyard gate. Soon, however, I followed her right up to her front door before bidding her farewell. Then, a few visits later, I tempted fate too far. Despite Lisa's protests, I boldly escorted her all the way into her hallway in order to save our farewell kiss for the last possible moment. On that occasion, her husband had returned home before he was expected. Instantly, my good humor was shattered when, much to my chagrin, I found myself once again face to face with the merchant, Giocundo.

It was immediately apparent that Giocundo was just back from feasting.

He stood in the hallway, swaying heavily from side to side like an over-stuffed lion. He frowned for a moment. Then he laughed a deep, roaring laugh. Keeping his eyes on Lisa and myself, who stood together in the middle of the marble hallway, Giocundo unhitched the fat purse which hung on his belt and threw it onto a nearby table. His valet helped him off with his fine coat. Still looking at Lisa and me and chortling a deep belly laugh, the merchant then sat down heavily on a chair. Brushing a loose lock of oily hair over his balding pate, he gestured to the shaggy bear-like man named Emilio, who shambled forward to help the merchant off with his boots. The wasp-like valet stood at Giocundo's elbow, clicking his tongue. After taking off his master's boots, Emilio stood by the doorway, staring at us with his one eye like some dumb, hungry cyclops.

There Lisa and I stood, like two stone statues positioned in the center of the merchant's marble hallway. After putting on his silken house-slippers, Giocundo dismissed his henchmen. His guffawing stopped. He stood up to confront us. Secure in her love for me, Lisa took my arm and stood beside me, unflinchingly. She smiled calmly at her husband. I squeezed her hand and prepared to meet whatever challenge Giocundo issued.

"Well, well!" said Giocundo. "Here I have just returned from the Duke's businessmen's banquet, hoping to find a little peace to take my afternoon nap, and what do I find? You two flaunting your lawless affair for all my servants and neighbours to see! Why must you two insist on making me aware of this insipid love which you share? I am loath even to discuss the affair! At this very moment, I have troubles enough with news of tax hikes ordered by the Duke, and demands by the guilds for higher wages. But I suppose, if I must deal with it, let us do it swiftly. Do either of you have anything to say for yourselves? Well, speak!"

Lisa demurred. I, too, shook my head.

Seeing our reluctance to say anything, Giocundo smiled. "These are unusual circumstances," said the merchant, patting his paunch. "But then this city is famous for its strange tales of love, is it not? I should probably congratulate you both on keeping up with the times! It is more than I can do."

"Why do you speak of strange tales of love?" asked Lisa, clearly perplexed by her husband's indifferent reaction to discovering us together under his roof.

"Why, my dear, this affair is most strange, is it not?" replied the merchant. "Why you have become so attached to this lowly artist's apprentice, when you could have had your choice of young lovers more suitable to your station, is certainly curious. And how you can forgive him for selling your child is more than anyone can understand!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Lisa. "Francesco, do you know what he means by these words?"

Saying nothing, I lowered my eyes.

"But, no! Ha! This is too rich!" exclaimed Giocundo. "Surely you have told my wife about the bond which you swore with me?"

"No," I said, keeping my eyes lowered to the floor. "I saw no reason to speak of it..."

"Well, my dear," said Giocundo to Lisa, "it seems that your fine young gentleman friend has neglected to tell you that he swore the child would be mine once it was born."

"Is this true, Francesco?" Lisa asked.

"Yes, I gave him my word," I said, trying desperately to defend myself. "In exchange, he agreed to give us our freedom..."

Lisa's face blanched. Giocundo belched. A lump rose in my throat.

"There was nothing else to do," I said to Lisa. "I had to accept your husband's terms, or he was going to kill us both and keep the child regardless."

Lisa's dark eyes looked at me without blinking. She shook her head as if in disbelief.

"I never want to see you again, Francesco," she said with evident disgust in her voice.

"But a boy-child was not born," I said. "We only agreed to the contract if a boy-child was born. Now we are safe..."

"That does not matter," said Lisa. "You betrayed me. I should have known better than to trust you a second time! You cared nothing about me! You would have sold my child to ensure your own safety!"

Giocundo watched our argument with amusement. Lisa's pain fired his delight. When his wife's emotions had worked up to an explosive intensity, the merchant spoke:

"Do not make such a commotion!" he said to Lisa, raising his thick, hairy hand as if to cuff her with the back of it. "You have tried my patience long enough. Has my little demonstration taught you to be thankful for your home and faithful to your lawful husband? Or, pray tell, do you still want to play the whore and elope with your fine, upright young lover, only to be abandoned in a backstreet of some strange city when he tires of you?"

Lisa looked at me with profound sadness in her eyes. That day, she wore a dark silken dress with a ruby brooch and her hair was braided in coils. She stood beside a vase of white and red roses, brushing away a tear. She lowered her dark half-veil and curtseyed slightly to Giocundo. "I must see if Maria is caring properly for the child," she said, avoiding my beseeching eyes, and turning to ascend the mansion's great marble staircase.

With Lisa gone, Giocundo turned to me. He spoke slowly and deliberately, his voice was deep and growling:

"You are a naughty monkey," he said. "If you want to survive in this life much longer, you will have to learn servility."

"I will not be spoken to in this way," I said, muttering a fragmented speech in defense of my position.

Giocundo paused. Lisa's weeping could be heard coming from the floor above. Watching me with his vacant, glassy eyes, her husband listened passively. He was standing so close to me that I could see the pores in his waxy complexion and the tufts of hair growing from his nose and ears.

"The girl-child is a disappointment, indeed," Giocundo said after his calculated pause. "Usually I have no pity on someone who does not hold up his end of a contract with me."

"I have already told you that the disappointment is yours alone," I said, standing rigid, with my arms folded across my chest.

"Let us make one thing clear," said Giocundo, grinding his right fist

into the palm of his left hand, "the only reason that I do not have you killed immediately is that your antics amuse me somewhat. Besides, I think that perhaps you may still be useful to me. I propose a new bargain. I have decided that I shall keep the girl-child, Angelica, unless you can convince my wife to make another effort to produce a boy as an heir to my household. In simple terms, you must produce a boy-child for me, or else the infant girl shall be forfeit!"

"Damn you!" I cursed. "Now it is you who fault the bond. But I shall not heed your terms. You must be mad if you think that I shall have anything further to do with your bargains."

"My ingenuous young knave, you can hardly choose this moment to begin thinking about scruples!" said Giocundo with quick fierceness. "Do not talk to me of what you will and will not do! Do you expect to cuckold me and then to pay no penalty? That is hardly equitable commerce now, is it? I am, you must remember, Lisa's lawful husband."

Thinking that it would be rash to refute Giocundo's claim to Lisa, I dared not utter a word.

"My wife is a whore," said Giocundo. "She is my property and should serve me as I see fit. I grow tired of restraining my temper! Shall I have you both imprisoned and guarded in one of the rooms of my house until my wish is carried out? Shall I have my men strip the clothes from your backs? Shall I have you horsewhipped? Impregnate my wife, then you will be released! Let me hear no more about it!"

"Nothing will persuade me to agree to your terms again," I said with firm resolve.

"Is your brain as soft as an overcooked noodle?" said Giocundo. "You cannot refuse! You have no choice about the matter!"

There was a silver ringing in my skull and the tips of my ears were burning. My mind was teeming with disdainful replies for Giocundo, but, at first, I could make no answer. "But I do refuse," was all I finally said.

"Well, my obstinate young urchin, soon you shall learn what true heartache is," said the merchant in an impassioned, vengeful voice. "If you refuse me, you shall pay dearly for your sudden turn of conscience!"

The sound of Lisa's weeping had quieted.

"I shall not allow Lisa's virtue and honesty to be soiled in this manner," I said, my voice quavering despite my effort to keep it steady. "She deserves better than either you or I can give her."

"Stifle your chattering!" growled Giocundo, evidently unwilling to speak with me further now that he saw that my mind was made up.

