

NOVEL III

Calandrino, Bruno and Buffalmacco go in quest of the heliotrope beside the Mugnone. Thinking to have found it, Calandrino gets him home laden with stones. His wife chides him: whereat he waxes wroth, beats her, and tells his comrades what they know better than he.

Ended Pamfilo's story, which moved the ladies to inextinguishable laughter, the queen bade Elisa follow suit: whereupon, laughing, she thus began:

I know not, debonair my ladies, whether with my little story, which is no less true than entertaining, I shall give you occasion to laugh as much as Pamfilo has done with his, but I will do my best.

In our city, where there has never been lack of odd humours and queer folk, there dwelt, no long time ago, a painter named Calandrino, a simple soul, of uncouth manners, that spent most of his time with two other painters, the one Bruno, the other Buffalmacco, by name, pleasant fellows enough, but not without their full share of sound and shrewd sense, and who kept with Calandrino for that they not seldom found his singular ways and his simplicity very diverting. There was also at the same time at Florence one Maso del Saggio, a fellow marvellously entertaining by his cleverness, dexterity and unfailing resource; who having heard somewhat touching Calandrino's simplicity, resolved to make fun of him by playing him a trick, and inducing him to believe some prodigy. And happening one day to come upon Calandrino in the church of San Giovanni, where he sate intently regarding the paintings and intaglios of the tabernacle above the altar, which had then but lately been set there, he deemed time and place convenient for the execution of his design; which he accordingly imparted to one of his comrades: whereupon the two men drew nigh the place where Calandrino sate alone, and feigning not to see him fell a talking of the virtues of divers stones, of which Maso spoke as aptly and pertinently as if he had been a great and learned lapidary. Calandrino heard what passed between them, and witting that 'twas no secret, after a while got up, and joined them, to Maso's no small delight. He therefore continued his discourse, and being asked by Calandrino, where these stones of such rare virtues were to be found, made answer:

"Chiefly in Berlinzone, in the land of the Basques. The district is called Bengodi, and there they bind the vines with sausages, and a denier will buy a goose and a gosling into the bargain; and on a mountain, all of grated Parmesan cheese, dwell folk that do nought else but make macaroni and raviuoli,⁽¹⁾ and boil them in capon's broth, and then throw them down to be scrambled for; and hard by flows a rivulet of Vernaccia, the best that ever was drunk, and never a drop of water therein."

"Ah! 'tis a sweet country!" quoth Calandrino; "but tell me, what becomes of the capons that they boil?"

"They are all eaten by the Basques," replied Maso. Then:

"Wast thou ever there?" quoth Calandrino. Whereupon:

"Was I ever there, sayst thou?" replied Maso. "Why, if I have been there once, I have been there a thousand times."

"And how many miles is't from here?" quoth Calandrino. "Oh!" returned Maso, "more than thou couldst number in a night without slumber."

"Farther off, then, than the Abruzzi?" said Calandrino. "Why, yes, 'tis a bit farther," replied Maso.

Now Calandrino, like the simple soul that he was, marking the composed and grave countenance with which Maso spoke, could not have believed him more thoroughly, if he had uttered the most patent truth, and thus taking his words for gospel:

"'Tis a trifle too far for my purse," quoth he; "were it nigher, I warrant thee, I would go with thee thither one while, just to see the macaroni come tumbling down, and take my fill thereof. But tell me, so good luck befall thee, are none of these stones, that have these rare virtues, to be found in these regions?"

"Ay," replied Maso, "two sorts of stone are found there, both of virtues extraordinary. The one sort are the sandstones of Settignano and Montisci, which being made into millstones, by virtue thereof flour is made; wherefore 'tis a common saying in those countries that blessings come from God and millstones from Montisci: but, for that these sandstones are in great plenty, they are held cheap by us, just as by them are emeralds, whereof they have mountains, bigger than Monte Morello, that shine at midnight, a God's name! And know this, that whoso should make a goodly pair of millstones, and connect them with a ring before ever a hole was drilled in them, and take them to the Soldan, should get all he would have thereby. The other sort of stone is the heliotrope, as we lapidaries call it, a stone of very great virtue, inasmuch as whoso carries it on his person is seen, so long as he keep it, by never another soul, where he is not."

"These be virtues great indeed," quoth Calandrino; "but where is this second stone to be found?" Whereunto Maso made answer that there were usually some to be found in the Mugnone. "And what are its size and colour?" quoth Calandrino. "The size varies," replied Maso, "for some are bigger and some smaller than others; but all are of the same colour, being nearly black." All

these matters duly marked and fixed in his memory, Calandrino made as if he had other things to attend to, and took his leave of Maso with the intention of going in quest of the stone, but not until he had let his especial friends, Bruno and Buffalmacco, know of his project. So, that no time might be lost, but, postponing everything else, they might begin the quest at once, he set about looking for them, and spent the whole morning in the search. At length, when 'twas already past none, he called to mind that they would be at work in the Faentine women's convent, and though 'twas excessively hot, he let nothing stand in his way, but at a pace that was more like a run than a walk, hied him thither; and so soon as he had made them ware of his presence, thus he spoke:

