

NOVEL IV

The rector of Fiesole loves a widow lady, by whom he is not loved, and thinking to lie with her, lies with her maid, with whom the lady's brothers cause him to be found by his Bishop.

Elisa being come to the end of her story, which in the telling had yielded no small delight to all the company, the queen, turning to Emilia, signified her will, that her story should ensue at once upon that of Elisa. And thus with alacrity Emilia began:

Noble ladies, how we are teased and tormented by these priests and friars, and indeed by clergy of all sorts, I mind me to have been set forth in more than one of the stories that have been told; but as 'twere not possible to say so much thereof but that more would yet remain to say, I purpose to supplement them with the story of a rector, who, in defiance of all the world, was bent upon having the favour of a gentlewoman, whether she would or no. Which gentlewoman, being discreet above a little, treated him as he deserved.

Fiesole, whose hill is here within sight, is, as each of you knows, a city of immense antiquity, and was aforetime great, though now 'tis fallen into complete decay; which notwithstanding, it always was, and still is the see of a bishop. Now there was once a gentlewoman, Monna Piccarda by name, a widow, that had an estate at Fiesole, hard by the cathedral, on which, for that she was not in the easiest circumstances, she lived most part of the year, and with her her two brothers, very worthy and courteous young men, both of them. And the lady being wont frequently to resort to the cathedral, and being still quite young and fair and debonair withal, it so befell that the rector grew in the last degree enamoured of her, and waxed at length so bold, that he himself avowed his passion to the lady, praying her to entertain his love, and requite it in like measure. The rector was advanced in years, but otherwise the veriest springald, being bold and of a high spirit, of a boundless conceit of himself, and of mien and manners most affected and in the worst taste, and withal so tiresome and insufferable that he was on bad terms with everybody, and, if with one person more than another, with this lady, who not only cared not a jot for him, but had liefer have had a headache than his company. Wherefore the lady discreetly made answer:

"I may well prize your love, Sir, and love you I should and will right gladly; but such love as yours and mine may never admit of aught that is not honourable. You are my spiritual father and a priest, and now verging towards old age, circumstances which should ensure your honour and chastity; and I, on my part, am no longer a girl, such as these love affairs might beseem, but a widow, and well you wot how it behoves widows to be chaste. Wherefore I pray you to have me excused; for, after the sort you crave, you shall never have my love, nor would I in such sort be loved by you." With this answer the rector was for the nonce fain to be

content; but he was not the man to be dismayed and routed by a first repulse; and with his wonted temerity and effrontery he plied her again and again with letters and ambassages, and also by word of mouth, when he espied her entering the church. Wherefore the lady finding this persecution more grievous and harassing than she could well bear, cast about how she might be quit thereof in such fashion as he deserved, seeing that he left her no choice; howbeit she would do nought in the matter until she had conferred with her brothers. She therefore told them how the rector pursued her, and how she meant to foil him; and, with their full concurrence, some few days afterwards she went, as she was wont, to church. The rector no sooner saw her, than he approached and accosted her, as he was wont, in a tone of easy familiarity. The lady greeted him, as he came up, with a glance of gladsome recognition; and when he had treated her to not a little of his wonted eloquence, she drew him aside, and heaving a great sigh, said:

"I have oftentimes heard it said, Sir, that there is no castle so strong, but that, if the siege be continued day by day, it will sooner or later be taken; which I now plainly perceive is my own case. For so fairly have you hemmed me in with this, that, and the other pretty speech or the like blandishments, that you have constrained me to make nought of my former resolve, and, seeing that I find such favour with you, to surrender myself unto you." Whereunto, overjoyed, the rector made answer:

"Madam, I am greatly honoured; and, sooth to say, I marvelled not a little how you should hold out so long, seeing that I have never had the like experience with any other woman, insomuch that I have at times said:

'Were women of silver, they would not be worth a denier, for there is none but would give under the hammer!' But no more of this: when and where may we come together?"

"Sweet my lord," replied the lady, "for the when, 'tis just as we may think best, for I have no husband to whom to render account of my nights, but the where passes my wit to conjecture."

"How so?" quoth the rector. "Why not in your own house?"

"Sir," replied the lady, "you know that I have two brothers, both young men, who day and night bring their comrades into the house, which is none too large: for which reason it might not be done there, unless we were minded to make ourselves, as

it were, dumb and blind, uttering never a word, not so much as a monosyllable, and abiding in the dark: in such sort indeed it might be, because they do not intrude upon my chamber; but theirs is so near to mine that the very least whisper could not but be heard."

