

NOVEL IV

Messer Gentile de' Carisendi, being come from Modena, disinters a lady that he loves, who has been buried for dead. She, being reanimated, gives birth to a male child; and Messer Gentile restores her, with her son, to Niccoluccio Caccianimico, her husband.

A thing marvellous seemed it to all that for liberality a man should be ready to sacrifice his own life; and herein they averred that Nathan had without doubt left the King of Spain and the Abbot of Cluny behind. However, when they had discussed the matter diversely and at large, the king, bending his regard on Laretta, signified to her his will that she should tell; and forthwith, accordingly, Laretta began:

Goodly matters are they and magnificent that have been recounted to you, young ladies; nay, so much of our field of discourse is already filled by their grandeur, that for us that are yet to tell, there is, methinks, no room left, unless we seek our topic there where matter of discourse germane to every theme does most richly abound, to wit, in the affairs of love. For which cause, as also for that our time of life cannot but make us especially inclinable thereto, I am minded that my story shall be of a feat of magnificence done by a lover: which, all things considered, will, peradventure, seem to you inferior to none that have been shewn you; so it be true that to possess the beloved one, men will part with their treasures, forget their enmities, and jeopardize their own lives, their honour and their reputation, in a thousand ways.

Know, then, that at Bologna, that most famous city of Lombardy, there dwelt a knight, Messer Gentile Carisendi by name, worshipful alike for his noble lineage and his native worth: who in his youth, being enamoured of a young gentlewoman named Madonna Catalina, wife of one Niccoluccio Caccianimico, and well-nigh despairing, for that the lady gave him but a sorry requital of his love, betook him to Modena, being called thither as Podesta. Now what time he was there, Niccoluccio being also away from Bologna, and his lady gone, for that she was with child, to lie in at a house she had some three miles or so from the city, it befell that she was suddenly smitten with a sore malady of such and so virulent a quality that it left no sign of life in her, so that the very physicians pronounced her dead. And for that the women that were nearest of kin to her professed to have been told by her, that she was not so far gone in pregnancy that the child could be perfectly formed, they, without more ado, laid her in a tomb in a neighbouring church, and after long lamentation closed it upon her.

Whereof Messer Gentile being forthwith apprised by one of his friends, did, for all she had been most niggardly to him of her favour, grieve not a little, and at length fell a communing with himself on this wise:

So, Madonna Catalina, thou art dead! While thou livedst, never a glance of thine might I have; wherefore, now that thou art dead, 'tis but right that I go take a kiss from thee. 'twas night while he thus mused; and forthwith, observing strict secrecy

in his departure, he got him to horse with a single servant, and halted not until he was come to the place where the lady was interred; and having opened the tomb he cautiously entered it. Then, having lain down beside her, he set his face against hers; and again and again, weeping profusely the while, he kissed it. But as 'tis matter of common knowledge that the desires of men, and more especially of lovers, know no bounds, but crave ever an ampler satisfaction; even so Messer Gentile, albeit he had been minded to tarry there no longer, now said to himself:

Wherefore touch I not her bosom a while? I have never yet touched it, nor shall I ever touch it again. Obeying which impulse, he laid his hand on her bosom, and keeping it there some time, felt, as he thought, her heart faintly beating. Whereupon, banishing all fear, and examining the body with closer attention, he discovered that life was not extinct, though he judged it but scant and flickering: and so, aided by his servant, he bore her, as gently as he might, out of the tomb; and set her before him upon his horse, and brought her privily to his house at Bologna, where dwelt his wise and worthy mother, who, being fully apprised by him of the circumstances, took pity on the lady, and had a huge fire kindled, and a bath made ready, whereby she restored her to life. Whereof the first sign she gave was to heave a great sigh, and murmur:

"Alas! where am I?" To which the worthy lady made answer:

"Be of good cheer; thou art well lodged." By and by the lady, coming to herself, looked about her; and finding herself she knew not where, and seeing Messer Gentile before her, was filled with wonder, and besought his mother to tell her how she came to be there.