"Comrades, so you are but minded to hearken to me, 'tis in our power to become the richest men in Florence; for I am informed by one that may be trusted that there is a kind of stone in the Mugnone which renders whoso carries it invisible to every other soul in the world. Wherefore, methinks, we were wise to let none have the start of us, but go search for this stone without any delay. We shall find it without a doubt, for I know what 'tis like, and when we have found it, we have but to put it in the purse, and get us to the moneychangers, whose counters, as you know, are always laden with groats and florins, and help ourselves to as many as we have a mind to. No one will see us, and so, hey presto! we shall be rich folk in the twinkling of an eye, and have no more need to go besmearing the walls all day long like so many snails." Whereat Bruno and Buffalmacco began only to laugh, and exchanging glances, made as if they marvelled exceedingly, and expressed approval of Calandrino's project. Then Buffalmacco asked, what might be the name of the stone. Calandrino, like the numskull that he was, had already forgotten the name: so he made answer:

"Why need we concern ourselves with the name, since we know the stone's virtue? methinks, we were best to go look for it, and waste no more time."

"Well, well," said Bruno, "but what are the size and shape of the stone?"

"They are of all sizes and shapes," said Calandrino, "but they are all pretty nearly black; wherefore, methinks, we were best to collect all the black stones that we see until we hit upon it: and so, let us be off, and lose no more time."

"Nay, but," said Bruno, "wait a bit." And turning to Buffalmacco:

"Methinks," quoth he, "that Calandrino says well: but I doubt this is not the time for such work, seeing that the sun is high, and his rays so flood the Mugnone as to dry all the stones; insomuch that stones will now shew as white that in the morning, before the sun had dried them, would shew as black: besides which, to-day being a working-day, there will be for one cause or another folk not a few about the Mugnone, who, seeing us, might guess what we were come for, and peradventure do the like themselves; whereby it might well be that they

found the stone, and we might miss the trot by trying after the amble. Wherefore, so you agree, methinks we were best to go about it in the morning, when we shall be better able to distinguish the black stones from the white, and on a holiday, when there will be none to see us."

Buffalmacco's advice being approved by Bruno, Calandrino chimed in; and so 'twas arranged that they should all three go in quest of the stone on the following Sunday. So Calandrino, having besought his companions above all things to let never a soul in the world hear aught of the matter, for that it had been imparted to him in strict confidence, and having told them what he had heard touching the land of Bengodi, the truth of which he affirmed with oaths, took leave of them; and they concerted their plan, while Calandrino impatiently expected the Sunday morning. Whereon, about dawn, he arose, and called them; and forth they issued by the Porta a San Gallo, and hied them to the Mugnone, and following its course, began their quest of the stone, Calandrino, as was natural, leading the way, and jumping lightly from rock to rock, and wherever he espied a black stone, stooping down, picking it up and putting it in the fold of his tunic, while his comrades followed, picking up a stone here and a stone there. Thus it was that Calandrino had not gone far, before, finding that there was no more room in his tunic, he lifted the skirts of his gown, which was not cut after the fashion of Hainault, and gathering them under his leathern girdle and making them fast on every side, thus furnished himself with a fresh and capacious lap, which, however, taking no long time to fill, he made another lap out of his cloak, which in like manner he soon filled with stones. Wherefore, Bruno and Buffalmacco seeing that Calandrino was well laden, and that 'twas nigh upon breakfast-time, and the moment for action come:

"Where is Calandrino?" quoth Bruno to Buffalmacco. Whereat Buffalmacco, who had Calandrino full in view, having first turned about and looked here, there and everywhere, made answer:

"That wot not I; but not so long ago he was just in front of us."

"Not so long ago, forsooth," returned Bruno; "'tis my firm belief that at this very moment he is at breakfast at home, having left to us this wild-goose chase of black stones in the Mugnone."

"Marry," quoth Buffalmacco, "he did but serve us right so to trick us and leave, seeing that we were so silly as to believe him. Why, who could have thought that any but we would have been so foolish as to believe that a stone of such rare virtue was to be found in the Mugnone?" Calandrino, hearing their colloquy, forthwith imagined that he had the stone in his hand, and by its virtue, though present, was invisible to them; and overjoyed by such good fortune, would not say a word to undeceive them, but determined to hie him home, and accordingly faced about, and put himself in motion.

Whereupon:

"Ay!" quoth Buffalmacco to Bruno, "what are we about that we go not back too?"

"Go we then," said Bruno; "but by God I swear that Calandrino shall never play me another such trick; and as to this, were I nigh him, as I have been all the morning, I would teach him to remember it for a month or so, such a reminder would I give him in the heel with this stone." And even as he spoke he threw back his arm, and launched the stone against Calandrino's heel. Galled by the blow, Calandrino gave a great hop and a slight gasp, but said nothing, and halted not. Then, picking out one of the stones that he had collected:

"Bruno," quoth Buffalmacco, "see what a goodly stone I have here, would it might but catch Calandrino in the back;" and forthwith he discharged it with main force upon the said back. And in short, suiting action to word, now in this way, now in that, they stoned him all the way up the Mugnone as far as the Porta a San Gallo. There they threw away the stones they had picked up, and tarried a while with the customs' officers, who, being primed by them, had let Calandrino pass unchallenged, while their laughter knew no bounds.

