THE CHRONICLE OF TOMMASO DE' MAFFEI FROM THE BIRTH OF VENUS TO THE DEATH OF THE ANTICHRIST, 1482-1498 FOR DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

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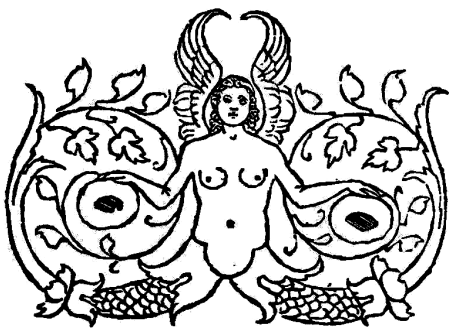

1 THE HEART IN A PRESS 1482

'TELL ME,' I SAID TO MARSILIO FICINO, 'ABOUT THE HIGHER and lower Venus. Are we talking about one Venus or two?'

'The higher Venus was born of Uranus, the sky, and the lower one of Jupiter and Juno.'

'Two, then.'

'Will you never understand?' Ficino was plucking at thyme, rosemary and lavender, tearing leaves from the shrubs and sprinkling them over me where I lay on my back in a bed of camomile. 'Keep inhaling and concentrate on the sky.'

I gazed up into the blue empyrean. Happiness groaned in its chains. 'Stop this!' I said, coming to my feet. 'Stop showering me with pungent weeds!' I went back inside his house to my desk in a gloomy corner.

After the murder of Giuliano, the hanging of the conspirators, the resulting war with Rome; after the death of my wife, I was living like a recluse in Ficino's villa at Careggi. His usually potent cures for melancholy were failing to work. I found interest in nothing. It was as if only my body were alive, as if my spirit were not so much melancholy as dead. I had achieved all I had ever wanted: I'd had a house, work that fed my soul as well as my body and a wife who completed me. Losing her, I had lost everything; all thoughts in my mind had dissolved into the sound of one long, continuous scream. I woke to it every morning and lived with it through each day, as if all sounds had been reduced to this single, horrible screech of discord. It was the soul's response to a mind which said, 'I have had everything I have ever wanted, and I have lost it. What do I want now? To repeat it, only to lose it again? No. Therefore I want nothing.' It was the mortal scream of dying ambition. I was an automaton. Only my body was alive.

'Let go of the past and live in the present,' Ficino had often counselled me, but one may as well tell a man not to put his tongue in the warm and bloody cavity where his tooth has been. He tried to restore my spirit by invoking the planetary influence of Jupiter, but his fine wines and golden honey, his heliotropes and sweet, Jovial music – none of these things could remove the weight of Saturn from my soul.

He followed me in, bearing rose-oil in a little dish which he placed on my desk. 'Rub this over your heart,' he said.

Obediently I unlaced my shirt and rubbed in the warm oil. Its scent, reminding me of Elena, nearly made my heart crack. 'This is no good,' I said. 'Nothing works, nothing will work.'

'Not while your will is opposed to recovery.'

'It is not my will, it is fate. This terrible fate which brings death to anyone I love.'

'Do not be shackled by such illusions. That belief is of your lower nature. You must rise and transcend the stars.'

'But how?'

'By willing it.' He returned to his own desk and left me to my work, which was a fair transcription of his book *The Platonic Theology – concerning the immortality of the soul.* Work was my only relief. I concentrated on rendering fine words in fine letters, listening to my nib telling the page what to say. To calm my troubled spirits I applied my attention to constructing a particularly fine capital letter at the head of a chapter. Two hours later, Ficino smacked me on the back of the head and told me off for wasting time. 'This is only for the printer! All that is required of you is legibility!'

In no mood to sacrifice my art and dismayed that he should embrace the new invention so readily, I let fly. 'How can you of all men, the high priest of Beauty, ask me, Tommaso de' Maffei, to cripple my art in the cause of haste? Truth is in Beauty and God is in Truth – is that not what you teach us? But now you want me to dash off a manuscript so that you can take it to a printer who

will, with all his might, turn it into a book as ugly as the *befana*. How could you? How could *you* betray Beauty?'

'Surely by now you understand Plato's *Symposium*?'

'Of course I do. I've written it out twice. I've even written out your commentary on it.'

'Yet you know nothing. What are beautiful letters if you do not connect with their meaning?'

Ficino could always identify a man's blind spot. I said nothing and sat there with an expression of petulance unbecoming to a member of the Platonic Academy.

'On the seven steps of Love, what is the second step?' he asked.

'To appreciate the beauty of fair ideas.'

'And the first step?'

'Fair forms.'

'So you are still on the first step. The beauty of Plato is the beauty of fair ideas. My book is devoted to those fair ideas. Why should it be adorned with flowery margins and little cupids? It is the ideas that are beautiful, and the printing press, that marvellous invention, allows us to reproduce that beauty and broadcast it across the world.'

He was right, of course. Beauty of ideas does not require beauty of form, or else Socrates would have been a good-looking man. But I had trained for years to become a scribe, striving always for the elusive beauty, and I could not give it up, not at once.