"Nay but, Madam," returned the rector, "let not this stand in our way for a night or two, until I may bethink me where else we might be more at our ease."

"Be that as you will, Sir," quoth the lady, "I do but entreat that the affair be kept close, so that never a word of it get wind."

"Have no fear on that score, Madam," replied the priest; "and if so it may be, let us forgather to-night."

"With pleasure," returned the lady; and having appointed him how and when to come, she left him and went home.

Now the lady had a maid, that was none too young, and had a countenance the ugliest and most misshapen that ever was seen; for indeed she was flat-nosed, wry-mouthed, and thick-lipped, with huge, ill-set teeth, eyes that squinted and were ever bleared, and a complexion betwixt green and yellow, that shewed as if she had spent the summer not at Fiesole but at Sinigaglia: besides which she was hip-shot and somewhat halting on the right side. Her name was Ciuta, but, for that she was such a scurvy bitch to look upon, she was called by all folk Ciutazza.⁽¹⁾ And being thus misshapen of body, she was also not without her share of guile. So the lady called her and said:

"Ciutazza, so thou wilt do me a service to-night, I will give thee a fine new shift." At the mention of the shift Ciutazza made answer:

"So you give me a shift, Madam, I will throw myself into the very fire."

"Good," said the lady; "then I would have thee lie to-night in my bed with a man, whom thou wilt caress; but look thou say never a word, that my brothers, who, as thou knowest, sleep in the next room, hear thee not; and afterwards I will give thee the shift."

"Sleep with a man!" quoth Ciutazza: "why, if need be, I will sleep with six." So in the evening Master Rector came, as he had been bidden; and the two young men, as the lady had arranged, being in their room, and making themselves very audible, he stole noiselessly, and in the dark, into the lady's room, and got him on to the bed, which Ciutazza, well advised by the lady how to behave, mounted from the other side. Whereupon Master Rector, thinking to have the lady by his side, took Ciutazza in his arms, and fell a kissing her, saying never a word the while, and Ciutazza did the like; and so he enjoyed her, plucking the boon which he had so long desired.

The rector and Ciutazza thus closeted, the lady charged her brothers to execute the rest of her plan. They accordingly stole quietly out of their room, and hied them to the piazza, where Fortune proved propitious beyond what they had craved of her; for,

it being a very hot night, the bishop had been seeking them, purposing to go home with them, and solace himself with their society, and quench his thirst. With which desire he acquainted them, as soon as he espied them coming into the piazza; and so they escorted him to their house, and there in the cool of their little courtyard, which was bright with many a lamp, he took, to his no small comfort, a draught of their good wine. Which done:

"Sir," said the young men, "since of your great courtesy you have deigned to visit our poor house, to which we were but now about to invite you, we should be gratified if you would be pleased to give a look at somewhat, a mere trifle though it be, which we have here to shew you." The bishop replied that he would do so with pleasure. Whereupon one of the young men took a lighted torch and led the way, the bishop and the rest following, to the chamber where Master Rector lay with Ciutazza.

Now the rector, being in hot haste, had ridden hard, insomuch that he was already gotten above three miles on his way when they arrived; and so, being somewhat tired, he was resting, but, hot though the night was, he still held Ciutazza in his arms. In which posture he was shewn to the bishop, when, preceded by the young man bearing the light, and followed by the others, he entered the chamber. And being roused, and observing the light and the folk that stood about him, Master Rector was mighty ashamed and affrighted, and popped his head under the clothes. But the bishop, reprimanding him severely, constrained him to thrust his head out again, and take a view of his bed-fellow. Thus made aware of the trick which the lady had played him, the rector was now, both on that score and by reason of his signal disgrace, the saddest man that ever was; and his discomfiture was complete, when, having donned his clothes, he was committed by the bishop's command to close custody and sent to prison, there to expiate his offence by a rigorous penance.

The bishop was then fain to know how it had come about that he had forgathered there with Ciutazza. Whereupon the young men related the whole story; which ended, the bishop commended both the lady and the young men not a little, for that they had taken condign vengeance upon him without imbruing their hands in the blood of a priest. The bishop caused him to bewail his transgression forty days; but what with his love, and the scornful requital which it had received, he bewailed it more than forty and nine days, not to mention that for a great while he could not shew himself in the street but the boys would point the finger at him and say:

"There goes he that lay with Ciutazza." Which was such an affliction to him that he was like to go mad. On this wise the worthy lady rid herself of the rector's vexatious importunity, and Ciutazza had a jolly night and earned her shift.

1 An augmentative form, with a suggestion of cagnazza, bitch-like.