

NOVEL VII

Bergamino, with a story of Primasso and the Abbot of Cluny, finely censures a sudden access of avarice in Messer Cane della Scala.

Emilia's charming manner and her story drew laughter and commendation from the queen and all the company, who were much tickled by her new type of crusader. When the laughter had subsided, and all were again silent, Filostrato, on whom the narration now fell, began on this wise:

A fine thing it is, noble ladies, to hit a fixed mark; but if, on the sudden appearance of some strange object, it be forthwith hit by the bowman, 'tis little short of a miracle. The corrupt and filthy life of the clergy offers on many sides a fixed mark of iniquity at which, whoever is so minded, may let fly, with little doubt that they will reach it, the winged words of reproof and reprehension. Wherefore, though the worthy man did well to censure in the person of the inquisitor the pretended charity of the friars who give to the poor what they ought rather to give to the pigs or throw away, higher indeed is the praise which I accord to him, of whom, taking my cue from the last story, I mean to speak; seeing that by a clever apologue he rebuked a sudden and unwonted access of avarice in Messer Cane della Scala, conveying in a figure what he had at heart to say touching Messer Cane and himself; which apologue is to follow.

Far and wide, almost to the ends of the earth, is borne the most illustrious renown of Messer Cane della Scala, in many ways the favoured child of fortune, a lord almost without a peer among the notables and magnificoes of Italy since the time of the Emperor Frederic II. Now Messer Cane, being minded to hold high festival at Verona, whereof fame should speak marvellous things, and many folk from divers parts, of whom the greater number were jesters of every order, being already arrived, Messer Cane did suddenly (for some cause or another) abandon his design, and dismissed them with a partial recompense. One only, Bergamino by name, a speaker ready and polished in a degree credible only to such as heard him, remained, having received no recompense or conge, still cherishing the hope that this omission might yet turn out to his advantage. But Messer Cane was possessed with the idea that whatever he might give Bergamino would be far more completely thrown away than if he had tossed it into the fire; so never a word of the sort said he or sent he to him. A few days thus passed, and then Bergamino, seeing that he was in no demand or request for aught that belonged to his office, and being also at heavy charges at his inn for the keep of his horses and servants, fell into a sort of melancholy; but still he waited a while, not deeming it expedient to leave. He had brought with him three rich and goodly robes, given him by other lords, that he might make a brave show at the festival, and when his host began to press for payment he gave him one of the robes; afterwards, there being still much outstanding against him, he

must needs, if he would tarry longer at the inn, give the host the second robe; after which he began to live on the third, being minded remain there, as long as it would hold out, in expectation of better luck, and then to take his departure. Now, while he was thus living on the third robe, it chanced that Messer Cane encountered him one day as he sate at breakfast with a very melancholy visage. Which Messer Cane observing, said, rather to tease him than expecting to elicit from him any pleasant retort:

“What ails thee, Bergamino, that thou art still so melancholy? Let me know the reason why.” Whereupon Bergamino, without a moment's reflection, told the following story, which could not have fitted his own case more exactly if it had been long premeditated.

My lord, you must know that Primasso was a grammarian of great eminence, and excellent and quick beyond all others in versifying; whereby he waxed so notable and famous that, albeit he was not everywhere known by sight, yet there were scarce any that did not at least by name and report know who Primasso was. Now it so happened that, being once at Paris in straitened circumstances, as it was his lot to be most of his time by reason that virtue is little appreciated by the powerful, he heard speak of the Abbot of Cluny, who, except the Pope, is supposed to be the richest prelate, in regard of his vast revenues, that the Church of God can shew; and marvellous and magnificent things were told him of the perpetual court which the abbot kept, and how, wherever he was, he denied not to any that came there either meat or drink, so only that he preferred his request while the abbot was at table. Which when Primasso heard, he determined to go and see for himself what magnificent state this abbot kept, for he was one that took great delight in observing the ways of powerful and lordly men; wherefore he asked how far from Paris was the abbot then sojourning. He was informed that the abbot was then at one of his places distant perhaps six miles; which Primasso concluded he could reach in time for breakfast, if he started early in the morning. When he had learned the way, he found that no one else was travelling by it, and fearing lest by mischance he should lose it, and so find himself where it would not be easy for him to get food, he determined to obviate so disagreeable a contingency by taking with him three loaves of bread – as for drink, water, though not much to his taste, was, he supposed, to be found everywhere. So, having

disposed the loaves in the fold of his tunic, he took the road and made such progress that he reached the abbot's place of sojourn before the breakfast-hour. Having entered, he made the circuit of the entire place, observing everything, the vast array of tables, and the vast kitchen well-appointed with all things needful for the preparation and service of the breakfast, and saying to himself:

"In very truth this man is even such a magnifico as he is reported to be." While his attention was thus occupied, the abbot's seneschal, it being now breakfast-time, gave order to serve water for the hands, which being washen, they sat them all down to breakfast. Now it so happened that Primasso was placed immediately in front of the door by which the abbot must pass from his chamber, into the hall, in which, according to rule of his court, neither wine, nor bread, nor aught else drinkable or eatable was ever set on the tables before he made his appearance and was seated. The seneschal, therefore, having set the tables, sent word to the abbot, that all was now ready, and they waited only his pleasure. So the abbot gave the word, the door of his chamber was thrown open, and he took a step or two forward towards the hall, gazing straight in front of him as he went. Thus it fell out that the first man on whom he set eyes was Primasso, who was in very sorry trim. The abbot, who knew him not by sight, no sooner saw him, than, surprised by a churlish mood to which he had hitherto been an entire stranger, he said to himself:

"So it is to such as this man that I give my hospitality;" and going back into the chamber he bade lock the door, and asked of his attendants whether the vile fellow that sate at table directly opposite the door was known to any of them, who, one and all, answered in the negative. Primasso waited a little, but he was not used to fast, and his journey had whetted his appetite. So, as the abbot did not return, he drew out one of the loaves which he had brought with him, and began to eat. The abbot, after a while, bade one of his servants go see whether Primasso were gone. The servant returned with the answer:

"No, sir, and (what is more) he is eating a loaf of bread, which he seems to have brought with him." "Be it so then," said the abbot, who was vexed that he was not gone of his own accord, but was not disposed to turn him out; "let him eat his own bread, if he have any, for he shall have none of ours today." By and by Primasso, having finished his first loaf, began, as the abbot did not make his appearance, to eat the second; which was likewise reported to the abbot, who had again sent to see if he were gone. Finally, as the abbot still delayed his coming, Primasso, having finished the second loaf, began upon the third; whereof, once more, word was carried to the abbot, who now began to commune with himself and say:

"Alas! my soul, what unwonted mood harbourst thou to-day? What avarice? what scorn? and of whom? I have given my hospitality, now for many a year, to whoso craved it, without looking to see whether he were gentle or churl, poor or rich,

merchant or cheat, and mine eyes have seen it squandered on vile fellows without number; and nought of that which I feel towards this man ever entered my mind. Assuredly it cannot be that he is a man of no consequence, who is the occasion of this access of avarice in me. Though he seem to me a vile fellow, he must be some great man, that my mind is thus obstinately averse to do him honour." Of which musings the upshot was that he sent to inquire who the vile fellow was, and learning that he was Primasso, come to see if what he had heard of his magnificent state were true, he was stricken with shame, having heard of old Primasso's fame, and knowing him to be a great man. Wherefore, being zealous to make him the amend, he studied to do him honour in many ways; and after breakfast, that his garb might accord with his native dignity, he caused him to be nobly arrayed, and setting him upon a palfrey and filling his purse, left it to his own choice, whether to go or to stay. So Primasso, with a full heart, thanked him for his courtesy in terms the amplest that he could command, and, having left Paris afoot, returned thither on horseback."

Messer Cane was shrewd enough to apprehend Bergamino's meaning perfectly well without a gloss, and said with a smile:

"Bergamino, thy parable is apt, and declares to me very plainly thy losses, my avarice, and what thou desirest of me. And in good sooth this access of avarice, of which thou art the occasion, is the first that I have experienced. But I will expel the intruder with the baton which thou thyself hast furnished." So he paid Bergamino's reckoning, habited him nobly in one of his own robes, gave him money and a palfrey, and left it for the time at his discretion, whether to go or to stay.