

NOVEL II

Fra Alberto gives a lady to understand that she is beloved of the Angel Gabriel, in whose shape he lies with her sundry times; afterward, for fear of her kinsmen, he flings himself forth of her house, and finds shelter in the house of a poor man, who on the morrow leads him in the guise of a wild man into the piazza, where, being recognized, he is apprehended by his brethren and imprisoned.

More than once had Fiammetta's story brought tears to the eyes of her fair companions; but now that it was ended the king said with an austere air

"I should esteem my life but a paltry price to pay for half the delight that Ghismonda had with Guiscardo: whereat no lady of you all should marvel, seeing that each hour that I live I die a thousand deaths; nor is there so much as a particle of compensating joy allotted me. But a truce to my own concerns: I ordain that Pampinea do next ensue our direful argument, wherewith the tenor of my life in part accords, and if she follow in Fiammetta's footsteps, I doubt not I shall presently feel some drops of dew distill upon my fire." Pampinea received the king's command in a spirit more accordant with what from her own bent she divined to be the wishes of her fair gossips than with the king's words; wherefore, being minded rather to afford them some diversion, than, save as in duty bound, to satisfy the king, she made choice of a story which, without deviating from the prescribed theme, should move a laugh, and thus began:

'Tis a proverb current among the vulgar, that
"Whoso, being wicked, is righteous reputed,
May sin as he will, and 'twill ne'er be imputed."
Which proverb furnishes me with abundant matter of discourse, germane to our theme, besides occasion to exhibit the quality and degree of the hypocrisy of the religious, who flaunt it in ample flowing robes, and, with faces made pallid by art, with voices low and gentle to beg alms, most loud and haughty to reprove in others their own sins, would make believe that their way of salvation lies in taking from us and ours in giving to them; nay, more, as if they had not like us Paradise to win, but were already its lords and masters, assign therein to each that dies a place more or less exalted according to the amount of the money that he has bequeathed to them; which if they believe, 'tis by dint of self-delusion, and to the effect of deluding all that put faith in their words. Of whose guile were it lawful for me to make as full exposure as were fitting, not a few simple folk should soon be enlightened as to what they cloak within the folds of their voluminous habits. But would to God all might have the like reward of their lies as a certain friar minor, no novice, but one that was reputed among their greatest(i) at Venice; whose story, rather than aught else, I am minded to tell you, if so I may, perchance, by laughter and jollity relieve in some degree your souls that are heavy laden with pity for the death of Ghismonda.

Know then, noble ladies, that there was in Imola a man of evil and corrupt life, Berto della Massa by name, whose pestilent practices came at length to be so well known to the good folk of Imola that 'twas all one whether he lied or spoke the truth, for there was not a soul in Imola that believed a word he said: wherefore, seeing that his

tricks would pass no longer there, he removed, as in despair, to Venice, that common sink of all abominations, thinking there to find other means than he had found elsewhere to the prosecution of his nefarious designs. And, as if conscience-stricken for his past misdeeds, he assumed an air of the deepest humility, turned the best Catholic of them all, and went and made himself a friar minor, taking the name of Fra Alberto da Imola. With his habit he put on a shew of austerity, highly commending penitence and abstinence, and eating or drinking no sort of meat or wine but such as was to his taste. And scarce a soul was there that wist that the thief, the pimp, the cheat, the assassin, had not been suddenly converted into a great preacher without continuing in the practice of the said iniquities, whensoever the same was privily possible. And withal, having got himself made priest, as often as he celebrated at the altar, he would weep over the passion of our Lord, so there were folk in plenty to see, for tears cost him little enough, when he had a mind to shed them. In short, what with his sermons and his tears, he duped the folk of Venice to such a tune that scarce a will was there made but he was its executor and depositary; nay, not a few made him trustee of their moneys, and most, or well-nigh most, men and women alike, their confessor and counsellor: in short, he had put off the wolf and put on the shepherd, and the fame of his holiness was such in those parts that St. Francis himself had never the like at Assisi.