After my refusal to bargain with the merchant, all pretensions of civility quickly eroded. Without further ado, Giocundo called for his servants and dismissed me curtly. Once out in the street, I tried in vain to keep my knees from trembling and knocking together as I walked. Every fibre of my being had been concentrated in repelling Giocundo and, now that the incident was over, my thoughts rushed forward. Fear flowed through my veins. I dared not think of what punishment Giocundo would devise to repay me for my refusal to comply with his latest proposition. My head ached. I knew that, even at this late point, my best course of action was to leave Florence with Lisa and the child before Giocundo had time to execute his revenge. Still, I hesitated. "Tomorrow, I shall take Lisa and the child away to Venice," I whispered to myself. But the plain truth of the matter was that, although I voiced these noble intentions, I was powerless to put them into action. With sagging shoulders, I slunk through the city streets. Filled with disgrace and shame, I longed for the days when I had been merely an anonymous escort to the Lady Giocundo.

CHAPTER 31

After my third meeting with Giocundo, I did not see Lisa again for nearly a full fortnight. February passed and soon it was the beginning of March. During this time, I thought a great deal about my most recent misfortune. I was galled by Giocundo's abominable proposal, outraged by the way in which he played the tyrant, treating his wife like a whore. I was certain that he had bided his time, waiting to strike Lisa and me down at the height of our happiness. I cursed the merchant for turning our bliss into misery. And, I cursed myself for not listening to Lisa, who had warned me that we must keep our love a secret.

Now that I wanted Lisa more than ever, I remembered the nights of passion which we once shared, when we took our delight together without care for the world outside of her chamber. I wanted desperately to see her again, to explain my love for her and the complicated circumstances which prevented it from shining forth as it should. Yet, I could not bear the thought of being reproached again. I feared that, if I went unannounced to her window, she might turn me away. I feared her recriminations. I tried to shake off this anxiety, telling myself that Lisa would surely be forgiving. Yet, I had little faith in her strength. Thinking on these things, I was filled with guilt and despair. A strange sense of loneliness pervaded my soul. I hoped that this mood would pass.

For several days, I shuffled about the studio, doing as little as possible. During this interim, I tried to deny my complicity with Giocundo. Now that I had refused his latest attempt to use me as his pawn, I felt somewhat redeemed for my earlier misdeeds. Yet, I feared the cruel punishment which I knew the merchant would devise. I prayed for Lisa's safety and for that of the child, Angelica. But when I thought about them locked in Giocundo's mansion, I stilled the stirrings of my conscience. It

seemed impossible for me to rescue them now. For a moment, I even wondered whether I should have given my consent to carry on with the affair. "Perhaps," I thought, "I could have appeased Giocundo with my faked assent and avoided any further trouble." Yet, I remained adamant about my decision; I swore that I would never again be tempted from the straight and narrow course which I had followed before meeting Lisa. I asserted that I would escape the merchant's vengeance and that virtue and reason would again guide my life.

The Lenten days before Easter were now quickly approaching and while I skulked about the studio, in a desperate, gloomy mood, outside in the streets the citizens of Florence were planning a carnival to celebrate the arrival of a new spring. The plague seemed now long past, and the warnings of that madman and martyr, Fra Girolamo, were almost forgotten. Heralded by this upsurge of merry-making, the new spring arrived. For his part, Salai, true to form, went drinking nightly with his friends. He often invited me along, but his companions were sucking pigs with whom I did not care to fraternize. Popularity meant nothing to me. I knew that I could take no delight from such forays, so I spent all my time around the studio. I frittered away the afternoons looking after Leonardo and doing odd jobs. Evenings, I sat at my desk, composing notes for my personal history while Leonardo slept on his cot downstairs. Despite my coldness toward Salai, he still chummed up to me, raising his cap when we met in the corridor and trying to draw me into conversation at mealtimes. But I was not fooled by his false geniality. I avoided him as much as possible. I waited impatiently for a chance to execute the revenge which I had already sworn.

For a time, I played along with Salai, lulling him into a false sense of security. I laughed at his practical jokes. I tolerated his slovenly manners. Then, one evening while I was sitting at my desk, he barged into my room, demanding to know if I would accompany him to the carnival. He was excited because a caravan from the East was stopped in Florence for the three day pre-Lenten holiday in honor of which the carnival had been organized. It was the last night of the carnival and Salai wanted desperately to go. Though reluctant to go with him, I had to do something to stamp out my melancholy. I was lonely and needed some way to fill the

time when I was not with Lisa. I thought that perhaps a night out would help me to forget my uncertain future. So, much to Salai's surprise, I replied that I would be delighted to accompany him.

I remember that it was shortly before twilight when the two of us set out that evening. As we walked through the winding city streets, a silver half-moon was rising in the sky and pale stars were slowly becoming visible. Before leaving the studio, Salai had told me that we would make a better impression on the fashionable ladies if we dressed ourselves like two young gentlemen of the wealthier sort. In consequence, he was attired in a pair of red satin knee breeches and a blouse of pale blue silk with puffed sleeves. His velvet cap sat jauntily on his head of golden curls and the little silver buckles on his shoes shone brightly in the moonlight. I too had dressed specially for the evening. As we drew closer to the Piazza della Signoria, where the carnival was being held, I smoothed a crease in my stockings and turned up the collar of my goat-skin tunic. I tried to look the part of a fashionable young gentleman about town as Salai did so splendidly.

When we arrived at the piazza, Salai and I were greeted by a scene of noise and confusion. At the entrance of the piazza, I halted. In the dying evening light, I could see a great crowd of Florentines moving about like a swarm of buzzing bees covering a honey patch. Instantly, I knew that it was a mistake coming here.

"Good Lord," I said, "what sort of devilry is this!?"

"Come on!" said Salai. "There's no need to be faint-hearted."

Having come this far, I relented and followed Salai into the piazza. He smiled at me reassuringly, patting me on the back. We pushed our way into the crowd and were immediately carried along in its flow.

The carnival was in full swing. Salai and I passed jugglers tossing sticks and balls and acrobats doing somersaults and cartwheels. Clowns with gaily painted faces walked through the crowd on stilts and Salai tried to trip one as he crossed our path. A troupe of monkeys danced to the organ music of their trainer, and a bright, red-feathered parrot did tricks

on the hand of a small Arab boy, to whom I threw a copper coin in passing. For a time, we stopped to watch a dark-bearded sword swallower who managed to swallow seventeen of the instruments before it became too painful for the audience to watch any longer. Salai and I moved on with the crowd. We stopped next to buy hot cherry comfits and lemonade from a vendor. As we stood eating our treats, we watched a magician mystify his audience with sleight of hand.

All manner of Florentines had gathered here for the last night of the carnival. Ragged peasants stood in clusters, observing the kaleidoscope of wonders. Wealthy merchants promenaded with their wives. Even the Duke and his entourage were present, standing with a group of other prominent Florentine gentlemen who were laughing and laying wagers while two swollen-headed dwarfs wrestled in a mud pit. Salai and I were jostled along amidst a sea of elbows. Without the power of determining our own course, we gave ourselves up to the press of the crowd and enjoyed the sights. Not stopping very long at any one attraction, we were carried along for quite some time in a haphazard fashion.

After seeing many strange marvels, toward the later part of the evening we found ourselves at the far end of the piazza, where a large circus tent was set-up. A sign declared this attraction to be the "Harem of Delights." Outside the tent were hung colorful paper lanterns which swayed to and fro in the evening breeze. The entrance of the tent was blocked with a crowd of Florentine men, but Salai and I pushed forward to see better. After a minute or two of fighting through the crowd, we found ourselves in an inner circle, where spectators sat at small round tables, waiting for the show to begin. At first, I was unsure what this show was going to be. All that I saw was a group of six swarthy Turks with the sun-dried faces of goat-herders sitting cross-legged in front of a raised platform in the center of the tent. Some were smoking pipes, others were tuning strange, nasal sounding musical instruments. Nothing happened for a minute or two. Then I realized what the spectacle was going to be when half-a-dozen brown-skinned women in loose, open-sleeved robes appeared from either side of the stage. Their faces were hidden behind silken gauze veils, but their large, almond eyes spoke in a most shameless fashion. The

musicians began to play and the women began a dance which was evidently meant to whet the audience's appetite for the main attraction, which was hidden behind a red curtain at the back of the stage.

