

NOVEL III

Fra Rinaldo lies with his gossip: her husband finds him in the room with her; and they make him believe that he was curing his godson of worms by a charm.

Filostrato knew not how so to veil what he said touching the mares of Parthia, but that the keen-witted ladies laughed thereat, making as if 'twas at somewhat else. However, his story being ended, the king called for one from Elisa, who, all obedience, thus began:

Debonair my ladies, we heard from Emilia how the bogey is exorcised, and it brought to my mind a story of another incantation: 'tis not indeed so good a story as hers; but, as no other, germane to our theme, occurs to me at present, I will relate it.

You are to know, then, that there dwelt aforetime at Siena a young man, right gallant and of honourable family, his name Rinaldo; who, being in the last degree enamoured of one of his neighbours, a most beautiful gentlewoman and the wife of a rich man, was not without hopes that, if he could but find means to speak with her privately, he might have of her all that he desired; but seeing no way, and the lady being pregnant, he cast about how he might become her child's godfather. Wherefore, having ingratiated himself with her husband, he broached the matter to him in as graceful a manner as he might; and 'twas arranged. So Rinaldo, being now godfather to Madonna Agnesa's child, and having a more colourable pretext for speaking to her, took courage, and told her in words that message of his heart which she had long before read in his eyes; but though 'twas not displeasing to the lady to hear, it availed him but little.

Now not long afterwards it so befell that, whatever may have been his reason, Rinaldo betook him to friarage; and whether it was that he found good pasture therein, or what not, he persevered in that way of life. And though for a while after he was turned friar, he laid aside the love he bore his gossip, and certain other vanities, yet in course of time, without putting off the habit, he resumed them, and began to take a pride in his appearance, and to go dressed in fine clothes, and to be quite the trim gallant, and to compose songs and sonnets and ballades, and to sing them, and to make a brave shew in all else that pertained to his new character. But why enlarge upon our Fra Rinaldo, of whom we speak? what friars are there that do not the like? Ah! opprobrium of a corrupt world! Sleek-faced and sanguine, daintily clad, dainty in all their accessories, they ruffle it shamelessly before the eyes of all, shewing not as doves but as insolent cocks with raised crest and swelling bosom, and, what is worse (to say nought of the vases full of electuaries and unguents, the boxes packed with divers comfits, the pitchers and phials of artificial waters, and oils, the flagons brimming with Malmsey and Greek and other wines of finest quality, with which their cells are so packed that they shew not as the cells of friars, but rather as apothecaries' or perfumers' shops), they blush not

to be known to be gouty, flattering themselves that other folk wot not that long fasts and many of them, and coarse fare and little of it, and sober living, make men lean and thin and for the most part healthy; or if any malady come thereof, at any rate 'tis not the gout, the wonted remedy for which is chastity and all beside that belongs to the regimen of a humble friar. They flatter themselves, too, that others wot not that over and above the meagre diet, long vigils and orisons and strict discipline ought to mortify men and make them pale, and that neither St. Dominic nor St. Francis went clad in stuff dyed in grain or any other goodly garb, but in coarse woollen habits innocent of the dyer's art, made to keep out the cold, and not for shew. To which matters 'twere well God had a care, no less than to the souls of the simple folk by whom our friars are nourished.

Fra Rinaldo, then, being come back to his first affections, took to visiting his gossip very frequently; and gaining confidence, began with more insistence than before to solicit her to that which he craved of her. So, being much urged, the good lady, to whom Fra Rinaldo, perhaps, seemed now more handsome than of yore, had recourse one day, when she felt herself unusually hard pressed by him, to the common expedient of all that would fain concede what is asked of them, and said:

"Oh! but Fra Rinaldo, do friars then do this sort of thing?"

"Madam," replied Fra Rinaldo, "when I divest myself of this habit, which I shall do easily enough, you will see that I am a man furnished as other men, and no friar." Whereto with a truly comical air the lady made answer:

"Alas! woe's me! you are my child's godfather: how might it be? nay, but 'twere a very great mischief; and many a time I have heard that 'tis a most heinous sin; and without a doubt, were it not so, I would do as you wish."

"If," said Fra Rinaldo, "you forego it for such a scruple as this, you are a fool for your pains. I say not that 'tis no sin; but there is no sin so great but God pardons it, if one repent. Now tell me: whether is more truly father to your son, I that held him at the font, or your husband that begot him?"

"My husband," replied the lady. "Sooth say you," returned the friar, "and does not your husband lie with you?"

"Why, yes," said the lady. "Then," rejoined the friar, "I that am less truly your son's father than your husband, ought also to lie with you, as does

your husband." The lady was no logician, and needed little to sway her: she therefore believed or feigned to believe that what the friar said was true. So:

"Who might avail to answer your words of wisdom?" quoth she; and presently forgot the godfather in the lover, and complied with his desires. Nor had they begun their course to end it forthwith: but under cover of the friar's sponsorship, which set them more at ease, as it rendered them less open to suspicion, they forgathered again and again.