So Calandrino, halting nowhere, betook him to his house, which was hard by the corner of the Macina. And so well did Fortune prosper the trick, that all the way by the stream and across the city there was never a soul that said a word to Calandrino, and indeed he encountered but few, for most folk were at breakfast. But no sooner was Calandrino thus gotten home with his stones, than it so happened that his good lady, Monna Tessa, shewed her fair face at the stair's head, and catching sight of him, and being somewhat annoyed by his long delay, chid him, saying:

"What the Devil brings thee here so late? Must breakfast wait thee until all other folk have had it?" Calandrino caught the words, and angered and mortified to find that he was not invisible, broke out with:

"Alas! curst woman! so 'twas thou! Thou hast undone me: but, God's faith, I will pay thee out." Whereupon he was upstairs in a trice, and having discharged his great load of stones in a parlour, rushed with fell intent upon his wife, and laid hold of her by the hair, and threw her down at his feet, and beat and kicked her in every part of her person with all the force he had in his arms and legs, insomuch that he left never a hair of her head or bone of her body unscathed, and 'twas all in vain that she laid her palms together and crossed her fingers and cried for mercy.

Now Buffalmacco and Bruno, after making merry a while with the warders of the gate, had set off again at a leisurely pace, keeping some distance behind Calandrino. Arrived at his door, they heard the noise of the sound thrashing that he was giving his wife; and making as if they were but that very instant come upon the scene, they called him. Calandrino, flushed, all of a sweat, and out of breath, shewed himself at the window, and bade them come up. They, putting on a somewhat angry air, did so; and espied Calandrino sitting in the

parlour, amid the stones which lay all about, untrussed, and puffing with the air of a man spent with exertion, while his lady lay in one of the corners, weeping bitterly, her hair all dishevelled, her clothes torn to shreds, and her face livid, bruised and battered. So after surveying the room a while:

"What means this, Calandrino?" quoth they. "Art thou minded to build thee a wall, that we see so many stones about?" And then, as they received no answer, they continued:

"And how's this? How comes Monna Tessa in this plight? 'twould seem thou hast given her a beating! What unheard-of doings are these?" What with the weight of the stones that he had carried, and the fury with which he had beaten his wife, and the mortification that he felt at the miscarriage of his enterprise, Calandrino was too spent to utter a word by way of reply. Wherefore in a menacing tone Buffalmacco began again:

"However out of sorts thou mayst have been, Calandrino, thou shouldst not have played us so scurvy a trick as thou hast. To take us with thee to the Mugnone in quest of this stone of rare virtue, and then, without so much as saying either God-speed or Devil-speed, to be off, and leave us there like a couple of gowks! We take it not a little unkindly: and rest assured that thou shalt never so fool us again." Whereto with an effort Calandrino replied:

"Comrades, be not wroth with me: 'tis not as you think. I, luckless wight! found the stone: listen, and you will no longer doubt that I say sooth. When you began saying one to the other:

"Where is Calandrino?" I was within ten paces of you, and marking that you came by without seeing me, I went before, and so, keeping ever a little ahead of you, I came hither." And then he told them the whole story of what they had said and done from beginning to end, and shewed them his back and heel, how they had been mauled by the stones; after which:

"And I tell you," he went on, "that, laden though I was with all these stones, that you see here, never a word was said to me by the warders of the gate as I passed in, though you know how vexatious and grievous these warders are wont to make themselves in their determination to see everything: and moreover I met by the way several of my gossips and friends that are ever wont to greet me, and ask me to drink, and never a word said any of them to me, no, nor half a word either; but they passed me by as men that saw me not. But at last, being come home, I was met and seen by this devil of a woman, curses upon her, forasmuch as all things, as you know, lose their virtue in the presence of a woman; whereby I from being the most lucky am become the most luckless man in Florence: and therefore I thrashed her as long as I could stir a hand, nor know I wherefore I forbear to sluice her veins for her, cursed be the hour that first I saw her, cursed be the hour that I brought her into the house!" And so, kindling with fresh wrath, he was about to start up and give her another

thrashing; when Buffalmacco and Bruno, who had listened to his story with an air of great surprise, and affirmed its truth again and again, while they all but burst with suppressed laughter, seeing him now frantic to renew his assault upon his wife, got up and withstood and held him back, averring that the lady was in no wise to blame for what had happened, but only he, who, witting that things lost their virtue in the presence of women, had not bidden her keep aloof from him that day; which precaution God had not suffered him to take, either because the luck was not to be his, or because he was minded to cheat his comrades, to whom he should have shewn the stone as soon as he found it. And so, with many words they hardly prevailed upon him to forgive his injured wife, and leaving him to rue the ill-luck that had filled his house with stones, went their way.

1 A sort of rissole.