A table became available and Salai and I sat down. While I fidgeted, he stretched out his legs and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Well, we're two fortunate rogues, aren't we?" he said. "This is a sort of coquetry even better than Florentine maidens provide!"

"I really do not think that we should be here," I said.

"Do not be such a worry-wart!" said Salai, snapping his fingers for bar service.

A harem woman who was serving drinks to admiring customers brought us a flagon of wine. It was no mystery to me what these women's occupation was and once again I expressed my discomfort at being in such a place.

"Do not be such a monk!" said Salai. "Enough of this simple-minded goodness! Why must you be so gloomy? Forget your troubles for one night! Be of good cheer!"

"But this place is immoral," I said. "We should not be here!"

"Do not be ridiculous!" said Salai, his green eyes glancing about the tent with approval. "You are a simpleton, Francesco. You would make yourself a monk and a hermit, but there is a devil in your heart. What is wrong with you? You seem to grow more melancholy by the day!"

"It is none of your concern," I said.

"I know of only one thing that makes men so drab and pensive," said Salai. "Why...Yes, of course! You have gone and fallen in love! That is it, isn't it?"

"And what if I have? Is that such a terrible sin?" I demanded.

"Ha! No, it is not a sin," said Salai, "but why dig yourself into a hole? Do not be such a pumpkin head! There are plenty of maidens to be had without becoming obsessed with this thing the poets call romantic love."

"You despise even love!" I exclaimed. "Is there nothing other than wine which holds your interest?"

"Beloved Francesco! Dear, innocent Francesco! You have been like a brother to me and so I feel that I can tell you something which I would not

dare to tell any of my friends," said Salai, with a queer look in his eye. "Though it may sound strange, I find that these days I can no longer worship wine in the way that I used to. I hardly even get drunk any more. Wine is no longer intoxicating! I feel as if there must be something more to life... But what am I doing? Forgive me...I do not mean to be low-spirited. We came here to cheer you up and to have a good time!"

"No, please speak!" I said.

"I thank you for your kindness, Francesco," said Salai. "You know, although it may not seem like it, sometimes I admire you. You have always been a restrained and judicious apprentice, whereas I have revelled and played the fool. In truth, I tire of this constant charade of merry-making. I wish I could quit it all and concentrate on more constructive pursuits! If only I could muster some small faith in something worthwhile! Sometimes I feel as if my soul were blighted!"

"Have you ever thought to pray to God when these questions trouble your soul?" I asked.

"You speak in riddles when you talk to me of such things," said Salai, looking at me now with contemptuous eyes, as if I were an idiot even to mention such a proposition.

After this conversation, Salai was quiet for a few minutes. My eyes darted quick glances at him from time to time. "Why do I envy him?" I thought. "What reason have I to be jealous now that I know of his insecurities?" Thinking these thoughts, I wished that Salai had not made his confession and that he was in a more boastful mood. I did my best to renew the anger which he often provoked in me, but it was difficult to do so. Fingering the vial of poison in my pocket, I maintained my guileless facade. I smiled at Salai when he looked over at me. My conscience told me that it would be wrong to strike him down after his so recent openness towards me. Yet, the time for my triumph was at hand. "It is now or never," a voice whispered in my head. Glancing cautiously around to assure that I was unwatched, I slipped the vial out of my pocket and poured the draught into Salai's cup while refilling both our goblets from the pitcher which the harlot had brought to our table.

Salai lifted his wine cup and, looking straight into my eyes, he

spoke:

"I am glad we have had this heart to heart talk, Francesco," he said. "We must try to get along better as a rule. To your health!"

I sat with bated breath, waiting to see the look on Salai's face when he realized the triumphant trick which I had played. Unfortunately, however, this was not to be.

"Pfffahhh!!!" Salai cried, spitting out the very first mouthful of the tainted wine and dashing the cup to the ground. "This is worse than vinegar! Barmaid, bring us another flagon!!"

"But surely this wine is palatable," I said, grasping Salai's hand as he gestured for the barmaid.

"No, it is not," said Salai. "It tastes horrible, as if someone dropped in rat poison."

"Do not be ridiculous!" I said. "Who would do such a thing?"

At that moment, I realized that I had gone too far. I had protested too strongly. Slowly, a look of realization dawned on Salai's face. "You're trying to poison me!" he cried, looking at me in horror.

"I would never do such a wicked thing!" I said.

"You are mad!" said Salai. "Who do you think you are, with your superior attitudes and judicious manner. Here I take you out to show you a good time, and you thank me by poisoning the wine! So this is what we have come to!"

"Fair enough," I said. "I admit that I was trying to play a trick on you, to pay you back for all those which you have played on me. But, as for taking me out to show me a good time, you are a cunning rascal and I do not believe that you ever truly wanted my friendship!"

"Francesco, have you completely lost your reason!" said Salai. "If you had any brains, you would know that this was not true!"

While Salai thrashed about in his chair, telling me that I was mad, I maintained my calm demeanor. I had failed to execute my revenge, and that was all that I regretted. I cursed my ill-luck and ignored Salai's prattling.

By this time, the six brown-skinned women had left the stage and the

audience was waiting for the main attraction to begin. The musicians began a weird chant and, after a moment, the red drapery at the back of the stage parted and a single dancer appeared on the platform. She was dressed in sheer, white silken veils and a large, sparkling gem was set in the cup of her navel. Whirling around the stage, gyrating rhythmically to the weird music, the dancer removed her veils. Her large almond eyes were fixed on the crowd, which eagerly urged her on. As her dance gradually built into a frenzy, the harlot closed her dark eyelids. Enveloped in a thin, yellow haze of smoke, she seemed like something out of a dream. Her skin was glistening, her legs were lean and smooth. One by one, she discarded her veils, letting them slip to the floor. Tossing back her head, she displayed her naked throat and shoulders. Weaving patterns with her hands, she conjured images of delight. The spell of her dance was irresistible and I was hypnotized by this creature. I tried to retain my composure, but, by this time, few veils remained and such a feat was impossible. My heart beat furiously. A new hunger was aroused within me. I was bewitched by this anonymous beauty.

Salai must have seen that I was inflamed with lust, for he stopped muttering about the trick which I had tried to play and looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. Then he grinned. When the dancer was finished, she disappeared behind the red curtain. She soon reappeared, dressed in a gown so that she could mingle with the audience. Salai called to her as she passed our table. His voice was smooth as olive-oil:

"Your dancing was magnificent!" he said, "Won't you come and join us?"

"Well hello, darlings!" said the harlot in broken Italian. "How may I be of service to two such fine young gentlemen?"

"Let us buy you a drink," said Salai. "Wouldn't that be fine to buy the lady a drink, Francesco?" he asked patronizingly, winking at me slyly.

"Yes, of course," I muttered.

The woman looked dreamily at Salai. "I would be delighted to join you," she said.

At first, the beautiful harlot sat next to Salai. Her hand rose and stroked his golden curls with great pleasure. But Salai jokingly

side-stepped the woman's advances. He told her that it was not he, but I who desired her services. He said that I was in evident need of exorcising my passions and that she could help to ease my frustrations. The woman laughed a deep-throated laugh, looking over at me from behind the silken gauze veil, which she had not yet removed. It was no mystery to me that Salai was up to mischief. But, while I murmured refusals, I was powerless to quell my desire. Salai egged me on, saying that he preferred to stay and play dice with some of his friends who had just arrived. He said that I should go and make merry. The woman saw something attractive in my shyness, so she too soon played the game, speaking to me caressingly and touching me rather boldly in erotic places. I tried to remain cool. I thought of Lisa and I told myself that I must not betray her again. Yet, my conscience was more elastic than I thought possible. I persuaded myself that no great harm could come of such an impulsive fling.

Finally, then, I consented. The air was vibrating with music as the next dancers came onto the stage. The beautiful harlot kissed Salai good-bye and then took me by the hand, leading me out of the main tent. She took me to one of the colorfully painted caravans parked just behind the tent. Pulling back a curtain of beads, she led me inside.