Now it so befell that among the ladies that came to confess to this holy friar was one Monna Lisetta of Ca' Quirino, the young, silly, empty-headed wife of a great merchant, who was gone with the galleys to Flanders. Like a Venetian – for unstable are they all – though she placed herself at

his feet, she told him but a part of her sins, and when Fra Alberto asked her whether she had a lover, she replied with black looks

“How now, master friar? have you not eyes in your head? See you no difference between my charms and those of other women? Lovers in plenty might I have, so I would: but charms such as mine must not be cheapened: ’tis not every man that might presume to love me. How many ladies have you seen whose beauty is comparable to mine? I should adorn Paradise itself.” Whereto she added so much more in praise of her beauty that the friar could scarce hear her with patience. Howbeit, discerning at a glance that she was none too well furnished with sense, he deemed the soil meet for his plough, and fell forthwith inordinately in love with her, though he deferred his blandishments to a more convenient season, and by way of supporting his character for holiness began instead to chide her, telling her (among other novelties) that this was vainglory: whereto the lady retorted that he was a blockhead, and could not distinguish one degree of beauty from another. Wherefore Fra Alberto, lest he should occasion her too much chagrin, cut short the confession, and suffered her to depart with the other ladies. Some days after, accompanied by a single trusty friend, he hied him to Monna Lisetta’s house, and having withdrawn with her alone into a saloon, where they were safe from observation, he fell on his knees at her feet, and said

“Madam, for the love of God I crave your pardon of that which I said to you on Sunday, when you spoke to me of your beauty, for so grievously was I chastised therefor that very night, that ’tis but to-day that I have been able to quit my bed.” “And by whom,” quoth my Lady Battledore, “were you so chastised?” “I will tell you,” returned Fra Alberto. “That night I was, as is ever my wont, at my orisons, when suddenly a great light shone in my cell, and before I could turn me to see what it was, I saw standing over me a right goodly youth with a stout cudgel in his hand, who seized me by the habit and threw me at his feet and belaboured me till I was bruised from head to foot. And when I asked him why he used me thus, he answered

“’Tis because thou didst to-day presume to speak slightly of the celestial charms of Monna Lisetta, whom I love next to God Himself.’ Whereupon I asked ‘And who are you?’ And he made answer that he was the Angel Gabriel. Then said I ‘O my lord, I pray you pardon me.’ Whereto he answered ‘I pardon thee on condition that thou go to her, with what speed thou mayst, and obtain her pardon, which if she accord thee not, I shall come back hither and give thee belabourings enough with my cudgel to make thee a sad man for the rest of thy days.’ What more he said, I dare not tell you, unless you first pardon me.” Wherewith our flimsy pumpkin-pated Lady Lackbrain was overjoyed, taking all the friar’s words for gospel. So after a while she said

“And did I not tell you, Fra Alberto, that my charms were celestial? But, so help me God, I am moved to pity of you, and forthwith I pardon you,

lest worse should befall you, so only you tell me what more the Angel said.” “So will I gladly, Madam,” returned Fra Alberto, “now that I have your pardon; this only I bid you bear in mind, that you have a care that never a soul in the world hear from you a single word of what I shall say to you, if you would not spoil your good fortune, wherein there is not to-day in the whole world a lady that may compare with you. Know then that the Angel Gabriel bade me tell you that you stand so high in his favour that again and again he would have come to pass the night with you, but that he doubted he should affright you. So now he sends you word through me that he would fain come one night, and stay a while with you; and seeing that, being an angel, if he should visit you in his angelic shape, he might not be touched by you, he would, to pleasure you, present himself in human shape; and so he bids you send him word, when you would have him come, and in whose shape, and he will come; for which cause you may deem yourself more blessed than any other lady that lives.” My Lady Vanity then said that she was highly flattered to be beloved of the Angel Gabriel; whom she herself loved so well that she had never grudged four soldi to burn a candle before his picture, wherever she saw it, and that he was welcome to visit her as often as he liked, and would always find her alone in her room; on the understanding, however, that he should not desert her for the Virgin Mary, whom she had heard he did mightily affect, and indeed ’twould so appear, for, wherever she saw him, he was always on his knees at her feet: for the rest he might even come in what shape he pleased, so that it was not such as to terrify her. Then said Fra Alberto

“Madam, ’tis wisely spoken; and I will arrange it all with him just as you say. But ’tis in your power to do me a great favour, which will cost you nothing; and this favour is that you be consenting that he visit you in my shape. Now hear wherein you will confer this favour: thus will it be: he will disembody my soul, and set it in Paradise, entering himself into my body; and, as long as he shall be with you, my soul will be in Paradise.” Whereto my Lady Slenderwit