Messer Gentile thereupon told her all. Sore distressed thereat, the lady, after a while, thanked him as best she might; after which she besought him by the love that he had borne her, and of his courtesy, that she might, while she tarried in his house, be spared aught that could impair her honour and her husband's; and that at daybreak he would suffer her to return home. "Madam," replied Messer Gentile, "however I did affect you in time past, since God in His goodness has, by means of the love I bore you, restored you to me alive, I mean not now, or at any time hereafter, to entreat

you either here or elsewhere, save as a dear sister; but yet the service I have to-night rendered you merits some guerdon, and therefore lief had I that you deny me not a favour which I shall ask of you." Whereto the lady graciously made answer that she would be prompt to grant it, so only it were in her power, and consonant with her honour. Said then Messer Gentile:

"Your kinsfolk, Madam, one and all, nay, all the folk in Bologna are fully persuaded that you are dead: there is therefore none to expect you at home: wherefore the favour I crave of you is this, that you will be pleased to tarry privily here with my mother, until such time—which will be speedily—as I return from Modena. And 'tis for that I purpose to make solemn and joyous donation of you to your husband in presence of the most honourable folk of this city that I ask of you this grace." Mindful of what she owed the knight, and witting that what he craved was seemly, the lady, albeit she yearned not a little to gladden her kinsfolk with the sight of her in the flesh, consented to do as Messer Gentile besought her, and thereto pledged him her faith. And scarce had she done so, when she felt that the hour of her travail was come; and so, tenderly succoured by Messer Gentile's mother, she not long after gave birth to a fine boy. Which event did mightily enhance her own and Messer Gentile's happiness. Then, having made all meet provision for her, and left word that she was to be tended as if she were his own wife, Messer Gentile, observing strict secrecy, returned to Modena.

His time of office there ended, in anticipation of his return to Bologna, he appointed for the morning of his arrival in the city a great and goodly banquet at his house, whereto were bidden not a few of the gentlemen of Bologna, and among them Niccoluccio Caccianimico. Whom, when he was returned and dismounted, he found awaiting him, as also the lady, fairer and more healthful than ever, and her little son doing well; and so with a gladness beyond compare he ranged his guests at table, and regaled them with many a course magnificently served. And towards the close of the feast, having premonished the lady of his intention, and concerted with her how she should behave, thus he spoke:

"Gentlemen, I mind me to have once heard tell of (as I deem it) a delightsome custom which they have in Persia; to wit, that, when one would do his friend especial honour, he bids him to his house, and there shews him that treasure, be it wife, or mistress, or daughter, or what not, that he holds most dear; assuring him that yet more gladly, were it possible, he would shew him his heart. Which custom I am minded to observe here in Bologna. You, of your courtesy, have honoured my feast with your presence, and I propose to do you honour in the Persian fashion, by shewing you that which in all the world I do, and must ever, hold most dear. But before I do so, tell me, I pray you, how you conceive of a nice question that I shall lay before you. Suppose that one has in his house a good and most faithful servant, who falls sick of a grievous

disorder; and that the master carries not for the death of the servant, but has him borne out into the open street, and concerns himself no more with him: that then a stranger comes by, is moved to pity of the sick man, and takes him to his house, and by careful tendance and at no small cost restores him to his wonted health. Now I would fain know whether the first master has in equity any just cause to complain of or be aggrieved with the second master, if he retain the servant in his employ, and refuse to restore him, when so required."

The gentlemen discussed the matter after divers fashions, and all agreed in one sentence, which they committed to Niccoluccio Caccianimico, for that he was an eloquent and accomplished speaker, to deliver on the part of them all. Niccoluccio began by commending the Persian custom: after which he said that he and the others were all of the same opinion, to wit, that the first master had no longer any right in his servant, since he had not only abandoned but cast him forth; and that by virtue of the second master's kind usage of him he must be deemed to have become his servant; wherefore, by keeping him, he did the first master no mischief, no violence, no wrong. Whereupon the rest that were at the table said, one and all, being worthy men, that their judgment jumped with Niccoluccio's answer. The knight, well pleased with the answer, and that 'twas Niccoluccio that gave it, affirmed that he was of the same opinion; adding:

"'Tis now time that I shew you that honour which I promised you." He then called two of his servants, and sent them to the lady, whom he had caused to be apparelled and adorned with splendour, charging them to pray her to be pleased to come and gladden the gentlemen with her presence. So she, bearing in her arms her most lovely little son, came, attended by the two servants, into the saloon, and by the knight's direction, took a seat beside a worthy gentleman: whereupon:

"Gentlemen," quoth the knight, "this is the treasure that I hold, and mean ever to hold, more dear than aught else. Behold, and judge whether I have good cause."