When I awoke shortly after dawn the next morning, the dancer had vanished. My purse was empty and the only trace of the dancer was a single torn veil, which I held clutched in my hand. I do not want to recall what happened before I fell asleep the previous night and, for this reason, I shall not utter half-truths about this episode in my adventures. Suffice it to say that, when I awoke, I was lying on the ground and the caravan had disappeared. A fine rain was falling. I picked myself up and brushed myself off. Gone was the festive crowd of the previous night. Now there were only soggy paper lanterns strewn in the gutters of the piazza. I felt for a fleeting moment as if the events of the previous evening had been a mirage, that my dancer had been an illusion, but I knew that this made no sense. Of course, it had all been real! As I walked homeward in the grey, early morning light, I cursed Salai for foiling me again.

CHAPTER 32

After the Carnival days of early spring, dark clouds settled over Florence for the duration of March. Gusting winds blew grey rain through the streets. Cats and dogs cowered in doorways, listening to the thunder. Pigeons huddled under eaves. During this time, I thought often of Lisa and the child, Angelica. I desperately wanted to go to see them, but I could not screw up my courage to the point where I was bold enough to act. I was immobilized by my cowardly fears of Giocundo and by the circumstances of my harassed existence. I recall that I shuffled idly about the studio for several days after my latest misadventure. Together with my fear of Giocundo, my failure to execute revenge on Salai frustrated me. Furthermore, my own guilt at having betrayed Lisa with the harlot maddened me to the breaking point.

In hindsight, when I think of how I wasted my time giving vent to my frustrations over Salai, I am filled with anger. I was a fool to have been so obsessed. It is dreadful to think that, because of my consenting to go with Salai to the carnival, I lost my loving Lisa.

Words do not come easily to my pen as I try to explain that night when I first heard the news of Lisa's death. I remember that her loyal maid-servant, Maria, came to the studio to fetch me. She was sobbing heavily, and I quieted her before letting her speak.

"Messer Francesco," she said, "I have terrible news!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"I have done something awful," she said.

"Tell me," I said.

"Salai told my boyfriend, Rudolfo, the news about your fling at the carnival," said Maria. "Thinking that it might jolt my mistress out of her

pinning misery, I told her the story. But, instead of making her see what a fool she was for loving you, this disclosure had the most harmful effect... Messer Francesco, it is horrible to have to tell you this...but my mistress, Lisa, has killed herself!"

At first, I was too shocked to say anything. I could not - would not - accept that what Maria said was true. My mind went blank. I felt as if my knees were about to buckle beneath me. I seemed to have completely lost my voice. But then, as Maria turned to leave, I managed to speak:

"And what of the child, Angelica?" I asked.

"I am caring for her," said Maria.

"I must see Lisa one last time," I said.

"We dare not risk it," said Maria.

"No, you don't understand! I must see her!" I said.

Maria looked at me tearfully for a moment. "I suppose you have the right to pay your last respects," she finally said.

As Maria and I hurried through Florence that night, the wind pelted rain in our faces. Torches mounted on brackets at street corners sputtered and fizzled as the rain blew under awnings. Only murky silhouettes were visible in the dull moonlight which flooded the piazzas and squares of the city.

When we reached Giocundo's household, we were soaking wet.

"We must be quiet," said Maria, leading me up the front path. "Messer Giocundo is not at home, but his valet has orders to be on watch. He is lazy, however, and is sleeping in his room. Try not to make a sound."

With Maria's aid, I successfully mounted the marble staircase without disturbing the wasp-like valet, whose door was open, and whose buzzing snores filled the corridor. When we reached Lisa's room, I asked Maria to leave me alone for a few short minutes. She consented, telling me to be as brief as possible. Leaving Maria to guard the door, I entered Lisa's room. It was dimly lit, with only one flickering lamp. I crossed the expanse of fine goat-skin carpets, noting how Lisa's cross, with its rubies set in gold, glittered in the light. Then, I saw Lisa lying on her great satin bed.

She was wearing the same dark silk dress which she had always worn when sitting for Leonardo. The skin of her face was much paler than it had been when she lived and, involuntarily, I thought of how this must be so because she had lost so much blood. I was standing only two or three yards from the bedstead, and I approached until I was standing over her. Lisa seemed serene in death. I touched her hand, which held a gilded rosary, but immediately I let it drop since it was horribly cold. Outside, the wind howled and groaned, shaking the shutters. I was filled with despair. At that moment, I heard a faint, familiar sound. I looked up and I saw the silver cage of the golden finch which I had given to Lisa as a present over a year ago.

"Yes," I said, "the finch must go free now. Lisa would have wanted it that way."

Bearing the golden finch's cage to the window, I held back tears which threatened to come to my eyes. I opened the shutters and then opened the cage to let the tiny finch escape. Immediately, the golden bird flew out into the night. I closed the shutters and returned to Lisa's bedstead.

"Good-bye, my love," I said, bowing my head. "Now that death has come," I thought, "what is there for me to do? Can I offer up a prayer for Lisa's soul? Would that bring any consolation?"

Thinking these thoughts, I bent over Lisa and kissed her cold lips.

"Good-bye, sweet love," I said once more.

After this last kiss, I left Lisa's room. Maria was waiting for me just outside the door. We crept silently down the stairs and into the front hallway, whose brocaded tapestries and carved marble statues provoked a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach when I saw, standing in proud ownership of these things, none other than Giocundo. The merchant's eyes were as cold as ice.

"Well, well, Francesco," he said, "I thought you might turn up tonight. Is it not terrible, this thing which has happened?"

"It is your fault," I said. "It was your cruelty which drove Lisa to take such drastic measures!"

"Do not try to lay the blame at my feet," said Giocundo. "You are equally to blame for this unfortunate event."

"You cared nothing for your wife!" I said. "You treated her like a mere ornament in your household. Even now that she is dead, you do not give a damn!"

"Nonsense, I am most unhappy," said Giocundo. "I have a respectable name to protect, I do not need this sort of bad publicity."

I recoiled from Giocundo's cruel indifference. "You are an ogre," I said. "Can nothing touch your heart?"

"Oh, one thing always finds a welcome place in my heart," said Giocundo. "I am most content when I get the better of a bargain."

"Well, you have won nothing tonight," I said.

"But I have, indeed," said Giocundo. "I am rid of my troublesome wife. I have had the delight of seeing you bankrupt. And now I intend to take the girl-child, Angelica, and have her locked away for good. When I remarry, she will not be an inconvenience to me."

"Am I never to see the child?" I asked, startled by this latest threat.

"No! From now on you will stay completely out of the way," said Giocundo.

"And if I disagree?" I asked.

"You will die!" replied Giocundo.

"But if I agree, what assurance do I have that you will look after the child properly?" I asked.

"You have none," said Giocundo. "You have no choice. You cheated me in the past, and I do not see any reason to respect your wishes."

"But I am the child's father!" I said.

"That does not matter," said Giocundo. "I must take stock of my assets. How else is a businessman to make a profit?"

"The child must not be abused," I said.

"Do not lament, my young pup!" said Giocundo. "I have the resources to look after the child in a much more gracious fashion than you could ever afford."

Giocundo knew that I could not refute this last assertion. With nothing left to say, I took my leave. My spirit was heavy as iron as I

made my way homeward through the lashing rain. A great weariness filled my soul. "Is it too late to pray for salvation?" I asked myself. But no answer came. The roofs and trees dripped with rain. Liquid mud flowed in the gutters. With hanging head, I walked onward through the slippery streets and alleyways.

CHAPTER 33

For the first few days after Lisa's death, I was in danger of losing my reason. My wits were frayed. I thought obsessively about how I had fulfilled my desire to become Mona Lisa's lover, and about how my lust had led me to become a victim of Giocundo's blackmail. I thought about how, from the very start, it was impossible for me to curb my yearning for Lisa, even though I had an inkling that this love could bring only disaster. Lastly, I thought that nothing worse could happen to me now.

In this last belief, however, I was wrong. Within the space of two days after visiting Lisa's chamber for the final time, Florence suffered a tragedy so dramatic and terrifying that I had little opportunity to think about my personal grief. I soon bore witness to heart-chilling scenes which forced me to forget, temporarily at least, my heart-ache over losing Lisa. Though it pains me to do so, I must now write of the Great Flood which struck Florence on that fateful twelfth of April, in the year in which I began this chronicle.