“So be it,” she said; “I am well pleased that you have this solace to salve the bruises that he gives you on my account.” “Good,” said Fra Alberto; “then you will see to it that to-night he find, when he comes, your outer door unlatched, that he may have ingress; for, coming, as he will, in human shape, he will not be able to enter save by the door.” “It shall be done,” replied the lady. Whereupon Fra Alberto took his leave, and the lady remained in such a state of exaltation that her nether end knew not her chemise, and it seemed to her a thousand years until the Angel Gabriel should come to visit her. Fra Alberto, bethinking him that ’twas not as an angel, but as a cavalier that he must acquit himself that night, fell to fortifying himself with comfits and other dainties, that he might not lose his saddle for slight cause. Then, leave of absence gotten, he betook him at nightfall, with a single companion, to the house of a woman that was his

friend, which house had served on former occasions as his base when he went a chasing the fillies; and having there disguised himself, he hid him, when he deemed 'twas time, to the house of the lady, where, donning the gewgaws he had brought with him, he transformed himself into an angel, and going up, entered the lady's chamber. No sooner saw she this dazzling apparition than she fell on her knees before the Angel, who gave her his blessing, raised her to her feet, and motioned her to go to bed. She, nothing loath, obeyed forthwith, and the Angel lay down beside his devotee. Now, Fra Alberto was a stout, handsome fellow, whose legs bore themselves right bravely; and being bedded with Monna Lisetta, who was lusty and delicate, he covered her after another fashion than her husband had been wont, and took many a flight that night without wings, so that she heartily cried him content; and not a little therewithal did he tell her of the glory celestial. Then towards daybreak, all being ready for his return, he hid him forth, and repaired, caparisoned as he was, to his friend, whom, lest he should be affrighted, sleeping alone, the good woman of the house had solaced with her company. The lady, so soon as she had breakfasted, betook her to Fra Alberto, and reported the Angel Gabriel's visit, and what he had told her of the glory of the life eternal, describing his appearance, not without some added marvels of her own invention. Whereunto Fra Alberto replied

"Madam, I know not how you fared with him; but this I know, that last night he came to me, and for that I had done his errand with you, he suddenly transported my soul among such a multitude of flowers and roses as was never seen here below, and my soul – what became of my body I know not – tarried in one of the most delightful places that ever was from that hour until matins." "As for your body," said the lady, "do I not tell you whose it was? It lay all night long with the Angel Gabriel in my arms; and if you believe me not, you have but to look under your left pap, where I gave the Angel a mighty kiss, of which the mark will last for some days." "Why then," said Fra Alberto, "I will even do to-day what 'tis long since I did, to wit, undress, that I may see if you say sooth." So they fooled it a long while, and then the lady went home, where Fra Alberto afterwards paid her many a visit without any let. However, one day it so befell that while Monna Lisetta was with one of her gossips canvassing beauties, she, being minded to exalt her own charms above all others, and having, as we know, none too much wit in her pumpkin-pate, observed

"Did you but know by whom my charms are prized, then, for sure, you would have nought to say of the rest." Her gossip, all agog to hear, for well she knew her foible, answered

"Madam, it may be as you say, but still, while one knows not who he may be, one cannot alter one's mind so rapidly." Whereupon my Lady Featherbrain

"Gossip," said she, "'tis not for common talk, but he that I wot of is the Angel Gabriel, who loves

me more dearly than himself, for that I am, so he tells me, the fairest lady in all the world, ay, and in the Maremma to boot."⁽²⁾ Whereat her gossip would fain have laughed, but held herself in, being minded to hear more from her. Wherefore she said

"God's faith, Madam, if 'tis the Angel Gabriel, and he tells you so, why, so of course it must needs be; but I wist not the angels meddled with such matters." "There you erred, gossip," said the lady: "zounds, he does it better than my husband, and he tells me they do it above there too, but, as he rates my charms above any that are in heaven, he is enamoured of me, and not seldom visits me: so now dost see?" So away went the gossip so agog to tell the story, that it seemed to her a thousand years till she was where it might be done; and being met for recreation with a great company of ladies, she narrated it all in detail: whereby it passed to the ladies' husbands, and to other ladies, and from them to yet other ladies, so that in less than two days all Venice was full of it. But among others, whose ears it reached, were Monna Lisetta's brothers-in-law, who, keeping their own counsel, resolved to find this angel and make out whether he knew how to fly; to which end they kept watch for some nights. Whereof no hint, as it happened, reached Fra Alberto's ears; and so, one night when he was come to enjoy the lady once more, he was scarce undressed when her brothers-in-law, who had seen him come, were at the door of the room and already opening it, when Fra Alberto, hearing the noise and apprehending the danger, started up, and having no other resource, threw open a window that looked on to the Grand Canal, and plunged into the water. The depth was great, and he was an expert swimmer; so that he took no hurt, but, having reached the other bank, found a house open, and forthwith entered it, praying the good man that was within, for God's sake to save his life, and trumping up a story to account for his being there at so late an hour, and stripped to the skin. The good man took pity on him, and having occasion to go out, he put him in his own bed, bidding him stay there until his return; and so, having locked him in, he went about his business.

