

Juliet of Narbona

from **The Decameron** by Giovanni Boccaccio

Translation Attributed to John Florio 1620

Ninth Novell on the 3rd Day

Juliet of Narbona, cured the King of France of a dangerous Fistula, in recompence whereof, she requested to enjoy as her husband in marriage, Bertrand Count of Roussillon. Hee having married her against his will, as utterly despising her, went to Florence, where hee made love to a young Gentlewoman. Juliet, by a queint and cunning policy, compassed the meanes (insted of his chosen new friend) to lye with her owne husband, by whom shee conceived, and had two Sonnes; which being afterward made knowne unto Count Bertrand, he accepted her into his favour againe, and loved her as his loyall and honourable wife.

... the tale told by Pampinea ...

There lived sometime in the kingdome of France, a Gentleman named Isnarde, being the Count of Roussillon: who because hee was continually weake, crazie, and sickly, kept a Physitian daily in his house, who was called Master Gerard of Narbona. Count Isnarde had one onely Sonne, very young in yeares, yet of towardly hope, faire, comely, and of pleasing person, named Bertrand; with whom, many other children of his age, had their education: and among them, a daughter of the fore-named Physitian, called Juliet; who, even in these tender yeares, fixed her affection upon young Bertrand, with such an earnest and intimate resolution, as was most admirable in so yong a Maiden, and more then many times is noted in yeares of greater discretion. Old Count Isnarde dying, young Bertrand fell as a Ward to the King, and being sent to Paris, remained there under his royall custodie and protection, to no little discomfort of young Juliet, who became greevously afflicted in minde, because she had lost the company of Bertrand.

Within some few yeares after, the Physitian her Father also dyed, and then her desires grew wholly addicted, to visite Paris her selfe in person, onely because she would see the young Count, awaiting but time and opportunitie, to fit her stolne journey thither. But her kindred and friends, to whose care and trust she was committed, in regard of her rich dowrie, and being left as a fatherlesse Orphane: were so circumspect of her walks and daily behaviour, as she could not compass any meane; of escaping. Her yeares made her now almost fit for marriage, which so much more encreased her love to the Count, making refusall of many woorthy husbands, and laboured by the motions of her friends and kindred, yet all denyed, they not knowing any reason for her refusalles. By this time the Count was become a gallant goodly Gentleman, and able to make election of his wife, whereby her affections were the more violently enflamed, as fearing least some other should be preferred before her, and so her hopes be utterly disappointed.

It was noysed abroad by common report, that the King of France was in a very dangerous condition, by reason of a strange swelling on his stomacke, which failing of apt and

convenient curing, became a Fistula, afflicting him daily with extraordinary paine and anguish, no Chirurgion or Physitian being found, that could minister any hope of healing, but rather encreased the greefe, and drove it to more vehement extremitie, compelling the King, as despairing utterly of all helpe, to give over any further counsell or advice. Heereof faire Juliet was wondrously joyfull, as hoping that this accident would prove the meanes, not onely of her journey to Paris, but if the disease were no more then she imagined; she could easily cure it, and thereby compasse Count Bertrand to be her husband. Hereupon, quickning up her wits, with remembrance of those rules of Art, which (by long practise and experience) she had learned of her skilfull Father, she compounded certaine hearbes together, such as she knew fitting for that kinde of infirmity, and having reduced her compound into powder, away she rode forthwith to Paris.

Being there arrived, all other serious matters set aside, first shee must needs have a sight of Count Bertrand, as being the onely Saint that caused her pilgrimage. Next she made meanes for her accesse to the King, humbly entreating his Majesty, to vouchsafe her the sight of his Fistula. When the King saw her, her modest lookes did plainly deliver, that she was a faire, comely, and discreete young Gentlewoman; wherefore, he would no longer hide it, but layed it open to her view. When shee had seene and felt it, presently she put the King in comfort; affirming, that she knew her selfe able to cure his Fistula, saying: Sir, if your Highnesse will referre the matter to me, without any perill of life, or any the least paine to your person, I hope (by the helpe of heaven) to make you whole and sound within eight dayes space. The King hearing her words, beganne merrily to smile at her, saying: How is it possible for thee, being a yong Maiden, to do that which the best Physitians in Europe, are not able to performe? I commend thy kindnesse, and will not remaine unthankfull for thy forward willingnesse: but I am fully determind, to use no more counsell, or to make any further triall of Physicke or Chirurgery. Whereto faire Juliet thus replyed: Great King, let not my skill and experience be despised, because I am young, and a Maiden; for my profession is not Physicke, neither do I undertake the ministering thereof, as depending on mine owne knowledge; but by the gracious assistance of heaven, and some rules of skilfull observation, which I learned of reverend Gerard of Narbona who was my worthy Father, and a Physitian of no meane fame, all the while he lived.