As I remember it, during the days preceding the flood, a huge mass of warm and humid air hovered over the city and the sky crackled with thunder and lightening. There were rains so heavy and persistent that people said there had been nothing like it in living memory. Roars and rumblings were heard coming from the bowels of the earth. While her citizens cowered behind locked doors and shutters, the Arno was swelling and Fate was preparing the tragedy which fell upon Florence and all the cities along the river down to the Sea.

In Florence, of course, flooding was a constant menace. But, while the condition of the river was always a concern, during the twelve years which I lived in the city, I saw only a few minor floods. Indeed, if I had not seen with my own eyes the disaster wrecked by the Great Flood on that fateful Friday in April, I would not have believed the destructive power of the river which, in previous years, had seemed merely sullen and indifferent.

I recall that I had retired to bed early the previous evening, disconsolate and weary after spending several sleepless nights reflecting on Lisa's death. Even at that early hour on Thursday evening, the city's gutters and drains were unable to cope with the downpour. As I turned the latch on the front door of the studio, I peeped out and noted the muddy waters rising in the streets. For a moment, I stopped and considered whether it was likely that the waters would invade our household cellar, as they had done once or twice in the past when there was a heavy rainfall. I wondered whether I should roll up a piece of carpet to seal the crack under the door, but I was too tired to be bothered with such precautions. I climbed the stairs to my bed chamber, telling myself not to worry, that the rain would no doubt stop within an hour or two. But, as I lay tossing and turning on my bed that night, I listened to the rain continue. I drifted in and out of a troubled sleep, picturing in my mind the rising waters.

I arose shortly after dawn on that storm-darkened morning of the day on which the Great Flood struck Florence. I prepared and served a breakfast of porridge and goat's milk to Leonardo, Salai and myself as we sat at the table in our kitchen. Little was said during breakfast and, afterwards, Leonardo shuffled off into the front studio to begin work. His health was now slightly better, but he was often in a cantankerous mood. Somehow he had heard the rumor that Salai was now almost always in attendance at the studio of that rising young star, Raphael. Though Leonardo would never have admitted it, I knew that he was jealous. When he saw that he was losing control over Salai, he looked obstinately for occasions to demand that both Salai and I perform needless duties, just to prove our loyalty.

On that particular morning, Leonardo wanted fish for Good Friday dinner. I was told to take his boots to the cobbler to have the heels fixed, and then to go shopping. Salai was sent along to help carry groceries. We tried to protest having to do these errands, explaining to our master that the inclement weather would not permit such an excursion, but he only scowled and told us to get moving.

And so it was that Salai and I donned our street cloaks that day, reluctantly setting off through a curtain of rain and braving the tempest to appease Leonardo's wishes. In the city streets, there were few people. As we crossed the Great Market Square, the only signs of life were a few shadowy figures scurrying towards shelter, and several torn flags flapping wildly in the driving wind. Salai and I hurried to accomplish our errands as quickly as possible. We had come out armed with one of Leonardo's inventions - an absurd wire and cloth contrivance intended to keep off rain. With the gusting winds, the mechanism refused to work properly and the cloth leaked terribly. In no time at all, we were soaked to the skin. Onward we scurried into the dark morning, which was pierced, here and there, by dim, mysterious lights.

Despite the odds against success, Salai and I managed to secure our provisions. I had thought that everywhere would be closed because of the storm; however, several shops in the center of town were open. Evidently, a few hardy souls were determined to continue business as usual, heedless of the hazards involved. I did not linger on these details at the time. Once we had seen to Leonardo's boots and bought our portion of herring for supper, Salai and I headed home. I had by now resolved myself to accomplishing our errand in the least troublesome manner without complaining, but Salai whined all the way. I told him not to grumble, but rather to be thankful that our task had gone so smoothly. He stayed quiet for a block or two until we came to the Ponte Trinita, when he cried out in surprise. Salai and I needed to cross the bridge to reach the quarter in which Leonardo's studio lay, but it was clear that it was now a very dangerous prospect to try to get to the other side. In horror, I realized that, although we had succeeded with little difficulty on the first part of our mission, if we did not act quickly, we would be cut off from returning to the studio.

Salai's face grew pale. He stopped and stood, gape-jawed and shivering, pointing to the muddy waters below the bridge, which were travelling as fast as a run-away horse. I took his arm to prompt him to follow me across the bridge, but he pulled it away. We stood for several minutes arguing on the Ponte Trinita, the tops of whose arches were by this time only about a meter clear of the water. As we argued, up-rooted tree trunks went charging along and vendors' carts and pieces of furniture went crashing by. Casks of wine and huge rolls of cloth which had been swept out of warehouses bobbed in the current like giant corks.

"Do not give way to despair," I said to Salai, tugging at his arm, trying to get him to snap out of his fear and cross the bridge before it was too late and we were cut off in both directions.

"We must go back," said Salai. "You can see that the bridge is not safe to cross!"

"Come on!" I said. "I know that you would turn and run away, but we must get to the studio to make sure that our master is safe from the flood."

"You are mad!" Salai replied. "Look at the river! It is now impossible to return to the studio. We shall have to secure shelter somewhere in town."

"But Leonardo is in danger," I said breathlessly. "We must do our best to save him."

"No!" cried Salai. "We must go back! The river is too perilous!"

"We must not be prevented by the water from trying as best we can," I replied.

By this time, the Ponte Trinita was shaking terribly under our feet. The bridge was acting like a dam, holding back the waters of the Arno. A terrifying quantity of water was backed up, but still the bridge held. I could hear the grim rumbling of the water beneath us and the awful thuds and bangs as the bridge was beaten by the wood and debris carried by the river. Before long, the flood poured over the embankments and into the streets below the bridge. The embankments were quickly giving way. The arches of the bridge were now almost completely under water and the whole structure was shaking so violently that I thought that it was going to collapse at any moment.

"Run for it!" I shouted to Salai, seeing that the bridge could not hold the water back any longer.

I shouted my warning just in time for, at last, the tremendous pressure exerted by the Arno proved too much and the mass of water held back by the bridge was discharged. As we ran, the bridge collapsed under our very feet. Just as Salai and I reached the opposite embankment, the parapets of the Ponte Trinita disappeared beneath a raging torrent.

Instantly, the streets were awash with muddy water which rose to a level of more than three meters in a matter of seconds. Everything was going under. The violent torrent poured over the ramparts of the bridge and burst into houses, shops and churches. Terrified Florentines climbed onto their rooftops for safety. Even two story dwellings quickly became completely submerged.

Amidst the panic, Salai and I made a bid for safety by hoisting ourselves onto a large wooden table which was being swept along in the flood. Using the table as a raft, we clung like a couple of pack-rats as we followed the flow of mud and water.

"We are both going to die!" cried Salai. "This floating piece of debris cannot support the two of us for long!"

The torrent poured through the narrow streets and alleyways. A swirling mass of muddy water battered at the door of the Cathedral Santa Maria. Onward we were swept by the current which bore dead oxen and other beasts. By this time, I was shivering with cold and Salai seemed to be in a state of shock. The roaring of the water was tremendous. When we reached the Piazza della Signoria, it was like a storm-tossed lake. Unable to quell his fears, Salai almost fainted. He clung to the lurching raft with one hand, and with the other, tightly clasped my arm. In the blinding rain, we could see nothing. The table collided with trees and other debris. Suddenly, it heaved heavily to one side, almost capsizing. At that instant, Salai lost his grip on my arm and was thrown into the swirling water. I heard his startled cries, but I was powerless to help.

He went under, then came up choking with mud and the water he had swallowed. He tried to swim to the raft, but he could not reach it. At last, his cries stopped. Overwhelmed by the fierce current, he disappeared beneath the flood.

In terror, I clung to the wooden table as it followed the flow of the enraged river. Completely at the river's mercy, I had no time to think about losing Salai. For three desperate hours after the Arno burst its banks, I struggled on my perilous journey, intent on my desperate task of getting back to the studio to help Leonardo. I knew that my master was in great jeopardy since our studio was in the low lying part of the city. This, I realized, was my greatest chance to earn Leonardo's respect and admiration! Still, I could see nothing in the darkness. I could only hear the rumbling river beneath the raft, and the desperate howling of watchdogs chained to their posts in warehouses, until at last the rising waves closed over them.

