

NOVEL II

The priest of Varlungo lies with Monna Belcolore: he leaves with her his cloak by way of pledge, and receives from her a mortar. He returns the mortar, and demands of her the cloak that he had left in pledge, which the good lady returns him with a gibe.

Ladies and men alike commended Gulfardo for the check that he gave to the greed of the Milanese lady; but before they had done, the queen turned to Pamfilo, and with a smile bade him follow suit: wherefore thus Pamfilo began:

Fair my ladies, it occurs to me to tell you a short story, which reflects no credit on those by whom we are continually wronged without being able to retaliate, to wit, the priests, who have instituted a crusade against our wives, and deem that, when they have made conquest of one of them, they have done a work every whit as worthy of recompense by remission of sin and punishment as if they had brought the Soldan in chains to Avignon: in which respect 'tis not possible for the hapless laity to be even with them: howbeit they are as hot to make reprisals on the priests' mothers, sisters, mistresses, and daughters as the priests to attack their wives. Wherefore I am minded to give you, as I may do in few words, the history of a rustic amour, the conclusion whereof was not a little laughable, nor barren of moral, for you may also gather therefrom, that 'tis not always well to believe everything that a priest says.

I say then, that at Varlungo, a village hard by here, as all of you, my ladies, should wot either of your own knowledge or by report, there dwelt a worthy priest, and doughty of body in the service of the ladies: who, albeit he was none too quick at his book, had no lack of precious and blessed solecisms to edify his flock withal of a Sunday under the elm. And when the men were out of doors, he would visit their wives as never a priest had done before him, bringing them feast-day gowns and holy water, and now and again a bit of candle, and giving them his blessing. Now it so befell that among those of his fair parishioners whom he most affected the first place was at length taken by one Monna Belcolore, the wife of a husbandman that called himself Bentivegna del Mazzo. And in good sooth she was a winsome and lusty country lass, brown as a berry and buxom enough, and fitter than e'er another for his mill. Moreover she had not her match in playing the tabret and singing:

The borage is full sappy,⁽¹⁾ and in leading a brawl or a breakdown, no matter who might be next her, with a fair and dainty kerchief in her hand. Which spells so wrought upon Master Priest, that for love of her he grew distracted, and did nought all day long but loiter about the village on the chance of catching sight of her. And if of a Sunday morning he espied her in church, he strove might and main to acquit himself of his Kyrie and Sanctus in the style of a great singer, albeit his performance was liker to the braying of an ass: whereas, if he saw

her not, he scarce exerted himself at all. However, he managed with such discretion that neither Bentivegna del Mazzo nor any of the neighbours wist aught of his love. And hoping thereby to ingratiate himself with Monna Belcolore, he from time to time would send her presents, now a clove of fresh garlic, the best in all the country-side, from his own garden, which he tilled with his own hands, and anon a basket of beans or a bunch of chives or shallots; and, when he thought it might serve his turn, he would give her a sly glance, and follow it up with a little amorous mocking and mowing, which she, with rustic awkwardness, feigned not to understand, and ever maintained her reserve, so that Master Priest made no headway.

Now it so befell that one day, when the priest at high noon was aimlessly gadding about the village, he encountered Bentivegna del Mazzo at the tail of a well laden ass; and greeted him, asking him whither he was going. "I'faith, Sir," quoth Bentivegna, "for sure 'tis to town I go, having an affair or two to attend to there; and I am taking these things to Ser Buonaccorri da Ginestreto, to get him to stand by me in I wot not what matter, whereof the justice o' th' coram has by his provoker served me with a pertrumpery summons to appear before him." Whereupon:

"'Tis well, my son," quoth the priest, overjoyed, "my blessing go with thee: good luck to thee and a speedy return; and harkye, shouldst thou see Lapuccio or Naldino, do not forget to tell them to send me those thongs for my flails."

"It shall be done," quoth Bentivegna, and jogged on towards Florence, while the priest, thinking that now was his time to hie him to Belcolore and try his fortune, put his best leg forward, and stayed not till he was at the house, which entering, he said:

"God be gracious to us! Who is within?" Belcolore, who was up in the loft, made answer:

"Welcome, Sir; but what dost thou, gadding about in the heat?"

"Why, as I hope for God's blessing," quoth he, "I am just come to stay with thee a while, having met thy husband on his way to town." Whereupon down came Belcolore, took a seat, and began sifting cabbage-seed that her husband had lately threshed. By and by the priest began:

"So, Belcolore, wilt thou keep me ever a dying thus?" Whereat Belcolore tittered, and said:

"Why, what is't I do to you?"

"Truly, nothing at all," replied the priest: "but thou sufferest me not to do to thee that which I had lief, and which God commands."

"Now away with you!" returned Belcolore, "do priests do that sort of thing?"

"Indeed we do," quoth the priest, "and to better purpose than others: why not? I tell you our grinding is far better; and wouldst thou know why? 'tis because 'tis intermittent. And in truth 'twill be well worth thy while to keep thine own counsel, and let me do it."

"Worth my while!" ejaculated Belcolore. "How may that be? There is never a one of you but would overreach the very Devil."

"'Tis not for me to say," returned the priest; "say but what thou wouldst have: shall it be a pair of dainty shoes? Or wouldst thou prefer a fillet? Or perchance a gay riband? What's thy will?"

