

NOVEL I

A knight offers to carry Madonna Oretta a horseback with a story, but tells it so ill that she prays him to dismount her.

As stars are set for an ornament in the serene expanse of heaven, and likewise in springtime flowers and leafy shrubs in the green meadows, so, damsels, in the hour of rare and excellent discourse, is wit with its bright sallies. Which, being brief, are much more proper for ladies than for men, seeing that prolixity of speech, where brevity is possible, is much less allowable to them. But for whatever cause, be it the sorry quality of our understanding, or some especial enmity that heaven bears to our generation, few ladies or none are left to-day that, when occasion prompts, are able to meet it with apt speech, ay, or if aught of the kind they hear, can understand it aright: to our common shame be it spoken! But as, touching this matter, enough has already been said by Pampinea,⁽¹⁾ I purpose not to enlarge thereon; but, that you may know what excellence resides in speech apt for the occasion, I am minded to tell you after how courteous a fashion a lady imposed silence upon a gentleman.

'Tis no long time since there dwelt in our city a lady, noble, debonair and of excellent discourse, whom not a few of you may have seen or heard of, whose name – for such high qualities merit not oblivion – was Madonna Oretta, her husband being Messer Geri Spina. Now this lady, happening to be, as we are, in the country, moving from place to place for pleasure with a company of ladies and gentlemen, whom she had entertained the day before at breakfast at her house, and the place of their next sojourn, whither they were to go afoot,

being some considerable distance off, one of the gentlemen of the company said to her:

“Madonna Oretta, so please you, I will carry you great part of the way a horseback with one of the finest stories in the world.”

“Indeed, Sir,” replied the lady, “I pray you do so; and I shall deem it the greatest of favours.”

Whereupon the gentleman, who perhaps was no better master of his weapon than of his story, began a tale, which in itself was indeed excellent, but which, by repeating the same word three, four or six times, and now and again harking back, and saying:

“I said not well”; and erring not seldom in the names, setting one in place of another, he utterly spoiled; besides which, his mode of delivery accorded very ill with the character of the persons and incidents: insomuch that Madonna Oretta, as she listened, did oft sweat, and was like to faint, as if she were ill and at the point of death. And being at length able to bear no more of it, witting that the gentleman had got into a mess and was not like to get out of it, she said pleasantly to him:

“Sir, this horse of yours trots too hard; I pray you be pleased to set me down.” The gentleman, being perchance more quick of apprehension than he was skilful in narration, missed not the meaning of her sally, and took it in all good and gay humour. So, leaving unfinished the tale which he had begun, and so mishandled, he addressed himself to tell her other stories.

¹ Cf. First Day, Novel X.