After a while, I no longer had the strength to struggle against the turgid waters. I simply clung to the raft, which sped along the racing current. I told myself that, by now, Leonardo was, in all probability, drowned. To continue my desperate rescue attempt seemed futile. Thrown about by the river, in mortal fear of my life-raft being shattered against the wall of a building at any instant, I shed all thoughts of worldly responsibility and simply hoped and prayed that my life would be saved.

CHAPTER 34

Although, after Lisa's death, I was certain that I could endure no more sorrow, the Great Flood drastically changed my outlook on life. My experience of the flood was more terrifying than anything I could have imagined happening to me, yet it instilled a strange sense of hope in my heart. It was as if the heavens had split, raining disaster on Florence, and I had lived through the Day of Judgement. I was determined to prove myself worthy of salvation.

With the coming of evening, the rain stopped. As the clouds parted and the moon rose in the sky, the flood waters gradually began to decline. I later learned that, after the first wave of the flood raced through the city, the torrent of water burst through the wall near the south gate. With the breaking of the wall, the waters rejoined the main flow of the Arno, which was washing all in its path down to the Sea. Yet, still it took many hours for the water level to decrease in the city.

I reached our studio shortly before evening that fateful day. Although I feared that I would find Leonardo drowned by the waters, I found him sitting on top of the roof, a soggy, brown woolen blanket wrapped about his hunched shoulders. Forced by the rising waters to retreat to higher ground, my master had evidently overcome his fear of climbing the stairs. He was watching the diminishing waves swirling round the house with a look of bemused, cynical contemplation. I knew that, several times in the past, Leonardo had presented the Duke and the Priors with plans for dikes and dams and reservoirs to be built along the Arno, to ensure the safety of the city in case of flood. But, as always, the city council ignored his expensive schemes. The Duke, it was said, needed every penny of tax revenue to pay the salaries of his officers and officials. In the aftermath of the catastrophe, Leonardo was surveying the devastation with

what seemed to be smug self-satisfaction. Once again his patrons had paid him no heed, yet this time his grandiose proposals were justified.

I shouted greetings from my raft as I floated toward the studio roof-top, where Leonardo sat crouched. He looked at me with a grateful expression on his face.

"Please come and help me down from here, Francesco!" he called.

"Master, you found the courage to climb to the roof!" I shouted.

"I had no other choice," he replied. "I did what was necessary. Death's messenger clearly decided to enter by the back door rather than waiting on the staircase landing, so I climbed up to the rooftop."

"Wonderful!" I shouted.

When I reached the studio, the flood waters had subsided to the point where they were level with the second story windows. I jumped off my raft and grappled my way up onto the roof. I watched the large wooden table as it was carried away on the waters. Then I went over and took Leonardo's arm and helped him as we both climbed down into the studio through a skylight in the corridor. Together we walked slowly through our household, surveying the damage.

At their height, the flood waters had reached the second floor bedrooms, but little was ruined. The floorboards were soaking wet and dangerously warped but, when I looked into my chamber, all my things were intact. My bed mattress was wet, and the bronze statue of the pipe-playing satyr was tipped over in a puddle, but the large wooden trunk containing the notes for my history had not been penetrated. Downstairs in the front octagonal studio, the back studio and the kitchen, however, the damage was extensive and, in some cases, irreparable. All of Leonardo's half-finished paintings, his models, his drawings and many notes were destroyed. I saw his chart of the universe floating on the surface of the sinking waters. The ink was smeared and his drawings of the spheres looked horribly out of joint. Instantly, I thought of Lisa's portrait. I could not see it floating on the water with the many other canvases which I recognized. I turned to Leonardo in dismay.

"Master, the portrait you were painting...of the Lady Giocundo... where is it?" I asked.

Leonardo smiled at me. Taking my arm, he led me back up the stairs and into his room. He went over to a painting, which sat propped up on a chair, covered with a piece of black cloth. He took off the cloth, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Lisa's portrait was untouched.

"I had the time to save only this," Leonardo said. "I swore that I would perfect this one painting before I die, and I mean to honor my words. When the flood waters have sunk, I shall arrange for the lady Lisa to sit for me once again. This painting shall be my masterpiece! With this work, I shall secure my reputation!"

"Master, it shall never be finished," I said. "Lisa is... dead."

"No! This cannot be so!" said Leonardo.

"It is so..." I said.

"In the flood?" asked Leonardo. "Did she die in the flood, Francesco?"

"Yes, master," I said.

Leonardo sat down heavily on his bed. My words had completely deflated his newly rekindled determination. "I could never have made it perfect anyway," he muttered. "She was a mysterious woman. Something about her constantly eluded me."

With these words, Leonardo dismissed me, saying that he was tired and must sleep. I, too, was exhausted and I retired to my own chamber, leaving my master sitting on the side of his bed, holding his head in his hands and staring sadly at the floor.

That night, I slept fitfully. At about six the next morning, I awoke feeling rather shattered by my taxing ordeal of the previous day. I opened wide the shutters on my chamber window. With the coming of daylight, Florence could be seen rising from a sea of mud. In our neighbourhood, hundreds of houses and shops were buried in the stuff. I dressed hurriedly and crept silently downstairs. While Leonardo snored in his bed, I donned my street cloak and left the studio. My first thought upon rising that morning was that I must make certain that my child, Angelica, was safe in the wake of the flood. To this end, I immediately set out for Giocundo's mansion.

The route I followed on my journey was imposed upon me by the condition of the streets, some of which were impassable. All around me, those Florentines spared by the flood were surveying the damage surrounding them. Their glazed eyes stared out of hollow sockets in their mud-caked faces. Some murmured that the disaster was a manifestation of God's will. Others wept for lost loved ones. But, for the most part, the survivors were silent. It was like walking through a dead city. I struggled knee-deep through the slime in the streets, slipping and falling more than once as I made my way toward Giocundo's.

As I drew nearer to the heart of the city, the scenes of devastation grew even more severe than they were in the lesser populated outskirts. Yet, it was here that I saw the first signs of the city's will to live. Amidst the scenes of ruin and desolation, struggling human figures were beginning the job of reconstruction.

By this time, the flood waters had leveled off in the Piazza della Signoria, and the Duke (who promptly declared a state of emergency once the waters abated) was commanding clean-up operations from a rowboat. But the task before the citizens was great. As the flood waters subsided, it became apparent that tons of foul-smelling mud covered nearly every quarter of the city.

As I walked through Florence that morning, I watched the people begin to clean-up the city. It seemed to me that they labored instinctively, like a colony of ants intent upon rebuilding their nest. Despite the magnitude of the task, they went to work with brooms and buckets - and those who had no brooms or buckets made primitive shovels out of smashed window-frames, wrecked doors and broken chairs. With these simple tools, Florentines attacked the mud that had engulfed the basements and lower floors of their homes and shops.

Overnight, the city had changed. Factions and rivalries were forgotten as Florentines united in the common cause of restoration. In the city core, one could sense a feeling of general determination in the air. And at the core of my own life, also, a new determination was to be found,

for I soon learned that my fate, too, had been changed by the flood. Salai, it seemed, had truly been drowned! On my way to Giocundo's, I stopped and watched two soldiers dig his body out of a narrow alleyway choked with mud. In hindsight, I think it most regrettable that he suffered such a gruesome death. At the time, however, once the catastrophe was over, I simply thanked Providence that it was he and not I who met with such an end. Involuntarily, I thought that Salai had, after all, deservedly become a victim of the flood. I told myself that I must now rebuild my life, restoring myself to virtue.

Soon, I neared the rich merchants' quarter, which lay on a hillock in the west quarter of the city. Walking up the road on the hill overlooking the poorest quarter of town, I could see that, while most of the strong, squarely-built warehouses had been hardly damaged at all, the wool-workers' stilt-houses had toppled into the flood. Burdened with my own personal problems, I did not think long about this evident injustice. Sloshing through the mud with deliberate strides, I banished all peripheral thoughts from my mind. The child, Angelica, was my most immediate concern.