Now when the lady's brothers-in-law entered the room, and found that the Angel Gabriel had taken flight, leaving his wings behind him, being baulked of their prey, they roundly rated the lady, and then, leaving her disconsolate, betook themselves home with the Angel's spoils. Whereby it befell, that, when 'twas broad day, the good man, being on the Rialto, heard tell how the Angel Gabriel had come to pass the night with Monna Lisetta, and, being surprised by her brothers-in-law, had taken fright, and thrown himself into the Canal, and none knew what was become of him. The good man guessed in a trice that the said Angel was no other than the man he had at home, whom on his return he recognized, and, after much chaffering, brought him to promise him fifty ducats that he might not be given up to the lady's brothers-in-law. The bargain struck, Fra Alberto signified a desire to be going. Whereupon

“There is no way,” said the good man, “but one, if you are minded to take it. To-day we hold a revel, wherein folk lead others about in various disguises; as, one man will present a bear, another a wild man, and so forth; and then in the piazza of San Marco there is a hunt, which done, the revel is ended; and then away they hie them, whither they will, each with the man he has led about. If you are willing to be led by me in one or another of these disguises, before it can get wind that you are here, I can bring you whither you would go; otherwise I see not how you are to quit this place without being known; and the lady’s brothers-in-law, reckoning that you must be lurking somewhere in this quarter, have set guards all about to take you.” Loath indeed was Fra Alberto to go in such a guise, but such was his fear of the lady’s relations that he consented, and told the good man whither he desired to be taken, and that he was content to leave the choice of the disguise to him. The good man then smeared him all over with honey, and covered him with down, set a chain on his neck and a vizard on his face, gave him a stout cudgel to carry in one hand, and two huge dogs, which he had brought from the shambles, to lead with the other, and sent a man to the Rialto to announce that whoso would see the Angel Gabriel should hie him to the piazza of San Marco; in all which he acted as a leal Venetian. And so, after a while, he led him forth, and then, making him go before, held him by the chain behind, and through a great throng that clamoured

“What manner of thing is this? what manner of thing is this?” he brought him to the piazza, where, what with those that followed them, and those that had come from the Rialto on hearing the announcement, there were folk without end. Arrived at the piazza, he fastened his wild man to a column in a high and exposed place, making as if he were minded to wait till the hunt should begin;

whereby the flies and gadflies, attracted by the honey with which he was smeared, caused him most grievous distress. However, the good man waited only until the piazza was thronged, and then, making as if he would unchain his wild man, he tore the vizard from Fra Alberto’s face, saying

“Gentlemen, as the boar comes not to the hunt, and the hunt does not take place, that it be not for nothing that you are come hither, I am minded to give you a view of the Angel Gabriel, who comes down from heaven to earth by night to solace the ladies of Venice.” The vizard was no sooner withdrawn than all recognized Fra Alberto, and greeted him with hootings, rating him in language as offensive and opprobrious as ever rogue was abused withal, and pelting him in the face with every sort of filth that came to hand: in which plight they kept him an exceeding great while, until by chance the bruit thereof reached his brethren, of whom some six thereupon put themselves in motion, and, arrived at the piazza, clapped a habit on his back, and unchained him, and amid an immense uproar led him off to their convent, where, after languishing a while in prison, ’tis believed that he died.

So this man, by reason that, being reputed righteous, he did evil, and ’twas not imputed to him, presumed to counterfeit the Angel Gabriel, and, being transformed into a wild man, was in the end put to shame, as he deserved, and vainly bewailed his misdeeds. God grant that so it may betide all his likes.

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- 1 de’ maggior cassesi. No such word as cassesi is known to the lexicographers or commentators; and no plausible emendation has yet been suggested.
 - 2 With this ineptitude cf. the friar’s “flowers and roses “ on the preceding page.