"Marry, no lack have I," quoth Belcolore, "of such things as these. But, if you wish me so well, why do me not a service? and I would then be at your command."

"Name but the service," returned the priest, "and gladly will I do it." Quoth then Belcolore:

"On Saturday I have to go to Florence to deliver some wool that I have spun, and to get my spinning-wheel put in order: lend me but five pounds—I know you have them—and I will redeem my perse petticoat from the pawnshop, and also the girdle that I wear on saints' days, and that I had when I was married—you see that without them I cannot go to church or anywhere else, and then I will do just as you wish thenceforth and forever." Whereupon:

"So God give me a good year," quoth he, "as I have not the money with me: but never fear that I will see that thou hast it before Saturday with all the pleasure in life."

"Ay, ay," rejoined Belcolore, "you all make great promises, but then you never keep them. Think you to serve me as you served Biliuzza, whom you left in the lurch at last? God's faith, you do not so. To think that she turned woman of the world just for that! If you have not the money with you, why, go and get it."

"Prithee," returned the priest, "send me not home just now. For, seest thou, 'tis the very nick of time with me, and the coast is clear, and perchance it might not be so on my return, and in short I know not when it would be likely to go so well as now." Where to she did but rejoin:

"Good; if you are minded to go, get you gone; if not, stay where you are." The priest, therefore, seeing that she was not disposed to give him what he wanted, as he was fain, to wit, on his own terms, but was bent upon having a quid pro quo, changed his tone; and:

"Lo, now," quoth he, "thou doubtst I will not bring thee the money; so to set thy mind at rest, I will leave thee this cloak—thou seest 'tis good sky-blue silk—in pledge." So raising her head and glancing at the cloak:

"And what may the cloak be worth?" quoth Belcolore. "Worth!" ejaculated the priest: "I would have thee know that 'tis all Douai, not to say

Trouai, make: nay, there are some of our folk here that say 'tis Quadrouai; and 'tis not a fortnight since I bought it of Lotto, the secondhand dealer, for seven good pounds, and then had it five good soldi under value, by what I hear from Buglietto, who, thou knowest, is an excellent judge of these articles."

"Oh! say you so?" exclaimed Belcolore. "So help me God, I should not have thought it; however, let me look at it." So Master Priest, being ready for action, doffed the cloak and handed it to her. And she, having put it in a safe place, said to him:

"Now, Sir, we will away to the hut; there is never a soul goes there;" and so they did. And there Master Priest, giving her many a mighty buss and straining her to his sacred person, solaced himself with her no little while.

Which done, he hied him away in his cassock, as if he were come from officiating at a wedding; but, when he was back in his holy quarters, he bethought him that not all the candles that he received by way of offering in the course of an entire year would amount to the half of five pounds, and saw that he had made a bad bargain, and repented him that he had left the cloak in pledge, and cast about how he might recover it without paying anything. And as he did not lack cunning, he hit upon an excellent expedient, by which he compassed his end. So on the morrow, being a saint's day, he sent a neighbour's lad to Monna Belcolore with a request that she would be so good as to lend him her stone mortar, for that Binguccio dal Poggio and Nuto Buglietti were to breakfast with him that morning, and he therefore wished to make a sauce. Belcolore having sent the mortar, the priest, about breakfast time, reckoning that Bentivegna del Mazzo and Belcolore would be at their meal, called his clerk, and said to him:

"Take the mortar back to Belcolore, and say:

'My master thanks you very kindly, and bids you return the cloak that the lad left with you in pledge.'" The clerk took the mortar to Belcolore's house, where, finding her at table with Bentivegna, he set the mortar down and delivered the priest's message. Where to Belcolore would fain have demurred; but Bentivegna gave her a threatening glance, saying:

"So, then, thou takest a pledge from Master Priest? By Christ, I vow, I have half a mind to give thee a great clout o' the chin. Go, give it back at once, a murrain on thee! And look to it that whatever he may have a mind to, were it our very ass, he be never denied." So, with a very bad grace, Belcolore got up, and went to the wardrobe, and took out the cloak, and gave it to the clerk, saying:

"Tell thy master from me:

Would to God he may never ply pestle in my mortar again, such honour has he done me for this turn!" So the clerk returned with the cloak, and delivered the message to Master Priest; who, laughing, made answer:

"Tell her, when thou next seest her, that, so she lend us not the mortar, I will not lend her the pestle: be it tit for tat."

Bentivegna made no account of his wife's words, deeming that 'twas but his chiding that had provoked them. But Belcolore was not a little displeas'd with Master Priest, and had never a word to say to him till the vintage; after which, what with the salutary fear in which she stood of the mouth of Lucifer the Great, to which he threatened to consign her, and the must and roast chestnuts that he sent her, she made it up with him, and many a jolly time they had together. And though she got not the five pounds from him, he put a new skin on her tabret, and fitted it with a little bell, wherewith she was satisfied.

i For this folk-song see *Cantilene e Ballate, Strambotti e Madrigali*, ed. Carducci (1871), p. 60. The fragment there printed maybe freely rendered as follows:

The borage is full sappy,
And clusters red we see, And my love would make
me happy;
So that maiden give to me.
Ill set I find this dance,
And better might it be: So, comrade mine, advance,
And, changing place with me, Stand thou thy love
beside.