'Allow me this much at least,' I said. 'Allow me to find for you a printer who has some idea of harmony and proportion in letters.'

To my relief, Ficino agreed.

To many the Platonic Academy was a meeting of *eruditi* interested in discussing matters of philosophy, theology and literature. It could take place anywhere, sometimes at Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence, sometimes at the Badia on Fiesole, sometimes at San Marco monastery; but it was because it often took place in villas of the Medici that many wished to attend, affecting an interest in

philosophy so as to keep company with Lorenzo, to be seen with him, to be one of his intimate circle. That was the attraction for many.

For some, the attraction was intellectual. The ideas and insights that abounded at such meetings excited them and they gathered up the seeds of knowledge like eager sparrows, chirping and squabbling amongst themselves. These men were impressive in discussion, citing ancient authors and myths in dazzling profusion. Others, musicians, painters and poets, found our Platonic evenings plucked the strings of their souls and inspired them with fine words and mysterious images. Ficino fed everyone, casting out handfuls of seeds, nuts and bread to suit every need and taste.

But for a few there was another, inner academy of men who sought to make the teachings of Plato a living reality, thereby to transform their lives and make the ascent of the soul. For them, to sing an Orphic hymn was not to entertain others but was for the soul alone and a daily ritual; they were unlikely to hold a debate, challenging all-comers with logical arguments, but they could recite long passages of Plato, memorised by heart. That I was not one of these was an aggravation and a puzzle. Was I not ready to shun the world of the body? Grief, Ficino said, had opened the doors for me, so why had I not been invited in? I wanted nothing now from this mortal life. The liberation of my soul was my only desire. Or so I persuaded myself, as a drowning man with lead weights tied to his feet thinks, I will rise, I will rise.

Among the printers in Florence, I chose Antonio Miscomini to publish *The Platonic Theology*. He had printed the edition of Homer and was a man sensitive to our intentions. He also, I discovered, used a type fount somewhat similar to my own script. It had been less than a decade since the first printer set up shop in Florence, yet already there was a street of them, close to the Palazzo del Podestà. I would rather have traversed Dante's Inferno than walk that street, yet sometimes duty called me to it, as on one hot day

as the city was beginning to empty for the summer, when I took Ficino to see Miscomini.

I had always supposed printing to be a noisy affair as loud as a forge with the great presses stamping out books. In fact it is an almost silent occupation with each man in the shop intent on his work, the only sounds that of the tamping of the ink dabbers, the tapping of hammers on formes, the screw of the press as it is turned. I looked around me in disdain. Compositors arranged letters on a 'stick' while others were engaged in cutting new type, setting pages, making up galleys or inking at the press. Ficino looked on it all as a wonder of the world and a gift from God.

'It takes us less than a day to do a page,' said Miscomini proudly.

'Pah! It takes me only an hour or two,' I said.

'And if you had to copy that page again, how long would that take?'

'An hour or two…' I said, fully aware of the trap I had entered so stupidly.

'I can give you a hundred copies of that page in two days, two hundred in three days.'

'Wonderful!' said Ficino. 'Quite wonderful!'

I despaired. 'So how long before we receive the book?'

'November.'

'November? Why not next week?'

'Each page has to be set up, don't forget. Has to be set up, printed and taken apart again, since we need to use the same letters for the next page. That's what takes the time. Five hundred copies of a book with this many pages will take us several months. How long would it take you?'

I smiled wryly despite myself. Even Hercules would have been defeated by such a labour.

'Wonderful,' Ficino repeated as we left.

'Diabolical,' said I.

We had timed our visit to the city to coincide with a visit to the workshop of Sandro Botticelli, where a new picture was to be

unveiled to a small and very select group of men. Ficino, who came less and less often to the city these days, looked about him keenly as we rode through the city, and I saw through his eyes the division of men into rich and poor. It was easy to distinguish them: the rich wore colour and the poor wore undyed wool. Nor did they mingle overmuch. The crimsons and purples, yellows and blues, the silks, the velvets, the high cap-feathers, all kept each other's protective company in a city mostly comprising the undyed. The republican ideals that had inspired the government during Ficino's boyhood were now quite vanished; no one even made a pretence of them any more, except that Florence was ruled by a prince who pretended to be a citizen. Lorenzo, popularly referred to as *Il Magnifico*, was everywhere, visible and invisible. He was visible in the wealth paraded by those families affiliated to his. He was invisible in the favours granted that bound men to him; the arguments resolved with a gift; the marriages brokered; the benefices gained and bestowed.

The Medici bank was failing through mismanagement and Lorenzo wanted little to do with it. Because the war with Rome had been his war, he had more or less paid for it. When his own resources had run dry, he helped himself to the enormous fortune he was supposed to be protecting for his wards, his Pierfranceschi cousins, until they came of age. Similarly he helped himself to the fund for dowerless girls. He brought in new taxes which crippled the priesthood and the poor but left the rich untouched. When I say 'he', I mean of course the government, but the government *was* Lorenzo, invisibly. By secret ways the Medici had long been in control of those who chose the names for the ballot of each *signoria*, two months in duration.

