

NOVEL X

Alibech turns hermit, and is taught by Rustico, a monk, how the Devil is put in hell. She is afterwards conveyed thence, and becomes the wife of Neerbale.

Dioneo, observing that the queen's story, which he had followed with the closest attention, was now ended, and that it only remained for him to speak, waited not to be bidden, but smilingly thus began:

Gracious ladies, perchance you have not yet heard how the Devil is put in hell; wherefore, without deviating far from the topic of which you have discoursed throughout the day, I will tell you how 'tis done; it may be the lesson will prove inspiring; besides which, you may learn therefrom that, albeit Love prefers the gay palace and the dainty chamber to the rude cabin, yet, for all that, he may at times manifest his might in wilds matted with forests, rugged with alps, and desolate with caverns: whereby it may be understood that all things are subject to his sway. But – to come to my story – I say that in the city of Capsa(†) in Barbary there was once a very rich man, who with other children had a fair and dainty little daughter, Alibech by name. Now Alibech, not being a Christian, and hearing many Christians, that were in the city, speak much in praise of the Christian Faith and the service of God, did one day inquire of one of them after what fashion it were possible to serve God with as few impediments as might be, and was informed that they served God best who most completely renounced the world and its affairs; like those who had fixed their abode in the wilds of the Thebaid desert. Whereupon, actuated by no sober predilection, but by childish impulse, the girl, who was very simple and about fourteen years of age, said never a word more of the matter, but stole away on the morrow, and quite alone set out to walk to the Thebaid desert; and, by force of resolution, albeit with no small suffering, she after some days reached those wilds; where, espying a cabin a great way off, she hied her thither, and found a holy man by the door, who, marvelling to see her there, asked her what she came there to seek. She answered that, guided by the spirit of God, she was come thither, seeking, if haply she might serve Him, and also find some one that might teach her how He ought to be served. Marking her youth and great beauty, the worthy man, fearing lest, if he suffered her to remain with him, he should be ensnared by the Devil, commended her good intention, set before her a frugal repast of roots of herbs, crab-apples and dates, with a little water to wash them down, and said to her:

“My daughter, there is a holy man not far from here, who is much better able to teach thee that of which thou art in quest than I am; go to him, therefore;” and he shewed her the way. But when she was come whither she was directed, she met with the same answer as before, and so, setting forth again, she came at length to the cell of a young hermit, a worthy man and very devout – his name

Rustico – whom she interrogated as she had the others. Rustico, being minded to make severe trial of his constancy, did not send her away, as the others had done, but kept her with him in his cell, and when night came, made her a little bed of palm-leaves; whereon he bade her compose herself to sleep. Hardly had she done so before the solicitations of the flesh joined battle with the powers of Rustico's spirit, and he, finding himself left in the lurch by the latter, endured not many assaults before he beat a retreat, and surrendered at discretion: wherefore he bade adieu to holy meditation and prayer and discipline, and fell a musing on the youth and beauty of his companion, and also how he might so order his conversation with her, that without seeming to her to be a libertine he might yet compass that which he craved of her. So, probing her by certain questions, he discovered that she was as yet entirely without cognizance of man, and as simple as she seemed: wherefore he excogitated a plan for bringing her to pleasure him under colour of serving God. He began by giving her a long lecture on the great enmity that subsists between God and the Devil; after which he gave her to understand that, God having condemned the Devil to hell, to put him there was of all services the most acceptable to God. The girl asking him how it might be done, Rustico answered:

“Thou shalt know it in a trice; thou hast but to do that which thou seest me do.” Then, having divested himself of his scanty clothing, he threw himself stark naked on his knees, as if he would pray; whereby he caused the girl, who followed his example, to confront him in the same posture. Whereupon Rustico, seeing her so fair, felt an accession of desire, and therewith came an insurgence of the flesh, which Alibech marking with surprise, said:

“Rustico, what is this, which I see thee have, that so protrudes, and which I have not?” “Oh! my daughter,” said Rustico, “'tis the Devil of whom I have told thee: and, seest thou? he is now tormenting me most grievously, insomuch that I am scarce able to hold out.” Then:

“Praise be to God,” said the girl, “I see that I am in better case than thou, for no such Devil have I.” “Sooth sayst thou,” returned Rustico; “but instead of him thou hast somewhat else that I have not.” “Oh!” said Alibech, “what may that be?” “Hell,” answered Rustico: “and I tell thee, that 'tis my belief that God has sent thee hither for the salvation of my soul; seeing that, if this Devil shall continue to plague me thus, then, so thou wilt have

compassion on me and permit me to put him in hell, thou wilt both afford me great and exceeding great solace, and render to God an exceeding most acceptable service, if, as thou sayst, thou art come into these parts for such a purpose." In good faith the girl made answer:

"As I have hell to match your Devil, be it, my father, as and when you will." Whereupon:

"Bless thee, my daughter," said Rustico, "go we then, and put him there, that he leave me henceforth in peace." Which said, he took the girl to one of the beds and taught her the posture in which she must lie in order to incarcerate this spirit accursed of God. The girl, having never before put any devil in hell, felt on this first occasion a twinge of pain: wherefore she said to Rustico:

"Of a surety, my father, he must be a wicked fellow, this devil, and in very truth a foe to God; for there is sorrow even in hell – not to speak of other places – when he is put there." "Daughter," said Rustico, "'twill not be always so." And for better assurance thereof they put him there six times before they quitted the bed; whereby they so thoroughly abased his pride that he was fain to be quiet. However, the proud fit returning upon him from time to time, and the girl addressing herself always obediently to its reduction, it so befell that she began to find the game agreeable, and would say to Rustico:

"Now see I plainly that 'twas true, what the worthy men said at Capsa, of the service of God being so delightful: indeed I cannot remember that in aught that ever I did I had so much pleasure, so much solace, as in putting the Devil in hell; for which cause I deem it insensate folly on the part of any one to have a care to aught else than the service of God." Wherefore many a time she would come to Rustico, and say to him:

"My father, 'twas to serve God that I came hither, and not to pass my days in idleness: go we then, and put the Devil in hell." And while they did so, she would now and again say:

"I know not, Rustico, why the Devil should escape from hell; were he but as ready to stay there as hell is to receive and retain him, he would never come out of it." So, the girl thus frequently inviting and exhorting Rustico to the service of God, there came at length a time when she had so thoroughly lightened his doublet that he shivered when another would have sweated; wherefore he began to instruct her that the Devil was not to be corrected and put in hell, save when his head was exalted with pride; adding, "and we by God's grace have brought him to so sober a mind that he prays God he may be left in peace;" by which means he for a time kept the girl quiet. But when she saw that Rustico had no more occasion for her to put the Devil in hell, she said to him one day:

"Rustico, if thy Devil is chastened and gives thee no more trouble, my hell, on the other hand, gives me no peace; wherefore, I with my hell have holpen thee to abase the pride of thy Devil, so thou wouldst do well to lend me the aid of thy Devil to allay the fervent heat of my hell." Rustico, whose

diet was roots of herbs and water, was scarce able to respond to her demands: he told her that 'twould require not a few devils to allay the heat of hell; but that he would do what might be in his power; and so now and again he satisfied her; but so seldom that 'twas as if he had tossed a bean into the jaws of a lion. Whereat the girl, being fain of more of the service of God than she had, did somewhat repine. However, the case standing thus (deficiency of power against superfluity of desire) between Rustico's Devil and Alibech's hell, it chanced that a fire broke out in Capsa, whereby the house of Alibech's father was burned, and he and all his sons and the rest of his household perished; so that Alibech was left sole heiress of all his estate. And a young gallant, Neerbale by name, who by reckless munificence had wasted all his substance, having discovered that she was alive, addressed himself to the pursuit of her, and, having found her in time to prevent the confiscation of her father's estate as an escheat for failure of heirs, took her, much to Rustico's relief and against her own will, back to Capsa, and made her his wife, and shared with her her vast patrimony. But before he had lain with her, she was questioned by the ladies of the manner in which she had served God in the desert; whereto she answered, that she had been wont to serve Him by putting the Devil in hell, and that Neerbale had committed a great sin, when he took her out of such service. The ladies being curious to know how the Devil was put in hell, the girl satisfied them, partly by words, partly by signs. Whereat they laughed exorbitantly (and still laugh) and said to her:

"Be not down-hearted, daughter; 'tis done here too; Neerbale will know well how to serve God with you in that way." And so the story passing from mouth to mouth throughout the city, it came at last to be a common proverb, that the most acceptable service that can be rendered to God is to put the Devil in hell; which proverb, having travelled hither across the sea, is still current. Wherefore, young ladies, you that have need of the grace of God, see to it that you learn how to put the Devil in hell, because 'tis mightily pleasing to God, and of great solace to both the parties, and much good may thereby be engendered and ensue.

1 Now Gafsa, in Tunis.

