

NOVEL X

Dom Gianni at the instance of his gossip Pietro uses an enchantment to transform Pietro's wife into a mare; but, when he comes to attach the tail, Gossip Pietro, by saying that he will have none of the tail, makes the enchantment of no effect.

The queen's story evoked some murmurs from the ladies and some laughter from the young men; however, when they were silent, Dioneo thus began:

Dainty my ladies, a black crow among a flock of white doves enhances their beauty more than would a white swan; and so, when many sages are met together, their ripe wisdom not only shews the brighter and goodlier for the presence of one that is not so wise, but may even derive pleasure and diversion therefrom. Wherefore as you, my ladies, are one and all most discreet and judicious, I, who know myself to be somewhat scant of sense, should, for that by my demerit I make your merit shew the more glorious, be more dear to you, than if by my greater merit I eclipsed yours, and by consequence should have more ample license to reveal myself to you as I am; and therefore have more patient sufferance on your part than would be due to me, were I more discreet, in the relation of the tale which I am about to tell you. 'twill be, then, a story none too long, wherefrom you may gather with what exactitude it behoves folk to observe the injunctions of those that for any purpose use an enchantment, and how slight an error committed therein make bring to nought all the work of the enchanter.

A year or so ago there was at Barletta a priest named Dom Gianni di Barolo, who, to eke out the scanty pittance his church afforded him, set a pack-saddle upon his mare, and took to going the round of the fairs of Apulia, buying and selling merchandise. And so it befell that he clapped up a close acquaintance with one Pietro da Tresanti, who plied the same trade as he, albeit instead of a mare he had but an ass; whom in token of friendship and good-fellowship Dom Gianni after the Apulian fashion called ever Gossip Pietro, and had him to his house and there lodged and honourably entreated him as often as he came to Barletta. Gossip Pietro on his part, albeit he was very poor and had but a little cot at Tresanti, that scarce sufficed for himself, his fair, young wife, and their ass, nevertheless, whenever Dom Gianni arrived at Tresanti, made him welcome, and did him the honours of his house as best he might, in requital of the hospitality which he received at Barletta. However, as Gossip Pietro had but one little bed, in which he slept with his fair wife, 'twas not in his power to lodge Dom Gianni as comfortably as he would have liked; but the priest's mare being quartered beside the ass in a little stable, the priest himself must needs lie beside her on the straw. Many a time when the priest came, the wife, knowing how honourably he entreated her husband at Barletta, would fain have gone to sleep with a neighbour, one Zita Carapresa di Giudice Leo, that

the priest might share the bed with her husband, and many a time had she told the priest so howbeit he would never agree to it, and on one occasion:

"Gossip Gemmata," quoth he, "trouble not thyself about me; I am well lodged; for, when I am so minded, I turn the mare into a fine lass and dally with her, and then, when I would, I turn her back into a mare; wherefore I could ill brook to part from her." The young woman, wondering but believing, told her husband what the priest had said, adding:

"If he is even such a friend as thou sayst, why dost thou not get him to teach thee the enchantment, so that thou mayst turn me into a mare, and have both ass and mare for thine occasions? We should then make twice as much gain as we do, and thou couldst turn me back into a woman when we came home at night."

Gossip Pietro, whose wit was somewhat blunt, believed that 'twas as she said, approved her counsel, and began adjuring Dom Gianni, as persuasively as he might, to teach him the incantation. Dom Gianni did his best to wean him of his folly; but as all was in vain:

"Lo, now," quoth he, "as you are both bent on it, we will be up, as is our wont, before the sun tomorrow morning, and I will shew you how 'tis done. The truth is that 'tis in the attachment of the tail that the great difficulty lies, as thou wilt see." Scarce a wink of sleep had either Gossip Pietro or Gossip Gemmata that night, so great was their anxiety; and towards daybreak up they got, and called Dom Gianni; who, being risen, came in his shirt into Gossip Pietro's little bedroom, and:

"I know not," quoth he, "that there is another soul in the world for whom I would do this, save you, my gossips; however, as you will have it so, I will do it, but it behoves you to do exactly as I bid you, if you would have the enchantment work." They promised obedience, and Dom Gianni thereupon took a light, which he handed to Gossip Pietro, saying:

"Let nought that I shall do or say escape thee; and have a care, so thou wouldst not ruin all, to say never a word, whatever thou mayst see or hear; and pray God that the tail may be securely attached." So Gossip Pietro took the light, and again promised obedience; Dom Gianni caused Gossip Gemmata to strip herself stark naked, and stand on all fours like a mare, at the same time strictly charging her that, whatever might happen, she must utter no word. Then, touching her head and face:

“Be this a fine head of a mare,” quoth he; in like manner touching her hair, he said:

“Be this a fine mane of a mare;” touching her arms:

“Be these fine legs and fine hooves of a mare;” then, as he touched her breast and felt its firm roundness, and there awoke and arose one that was not called:

“And be this a fine breast of a mare,” quoth he; and in like manner he dealt with her back, belly, croup, thighs, and legs. Last of all, the work being complete save for the tail, he lifted his shirt and took in his hand the tool with which he was used to plant men, and forthwith thrust it into the furrow made for it, saying:

“And be this a fine tail of a mare.” Whereat Gossip Pietro, who had followed everything very heedfully to that point, disapproving that last particular, exclaimed:

“No! Dom Gianni, I’ll have no tail, I’ll have no tail.” The essential juice, by which all plants are propagated, was already discharged, when Dom Gianni withdrew the tool, saying:

“Alas! Gossip Pietro, what hast thou done? Did I not tell thee to say never a word, no matter what

thou mightst see? The mare was all but made; but by speaking thou hast spoiled all; and ’tis not possible to repeat the enchantment.”

“Well and good,” replied Gossip Pietro, “I would have none of that tail. Why saidst thou not to me:

‘Make it thou? And besides, thou wast attaching it too low.’”

“’Twas because,” returned Dom Gianni, “thou wouldst not have known, on the first essay, how to attach it so well as I.” Whereupon the young woman stood up, and in all good faith said to her husband:

“Fool that thou art, wherefore hast thou brought to nought what had been for the good of us both? When didst thou ever see mare without a tail? So help me God, poor as thou art, thou deservest to be poorer still.” So, after Gossip Pietro’s ill-timed speech, there being no way left of turning the young woman into a mare, downcast and melancholy she resumed her clothes; and Gossip Pietro plied his old trade with his ass, and went with Dom Gianni to the fair of Bitonto, and never asked him so to serve him again.