

## NOVEL II

*Cisti, a baker, by an apt speech gives Messer Geri Spina to know that he has by inadvertence asked that of him which he should not.*

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All the ladies and the men alike having greatly commended Madonna Oretta's apt saying, the queen bade Pampinea follow suit, and thus she began:

Fair ladies, I cannot myself determine whether Nature or Fortune be the more at fault, the one in furnishing a noble soul with a vile body, or the other in allotting a base occupation to a body endowed with a noble soul, whereof we may have seen an example, among others, in our fellow-citizen, Cisti; whom, furnished though he was with a most lofty soul, Fortune made a baker. And verily I should curse Nature and Fortune alike, did I not know that Nature is most discreet, and that Fortune, albeit the foolish imagine her blind, has a thousand eyes. For 'tis, I suppose, that, being wise above a little, they do as mortals oftentimes do, who, being uncertain as to their future, provide against contingencies by burying their most precious treasures in the basest places in their houses, as being the least likely to be suspected; whence, in the hour of their greatest need, they bring them forth, the base place having kept them more safe than the dainty chamber would have done. And so these two arbitresses of the world not seldom hide their most precious commodities in the obscurity of the crafts that are reputed most base, that thence being brought to light they may shine with a brighter splendour. Whereof how in a trifling matter Cisti, the baker, gave proof, restoring the eyes of the mind to Messer Geri Spina, whom the story of his wife, Madonna Oretta, has brought to my recollection, I am minded to shew you in a narrative which shall be of the briefest.

I say then that Pope Boniface, with whom Messer Geri Spina stood very high in favour and honour, having sent divers of his courtiers to Florence as ambassadors to treat of certain matters of great moment, and they being lodged in Messer Geri's house, where he treated with them of the said affairs of the Pope, 'twas, for some reason or another, the wont of Messer Geri and the ambassadors of the Pope to pass almost every morning by Santa Maria Ughi, where Cisti, the baker, had his bakehouse, and plied his craft in person. Now, albeit Fortune had allotted him a very humble occupation, she had nevertheless prospered him therein to such a degree that he was grown most wealthy, and without ever aspiring to change it for another, lived in most magnificent style, having among his other good things a cellar of the best wines, white and red, that were to be found in Florence, or the country parts; and marking Messer Geri and the ambassadors of the Pope pass every morning by his door, he bethought him that, as 'twas very hot, 'twould be a very courteous thing to give them to drink of his good wine; but comparing

his rank with that of Messer Geri, he deemed it unseemly to presume to invite him, and cast about how he might lead Messer Geri to invite himself. So, wearing always the whitest of doublets and a spotless apron, that denoted rather the miller, than the baker, he let bring, every morning about the hour that he expected Messer Geri and the ambassadors to pass by his door, a spick-and-span bucket of fresh and cool spring water, and a small Bolognese flagon of his good white wine, and two beakers that shone like silver, so bright were they: and there down he sat him, as they came by, and after hawking once or twice, fell a drinking his wine with such gusto that 'twould have raised a thirst in a corpse. Which Messer Geri having observed on two successive mornings, said on the third:

"What is't, Cisti? Is't good?" Whereupon Cisti jumped up, and answered:

"Ay, Sir, good it is; but in what degree I might by no means make you understand, unless you tasted it." Messer Geri, in whom either the heat of the weather, or unwonted fatigue, or, perchance, the gusto with which he had seen Cisti drink, had bred a thirst, turned to the ambassadors and said with a smile:

"Gentlemen, 'twere well to test the quality of this worthy man's wine: it may be such that we shall not repent us." And so in a body they came up to where Cisti stood; who, having caused a goodly bench to be brought out of the bakehouse, bade them be seated, and to their servants, who were now coming forward to wash the beakers, said:

"Stand back, comrades, and leave this office to me, for I know as well how to serve wine as to bake bread; and expect not to taste a drop yourselves." Which said, he washed four fine new beakers with his own hands, and having sent for a small flagon of his good wine, he heedfully filled the beakers, and presented them to Messer Geri and his companions; who deemed the wine the best that they had drunk for a great while. So Messer Geri, having praised the wine not a little, came there to drink every morning with the ambassadors as long as they tarried with him.

Now when the ambassadors had received their conge, and were about to depart, Messer Geri gave a grand banquet, to which he bade some of the most honourable of the citizens, and also Cisti, who could by no means be induced to come. However, Messer Geri bade one of his servants go fetch a flask of Cisti's wine, and serve half a beaker thereof to each guest at the first course. The servant, somewhat offended, perhaps, that he had not been

suffered to taste any of the wine, took with him a large flask, which Cisti no sooner saw, than:

“Son,” quoth he, “Messer Geri does not send thee to me”: and often as the servant affirmed that he did, he could get no other answer: wherewith he was fain at last to return to Messer Geri. “Go, get thee back, said Messer Geri, and tell him that I do send thee to him, and if he answers thee so again, ask him, to whom then I send thee.” So the servant came back, and said:

“Cisti, Messer Geri does, for sure, send me to thee.”

“Son,” answered Cisti, “Messer Geri does, for sure, not send thee to me.”

“To whom then,” said the servant, “does he send me?”

“To Arno,” returned Cisti. Which being reported by the servant to Messer Geri, the eyes of his mind were straightway opened, and:

“Let me see,” quoth he to the servant, “what flask it is thou takest there.” And when he had seen it:

“Cisti says sooth,” he added; and having sharply chidden him, he caused him take with him a suitable flask, which when Cisti saw:

“Now know I,” quoth he, “that ’tis indeed Messer Geri that sends thee to me,” and blithely filled it. And having replenished the rundlet that same day with wine of the same quality, he had it carried with due care to Messer Geri’s house, and followed after himself; where finding Messer Geri he said:

“I would not have you think, Sir, that I was appalled by the great flask your servant brought me this morning; ’twas but that I thought you had forgotten that which by my little beakers I gave you to understand, when you were with me of late; to wit, that this is no table wine; and so wished this morning to refresh your memory. Now, however, being minded to keep the wine no longer, I have sent you all I have of it, to be henceforth entirely at your disposal.” Messer Geri set great store by Cisti’s gift, and thanked him accordingly, and ever made much of him and entreated him as his friend.