But on one of these occasions it so befell that Fra Rinaldo, being come to the lady's house, where he espied none else save a very pretty and dainty little maid that waited on the lady, sent his companion away with her into the pigeon-house, there to teach her the paternoster, while he and the lady, holding her little boy by the hand, went into the bedroom, locked themselves in, got them on to a divan that was there, and began to disport them. And while thus they sped the time, it chanced that the father returned, and, before any was ware of him, was at the bedroom door, and knocked, and called the lady by her name. Whereupon:

"Tis as much as my life is worth," quoth Madonna Agnesa; "lo, here is my husband; and the occasion of our intimacy cannot but be now apparent to him."

"Sooth say you," returned Fra Rinaldo, who was undressed, that is to say, had thrown off his habit and hood, and was in his tunic; "if I had but my habit and hood on me in any sort, 'twould be another matter; but if you let him in, and he find me thus, 'twill not be possible to put any face on it." But with an inspiration as happy as sudden:

"Now get them on you," quoth the lady; "and when you have them on, take your godson in your arms, and give good heed to what I shall say to him, that your words may accord with mine; and leave the rest to me."

The good man was still knocking, when his wife made answer:

"Coming, coming." And so up she got, and put on a cheerful countenance and hied her to the door, and opened it and said:

"Husband mine: well indeed was it for us that in came Fra Rinaldo, our sponsor; 'twas God that sent him to us; for in sooth, but for that, we had to-day lost our boy." Which the poor simpleton almost swooned to hear; and:

"How so?" quoth he. "O husband mine," replied the lady, "he was taken but now, all of a sudden, with a fainting fit, so that I thought he was dead: and what to do or say I knew not, had not Fra Rinaldo, our sponsor, come just in the nick of time, and set him on his shoulder, and said:

'Gossip, 'tis that he has worms in his body, and getting, as they do, about the heart, they might only too readily be the death of him; but fear not; I will say a charm that will kill them all; and before I take my leave, you will see your boy as whole as you ever saw him.' And because to say certain of the prayers thou shouldst have been with us, and the maid knew

not where to find thee, he caused his companion to say them at the top of the house, and he and I came in here. And for that 'tis not meet for any but the boy's mother to assist at such a service, that we might not be troubled with any one else, we locked the door; and he yet has him in his arms; and I doubt not that he only waits till his companion have said his prayers, and then the charm will be complete; for the boy is already quite himself again."

The good simple soul, taking all this for sooth, and overwrought by the love he bore his son, was entirely without suspicion of the trick his wife was playing him, and heaving a great sigh, said:

"I will go look for him."

"Nay," replied the wife, "go not: thou wouldst spoil the efficacy of the charm: wait here; I will go see if thou mayst safely go; and will call thee."

Whereupon Fra Rinaldo, who had heard all that passed, and was in his canonicals, and quite at his ease, and had the boy in his arms, having made sure that all was as it should be, cried out:

"Gossip, do I not hear the father's voice out there?"

"Ay indeed, Sir," replied the simpleton. "Come in then," said Fra Rinaldo. So in came the simpleton. Whereupon quoth Fra Rinaldo:

"I restore to you your boy made whole by the grace of God, whom but now I scarce thought you would see alive at vespers. You will do well to have his image fashioned in wax, not less than life-size, and set it for a thanksgiving to God, before the statue of Master St. Ambrose, by whose merits you have this favour of God."

The boy, catching sight of his father, ran to him with joyous greetings, as little children are wont; and the father, taking him in his arms, and weeping as if he were restored to him from the grave, fell by turns a kissing him and thanking his godfather, that he had cured him. Fra Rinaldo's companion, who had taught the maid not one paternoster only, but peradventure four or more, and by giving her a little purse of white thread that a nun had given him, had made her his devotee, no sooner heard Fra Rinaldo call the simpleton into his wife's room, than he stealthily got him to a place whence he might see and hear what was going on. Observing that the affair was now excellently arranged, he came down, and entered the chamber, saying:

"Fra Rinaldo, those four prayers that you bade me say, I have said them all."

"Then well done, my brother," quoth Fra Rinaldo, "well-breathed must thou be. For my part, I had but said two, when my gossip came in; but what with thy travail and mine, God of His grace has vouchsafed-us the healing or the boy." The simpleton then had good wine and comfits brought in, and did the honours to the godfather and his companion in such sort as their occasions did most demand. He then ushered them forth of the house, commending them to God; and without delay had the waxen image made, and directed it to be set up with the others in front of the statue of St.

Ambrose, not, be it understood, St. Ambrose of Milan.(i)

i The statue would doubtless be that of St. Ambrose of Siena, of the Dominican Order.