On arriving at the rich merchants' quarter, I saw that the waters had merely lapped at the edges of Giocundo's mansion. Having nothing left to lose, I boldly walked up the front path and knocked at the door, asking to speak to the master of the house. Giocundo's wasp-like valet answered the door. Telling me to wait outside, he went to call his master. From where I stood, I could smell the faint aromas of cinnamon and thyme drifting from the kitchen down the hall. I poked my nose into the hallway. It seemed that the merchant's household had been little disturbed by the flood. After a minute or two, Giocundo came to the door. Although clearly annoyed at seeing me, his expression remained placid.

"What is it?" said the merchant. "My luncheon is being prepared, so make it quick."

"I have come to make certain that Angelica is safe," I said.

"Oh?" said Giocundo.

"May I see her?" I asked.

"No, you may not," Giocundo replied. "There is no need for anxiety, the child is fine."

"But I have the right to see her," I said. "Why do you object?"

"I object because I have had enough of your disturbing my household," said Giocundo. "If you are prepared to take the child, then take her right now! Otherwise, be kind enough to take your leave."

"But, I am the child's father!" I said. "I promised Lisa that Angelica would be looked after."

"She will be looked after," said the merchant. "I propose to put the child in the convent of Santa Maria, where the nuns will see that she is well taken care of. But, I suppose, if you have an alternative, I would be pleased to avoid the expense of paying for her keep and education. Well, speak up! Are you prepared to accept responsibility for the child's well being? Can you provide for her better than I?"

"No, of course not," I said. "But..."

"So be it," said Giocundo. "But remember, if you consent to let me be the child's guardian, then you must not ever come to disturb her. It would not be good for the child's well-being."

"I agree," I said, "but..."

"Fine!" said Giocundo. "Really, you should thank me for my generosity."

"Yes, of course," I said.

"Oh, by the way, I have a small bit of news for you in case you get the urge to visit Lisa's grave," said the merchant.

"What is it?" I said.

"She is buried in the section of unhallowed ground just outside the main cemetery," said Giocundo. "That is it! Now be gone!"

"But..."

"Say nothing more!" said the merchant, for the first time with something like a note of compassion in his voice. "For heaven's sake, I like it no better than you! Now get off my property, you troublemaker, or I shall have my servants throw you off!"

"Of course, I am sorry," I said. "I shall leave right away and not disturb you again. Thank you for looking after the child."

Giocundo said nothing, but rather closed the door in my face. I turned and walked back down the footpath, my eyes lowered to the ground. Wading through the foul-smelling mud, late that morning on my way back to the studio, I felt sure that, for perhaps the first time in my life, I had

done the right thing. Despite Giocundo's sometimes ferocious character, he had generously offered to provide the best for the child. I knew that I would miss Lisa terribly in the years to come, but I told myself that at least I had obeyed her wish not to betray her by forgetting Angelica. The child would be well looked after in the convent of Santa Maria, where vows were kept faithfully every day. I was confident that, within those walls, Angelica would be safe from the dangers of this sordid world.

CHAPTER 35

It is nearly two weeks now since the Great Flood struck Florence. Although, in several of the piazzas, there still lie vast pools of stagnant, greenish-grey water, the Arno itself has subsided nearly to its usual level. As before the days of the flood, the river flows, indifferent and hurried, through the heart of Florence. In the city core, it is still commonplace to see ragged Florentines, covered in mud from head to toe, digging out the cellars and lower floors of their homes and shops. One is no longer obliged, however, to wade through mud in the streets. Order is slowly rising out of chaos, and the city seems to be gradually regaining her former complexion. The Duke's engineers have started rebuilding the embankments of the Ponte Trinita. Yet, despite the hope for eventual restoration, tomorrow Leonardo and I must leave Florence.

If we stay here, we will soon be destitute. Although I have spent many hours over the last two weeks clearing the mud out of our studio, it is useless to pretend that Leonardo and I can sustain ourselves in this city for long. We must pack what we have been able to salvage and travel elsewhere - perhaps to Rome or Milan, or even out of Italy - to find a patron who, knowing of Leonardo's former reputation, will be willing to support us. Leonardo is fully aware of these facts. However, he is not facing them bravely. Yet, we are not the only unfortunates who are forced to leave the city now that the devastation is over. Indeed, there are many

left homeless in the wake of the flood. Also, there is a great shortage of flour and bread in Florence due to the destruction of mills and bake-houses. Life here has become very difficult. Lamentations, however, are useless. Courage is what is needed now. And so, I must pull myself together. I do not know what Fate holds in store for me, but, for the moment, the temptations which disturbed my life seem to be over. I hold no delusions about my past, and I look to the future with hope and determination.

My departure from Florence is made easier now that I have unburdened my soul with this confession. Tonight, as I sit alone in my small chamber, listening to the great bells of the Cathedral Santa Maria calling the faithful to vespers, I read over the pages of my history. As I read, I realize that many cherished beliefs have crumbled since I began this work nearly a year ago. But, despite the pain caused by shattered illusions, thanks to my confession I have been saved from despair. This work has allowed me to fight the blindness which afflicted me after Lisa died. Now that my memories have been ordered, I shall be able to continue my life. If I can find no more words to express my deep sorrow over losing Lisa, instinctively I sense that the reason is because I have written my testimony as best as I am able. I receive comfort from this knowledge.

Soon, I will put down my goose-quill pen and collect together the parchment leaves of my history, which are scattered about my room. This artifice of words has allowed me a freedom such as I never knew as a painter on flat, unyielding canvas. Yet, despite my conviction that I have honestly revealed the turbulent year since I first met Lisa in all its many facets, I am struck by the feeling that I have discovered nothing. I am no further towards knowing the how and the why of the motivations of my life than I was when I first began this work. At that time, I had hoped that, once memories were ordered, the rest would become simpler. Yet, now that my illusions have been shattered, I find that, in many ways, the future only becomes more difficult. I understand that the past must be left behind, but, before I leave it, I must be certain that I have justly earned pardon for my sins. I know that there is no hope for celestial aid; that I must find absolution on my own. Prayers can no longer redeem me. But,

dare I aspire to independent human virtue? Dare I admit that I am living in a God-forsaken world? Without faith in God as my center, how can I continue? What will uphold me?

Tormented by these questions, I close my eyes for a moment, remembering an incident which occurred just two evenings past. Although I try to suppress the memory, it gains dominance and controls my thoughts. Though I would forget it, I recall my last meeting with the old rag-vendor woman, whose words stirred up these doubts, leaving an indelible impression of confusion in my mind.

I recall that I left our studio shortly before twilight that evening, with money and orders from Leonardo to purchase a new mule which we needed to make our imminent departure from Florence. When I reached the Great Market Square, I saw that its cobblestones and pavement were still ripped up after the Great Flood. Few vendors were there since, in the countryside surrounding the city, farmers' crops had been destroyed and much livestock had perished. It was late in the day, and I did not linger on these thoughts, but rather went directly to the mule-dealer's stall. He was a disreputable looking character dressed in a dirty, baggy, brown tunic. His hat-brim was pulled down, throwing a dark shadow over his face. He had only three scruffy mules for me to choose from. After much bartering, I bought the smallest of the animals for a reasonable price and led it by its reins though the market place. From time to time, the mule stopped dead in its tracks to swish flies with its tail or to munch debris left in the gutter. It was during one of these stops, while I stood tugging at the stubborn beast's reins, that I spotted, not more than a few feet away, the old rag-vendor woman. She was sitting on her squat, wooden stool beside her cart, which was piled with many-colored scraps of cloth. The old woman's sunken, coal-black eyes recognized me at the same moment that I spotted her. Her gnarled hands were busily knitting a pair of long stockings from a ball of black yarn. Her voice was cracked and wheezing:

"Well, hello my young friend!" she called merrily, smiling her toothless grin.

"Hello," I said as noncommittally as possible, wishing with all my might that I could avoid speaking with the old woman again.

"What may I help you with today?" she asked. "A nice pair of stockings, perhaps?"

"Nothing," I said. "I came to the market to buy a mule."