Looking through Ficino's eyes, hard hit as he was himself by the new taxation on priests, I saw a city built on corruption and greed. Looking through my own eyes and myopically, I saw Florence as a city of beauty. But then I was a beneficiary of Lorenzo's generosity. He had given me a house in return for saving his life on that dread day when the rival Pazzi family had

sought to assassinate him in the Duomo. He had also permitted me to wed Elena de' Pazzi at the very time when he was arranging for the government to pass a new law that no daughter of the Pazzi family may marry or bear children. Why had he done this? Yes, he was grateful to me; but it was more than that. Lorenzo liked to give to others what he could not have himself. What he gave to me was a marriage based on love.

'She will have no dowry,' he had told me grimly.

'She is my wealth,' I replied.

And tears had come into his eyes, in that time when he cried easily and for good reason. In the death of Giuliano, he had lost not only the brother he had loved, but also a young and prudent counsellor he had never listened to. Lorenzo was alone. He needed friends. He gave us gifts of that which we held most precious and we were bound to him, as flies in the honeyed dew of certain plants.

I wanted Ficino to speak his thoughts out loud, but he kept quiet, looking to the left and right of him as we passed through the streets. The deprivations and ills we had suffered during the dark days of the war, the hopelessness and despair, had been swept away like the stinking silt after the flood of '79. The city was alive and at work restoring itself. It was growing in beauty, with new palazzi being built on ancient principles. There was a new order. The city militia was more evident than it ever had been, and there were police. The bankers at their green baize tables in the Old Market exchanged money as the Medici had done four generations ago – out in the open and according to custom, if not in strict adherence to the spirit of the law forbidding usury. Lorenzo no longer dealt in money. These days he dealt in benefices. He kept the best for his second son, seven-year-old Giovanni, and gave the rest as gifts. And who did not want a benefice? I would have liked one myself, to free me from the burden of earning a living by the skill of my hands, allowing me to copy books of my own choice and at a calm pace. Few recipients bothered with the requirement to be in holy orders, let alone follow the rules of those orders. What we all

wanted, Ficino included, was a life of leisure to pursue what we desired. The only difference between men was what they desired: Ficino wanted a simple life devoted to what he called 'the hunt for truth', whereas some, such as Bartolommeo Scala, once again the Chancellor of Florence, wanted fabulous wealth and to live like a prince. But it was all on the back of benefices, one way or another.

I speak with hindsight. At the time we could barely see the foundation on which we built our lives. It was the invisible part, the secret ways. It was normal. That men were divided between those who earned a living and were poor, and those who derived a living and were rich – that was normal. The poor went to church and prayed there. The rich went and gave generously, funding chapels that were to bear their names, having their own images painted on sacred walls. I did not have a benefice, but I lived by the hospitality and generosity of those who did.

On this day as we went to Ognissanti, I saw the hearts of men. There were those who greeted us affably in passing. They were the men who were part of the Medici system. Then there were those who turned their backs or just stared with cold eyes. They were the ones who hated Lorenzo, as I myself had hated him once. With some it was resentment and envy; with others it was with just cause. I knew their bitterness intimately, could understand but not condone. And then there were those who took no notice of us one way or another, being too busy laying out their stalls, skinning their meat, stirring their vats, planing their wood. The ones who live amongst dust and stench, converting the earth into a living. To them we were as we were, two men on horseback, of no relevance to their lives.

'What is this painting, Father?'

'Be patient. You will see it soon enough.'

'But it is shrouded in secrecy. Why?'

'Privacy, not secrecy. My young Lorenzino is a very private man. Only I have been invited to this unveiling, and Poliziano, of course, since we both designed the picture with Sandro. Lorenzino wants us to see it at the same time he does. Always considerate.'

The Lorenzo he spoke of was not il Magnifico but his cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. The painting we were going to see had been commissioned to celebrate his recent marriage to Semiramide d'Appiano. He was only nineteen, but il Magnifico, having found the perfect match for him, had seen no reason to wait.

There was much talk in the city of a rift in the Medici family, caused by the guardian spending the patrimony of his wards on the war. 'Will il Magnifico be there, do you think?' I asked.

'No, it is just the select few who will be there, at the most propitious moment for this celestial image to be uncovered.'

'Celestial?'

'Be patient, Tommaso.'

2 VENUS IN A SEASHELL 1482

ENTERING THE WORKSHOP IN OGNISSANTI I REVIVED, AS a vegetable gone limp plumps up in water. It was a temporary revival but enough to remind me what being alive felt like. Filippino Lippi said I walked in like a ghost and took on all the colours of what was around me. Colours. Pinks and duck-egg blues, dark greens and coral reds: Sandro's palette was a natural one and not overwhelmed by ultramarine and gold. The workshop was busy and many panels were in the process of completion but the large canvas in the centre of the room was shrouded in linen. All around were charcoal studies tacked up roughly: nymphs and goddesses dancing in flowing, diaphanous gowns, flowers of the meadow done in realistic detail, studies of trees, of feet and hands. Such movement, such vivacity! While other painters of Florence continued in the long tradition of holy scenes, Sandro Botticelli had returned to Arcadia.