The gentlemen said not a little in her honour and praise, averring that the knight ought indeed to hold her dear: then, as they regarded her more attentively, there were not a few that would have pronounced her to be the very woman that she was, had they not believed that woman to be dead. But none scanned her so closely as Niccoluccio, who, the knight being withdrawn a little space, could no longer refrain his eager desire to know who she might be, but asked her whether she were of Bologna, or from other parts. The lady, hearing her husband's voice, could scarce forbear to answer; but yet, not to disconcert the knight's plan, she kept silence. Another asked her if that was her little boy; and yet another, if she were Messer Gentile's wife, or in any other wise his connection. To none of whom she vouchsafed an answer. Then, Messer Gentile coming up:

“Sir,” quoth one of the guests, “this treasure of yours is goodly indeed; but she seems to be dumb: is she so?”

“Gentlemen,” quoth Messer Gentile, “that she has not as yet spoken is no small evidence of her virtue.”

“Then tell us, you, who she is,” returned the other. “That,” quoth the knight, “will I right gladly, so you but promise me, that, no matter what I may say, none of you will stir from his place, until I have ended my story.” All gave the required promise, and when the tables had been cleared, Messer Gentile, being seated beside the lady, thus spoke:

“Gentlemen, this lady is that loyal and faithful servant, touching whom a brief while ago I propounded to you my question, whom her own folk held none too dear, but cast out into the open street as a thing vile and no longer good for aught, but I took thence, and by my careful tendance wrested from the clutch of death; whom God, regardful of my good will, has changed from the appalling aspect of a corpse to the thing of beauty that you see before you. But for your fuller understanding of this occurrence, I will briefly explain it to you.” He then recounted to them in detail all that had happened from his first becoming enamoured of the lady to that very hour whereto they hearkened with no small wonder; after which:

“And so,” he added, “unless you, and more especially Niccoluccio, are now of another opinion than you were a brief while ago, the lady rightly belongs to me, nor can any man lawfully reclaim her of me.”

None answered, for all were intent to hear what more he would say. But, while Niccoluccio, and some others that were there, wept for sympathy, Messer Gentile stood up, and took the little boy in his arms and the lady by the hand, and approached Niccoluccio, saying:

“Rise, my gossip: I do not, indeed, restore thee thy wife, whom thy kinsfolk and hers cast forth; but I am minded to give thee this lady, my gossip, with this her little boy, whom I know well to be thy son,

and whom I held at the font, and named Gentile: and I pray thee that she be not the less dear to thee for that she has tarried three months in my house; for I swear to thee by that God, who, peradventure, ordained that I should be enamoured of her, to the end that my love might be, as it has been, the occasion of her restoration to life, that never with her father, or her mother, or with thee, did she live more virtuously than with my mother in my house.” Which said, he turned to the lady, saying:

“Madam, I now release you from all promises made to me, and so deliver you to Niccoluccio.” Then, leaving the lady and the child in Niccoluccio’s embrace, he returned to his seat.

Thus to receive his wife and son was to Niccoluccio a delight great in the measure of its remoteness from his hope. Wherefore in the most honourable terms at his command he thanked the knight, whom all the rest, weeping for sympathy, greatly commended for what he had done, as did also all that heard thereof. The lady, welcomed home with wondrous cheer, was long a portent to the Bolognese, who gazed on her as on one raised from the dead. Messer Gentile lived ever after as the friend of Niccoluccio, and his and the lady’s kinsfolk.

Now what shall be your verdict, gracious ladies? A king’s largess, though it was of his sceptre and crown, an abbot’s reconciliation, at no cost to himself, of a malefactor with the Pope, or an old man’s submission of his throat to the knife of his enemy—will you adjudge that such acts as these are comparable to the deed of Messer Gentile? Who, though young, and burning with passion, and deeming himself justly entitled to that which the heedlessness of another had discarded, and he by good fortune had recovered, not only tempered his ardour with honour, but having that which with his whole soul he had long been bent on wresting from another, did with liberality restore it. Assuredly none of the feats aforesaid seem to me like unto this.