"Oh? And a fine mule it is," she said, patting its flank.

"What happened to your apothecary shop?" I asked, tugging at the mule's reins.

"My shop was engulfed by the flood," the old woman replied. "But no matter, my fortunes shall soon rise!"

"I am sorry to hear that your shop was destroyed," I said, still fighting with the mule. "Many Florentines have suffered greatly, indeed."

"Yes," said the old rag-vendor with a drooling snigger. "And there is so much talk in the streets now that the catastrophe is over. Some believe that the flood was caused by the Devil's rage! Others believe that it was caused by the wrath of God! And you, my young friend, what do you believe?"

"I do not know," I said, dropping the mule's reins, but still trying to maintain my lukewarm demeanor toward the old woman.

"I am just an old, wine-soaked rag-vendor who never learned to read or write," she said, "but in my humble opinion, you should have some sort of an answer to this commonplace question. Do you not consider yourself an intelligent young man?"

"Perhaps God sent us this adversity by reason of sin," I muttered, lowering my eyes and trying to avoid further conversation with this old woman.

"Don't play the boyish innocent with me!" she said, cackling horribly and shaking her tangled mop of silver hair. "I know of your sins! Tell me, my fine, bold youth, the poisonous potion which I sold to you, did it succeed?"

"No, it did not," I replied. "But no matter, the pest was drowned in the flood."

"Oh?" said the old woman. "How awful! Are you not sorry to have lost your golden-haired friend?"

"No, I am glad to be rid of him," I said. "I despised him! He was a cunning rascal whose malice made my life a misery. I hope that he will burn in Hell!"

"Ah ha! I see that, perhaps after all, you are no longer the shy,

awkward youth you were when first we met," said the old woman. "And what of your lover? Did the golden finch succeed in helping you to achieve your desires?"

"My love is dead..., ' I replied.

"Well, do not look at me with your sad, grey eyes," said the snickering old woman. "Tell me, what have you learned from your experience?"

"Learned?" I said. "I have learned only that, although I swore to say nothing, I could not help revealing all."

"Very good!" she said. "You found it necessary to purge your soul. Yes! But what else did you learn? What prompted you to act? What drove you to confess?"

"I pursued everything in the name of love," I said. "Mine was a quest for virtue."

"Was it, indeed?!" she said. "But, surely, there is no such thing as simple good and evil? Surely you have learned this much?"

"I do not know what you are talking about," I said.

"To distinguish between good and evil is no easy matter," said the silver-haired old woman. "Mischief has its place, as does responsibility. You must sometimes follow your desires! Only desire can guide reason toward wisdom!"

"I do not understand," I said, not knowing what strange alchemy the old woman was jabbering about.

"Goodness and evil are two sides of the same coin," she said. "As life is the grist ground by the two great mill-stones of Heaven and Hell, the thoughts and feelings which pull you this way and that stem from the contrary forces which operate within your heart."

"I do not understand," I said again. "Surely it is best simply to try as earnestly as possible to live a life of Christian virtue through reason and temperance, by fasting and prayer?"

"You must be skeptical of such simple truths," said the old woman. "No evil is so evil as that which is born of the corrupted seed of good. No man is truly good except he who is aware of his evil alternatives. Pleasure and pain, health and sickness, virtue and vice, all are necessary and are inseparable by the law of Creation."

"I want to hear no more of this!" I said. "Your talk confuses me!"

"These ambiguities must teach you something!" said the old woman. "Get past the simple question of fleshly lust. Your torment runs deeper than that. It is more complicated than a mere struggle against the pagan seductions of wine, women and song. What is it that entices you to sin? What causes the conflict in your soul?"

"I do not know," I said. "I know only that I want to live a virtuous life!"

"Ha! You are a weak one," said the old woman. "Not good will alone, but the knowledgeable choice of good over evil leads to true virtue."

"I do not know what you mean," I said. "I know only that I hope to lead a life of reason."

"You cannot kill your desires in the name of reason!" said the old woman. "Listen to your dreams, they provide a key to the spiritual freedom toward which your desires prompt you."

"But that is immoral!" I said. "Where is God in this scheme? I am not so selfish as to put myself at the center of creation!"

"If you refuse to see the truth which lies right under your nose, that is your own concern," said the old rag-vendor with a shrug of her shoulders. "You do not know what you want. Part of you loves luxury and lewdness, the other part aspires to a life of reason. You must find the middle balance soon, or destruction will fall upon you."

"But what am I to do?" I asked.

"That is up to you," she said. "You are free to choose your own path. Your fate is not predetermined. Each decision which you make along the way determines your destiny."

"But I am afraid," I said. "Without my faith in God as the controlling center of the universe, how can I go on?"

"The stars are contained within your soul," said the old woman. "Man is at the center of the universe. All things are related to man as an apple seed is surrounded and preserved by the core and the flesh of the fruit. All things are in you!"

"I confess that I never thought of it that way," I said.

"There is nothing in heaven or in hell that is not also in man," repeated the old woman, nodding her mop of silver hair. "Study the moon, the sun and the stars. In the patterns of these constellations, your future is written!"

After speaking these last words, the old rag-vendor's voice grew quiet. Wiping some spittle from her chin, she resumed knitting the pair of long stockings from the ball of black yarn. I stood gape-jawed in front of her, too dumbfounded to move for a moment or two. Then, gathering my wits, I bid the old woman farewell. Thankful to get away from her, I walked as quickly as possible, leading Leonardo's new mule through the market place and back to our studio.

Sitting here at my desk tonight, remembering my conversation with the old rag-vendor woman, I reflect that, perhaps, what she meant by her words was that light and dark paints must be blended with care. Composing these last few pages of my confession, I realize that that is exactly what I have tried to do in this work. Yet, my eyes are weak from strain. Thinking these thoughts, I rest for a moment, putting down my goose-quill pen, leaning my elbows on my desk, closing my eyes. Outside, the great bells of the Cathedral Santa Maria have stopped ringing. As I listen to the resounding silence, I realize that I have come a long way since the days of my innocent boyhood, when I lived with my family on the mountain San Gervaso. With maturity there has developed in my heart and mind a more complex sense of faith than that which I knew then. The old rag-vendor was right. No longer can I rely on prayers to safeguard my soul, but rather I must rely on my own moral code. The knowledge of this fact brings with it strange new thoughts and emotions to which I shall have to grow accustomed. I find this thought of man at the center of things most disturbing. Does this not detract from the power and glory of God as the creator of man? I shudder to think that I will be doomed to wrestle with this question until the day I die. Yet, perhaps I shall discover some sort of answer as I grow older. As the old woman said, to discover the future, I must study the stars.

And so, Leonardo and I leave Florence tomorrow at daybreak. Those belongings which we were able to salvage from the flood have been packed onto a mule-cart which awaits outside. Through the open shutters of my room, I can see the cart below in the street. I also see the red-golden glow of the sun setting against the pale blue sky and a silver half-moon rising in the east. I breathe deeply of the cool night air. Already I can

picture my master and I leaving the towers and domes of Florence behind us as we walk out of the shadow of the city walls, into the open countryside. With pleasure, I imagine us passing through vineyards and olive groves, meadows and fields. I picture the clusters of pink villas on hillsides, which signal the small towns where we shall stop to rest on our journey.

Suddenly, however, my peaceful thoughts are shattered by the sounds of two crows cawing outside my window. I close the shutters to muffle the noise. With swelling heart, I turn and walk over to my bedside table, where I fill the chipped, white, porcelain wash-basin which rests there. Bathing my face, I reflect that, although I know my responsibility lies with Leonardo, I am very sad that Lisa is lost to me. "She was my inspiration," I think, "I shall miss her gentle smile."

Staring at the flickering flame of the single candle which stands, dripping wax onto my desk, I am above all sorry that, having come this close to forgiveness, I am unable to hold up to this light the elusive moral principle for which I have searched throughout my confession. Yet, I no longer want to remember. Words fail me. As I prepare to blow out the candle-flame, I realize that nothing can be offered in the way of a definitive moral. All that I may hope for is that impulsive lovers who one day read these words will understand my life, and learn forbearance from my story.