At the hearing of these words, the King began somewhat to admire at her gracious carriage, and saide within himselfe. What know I, whether this Virgin is sent to me by the direction of heaven, or no? Why should I disdain to make prooffe of her skill? Her promise is, to cure me in a small times compasse, and without any paine or affliction to me: she shall not come so farre, to returne againe with the losse of her labour, I am resolved to try her cunning, and thereon saide. Faire Virgin, if you cause me to breake my settled determination, and faile of curing me, what can you expect to follow thereon? Whatsoever great King (quoth she) shall please you. Let me be strongly guarded, yet not hindered, when I am to prosecute the businesse: and then if I do not perfectly heale you within eight daies, let a good fire be made, and therein consume my body unto ashes. But if I accomplish the cure, and set your Highnesse free from all further greivance, what recompence then shall remaine to me?

Much did the King commend the confident perswasion which she had of her owne power, and presently replyed. Faire beauty (quoth he) in regard that thou art a Maide and unmarried, if thou keepe promise, and I finde my selfe to be fully cured: I will match thee with some such Gentleman in marriage, as shall be of honourable and worthy reputation,

with a sufficient dowry beside. My gracious Sovereigne saide she, willing am I, and most heirtily thankfull withall, that your Highnesse shall bestow me in marriage: but I desire then, to have such a husband, as I shall desire or demand by your gracious favour, without presuming to crave any of your Sonnes, Kindred, or Alliance, or appertaining unto your Royall blood. Whereto the King gladly granted. Young Juliet began to minister her Physicke, and within fewer dayes then her limited time, the King was sound and perfectly cured; which when he perceived, he saide unto her. Trust me vertuous Mayde, most woorthily hast thou wonne a Husband, name him, and thou shalt have him. Royall King (quoth she) then have I won the Count Bertrand of Roussillion, whom I have most entirely loved from mine Infancy, and cannot (in my soule) affect any other. Very loath was the King to grant her the young Count, but in regard of his solemne passed promise, and his royal word engaged, which he would not by any meanes breake; he commanded, that the Count should be sent for, and spake thus to him. Noble Count, it is not unknowne to us, that you are a Gentleman of great honour, and it is our Royall pleasure, to discharge your wardship, that you may repaire home to your owne House, there to settle your affaires in such order, as you may be the readier to enjoy a Wife, which we intend to bestowe upon you. The Count returned his Highnesse most humble thankes, desiring to know of whence, and what she was? It is this Gentlewoman, answered the King, who (by the helpe of Heaven) hath beene the meanes to save my life. Well did the Count know her, as having very often before seene her; and although she was very faire and amiable, yet in regard of her meane birth, which he held as a disparagement to his Nobility in blood; he made a scorne of her, and spake thus to the King. Would your Highnesse give me a Quacksalver to my Wife, one that deales in drugges and Physicarie? I hope I am able to bestowe my selfe much better then so. Why? quoth the King, wouldst thou have us breake our faith; which for the recovery of our health, we have given to this vertuous virgin, and she will have no other reward, but onely Count Bertrand to be her husband? Sir, replied the Count, you may dispossesse me of all that is mine, because I am your Ward and Subject, any where else you may bestow me: but pardon me to tell you, that this marriage cannot be made with any liking or allowance of mine, neither will I ever give consent thereto.

Sir, saide the King, it is our will that it shall be so, vertuous she is, faire and wise; she loveth thee most affectionately, and with her mayest thou lead a more Noble life, then with the greatest Lady in our Kingdome. Silent, and discontented stode the Count, but the King commanded preparation for the marriage; and when the appointed time was come, the Count (albeit against his will) received his wife at the Kings hand; she loving him deerly as her owne life. When all was done, the Count requested of the King, that what else remained for further solemnization of the marriage, it might be performed in his owne Country, reserving to himselfe what else he intended. Being mounted on horseback, and humbly taking their leave of the King, the Count would not ride home to his owne dwelling, but into Tuscany, where he heard of a warre between the Florentines and the Senesi, purposing to take part with the Florentines, to whom he was willingly and honourably welcommed, being created Captaine of a worthy Company, and continuing there a long while in service.

The poore forsaken new married Countesse, could scarcely be pleased with such dishonourable unkindnesse, yet governing her impatience with no meane discretion, and hoping by her vertuous carriage, to compasse the meanes of his recall: home she rode to Roussillion, where all the people received her very lovingly. Now, by reason of the Counts so

long absence, all things were there farre out of order; mutinies, quarrels, and civill dissentions, having procured many dissolute irruptions, to the expence of much blood in many places. But she, like a jolly stirring Lady, very wise and provident in such disturbances, reduced all occasions to such civility againe, that the people admired her rare behaviour, and condemned the Count for his unkindnesse towards her.

After that the whole Country of Roussillion (by the policy and wisdom of this worthy Lady) was fully reestablished in their ancient liberties; she made choise of two discreet knights, whom she sent to the Count her husband, to let him understand, that if in displeasure to her, hee was thus become a stranger to his owne Country: upon the returne of his answer, to give him contentment, she would depart thence, and by no meanes disturbe him. Roughly and churlishly he replied; Let her do as she list, for I have no determination to dwell with her, or neere where she is. Tell her from me, when she shall have this Ring, which you behold heere on my finger, and a Sonne in her armes begotten by me; then will I come live with her, and be her love. The Ring he made most precious and deere account of, and never tooke it off from his finger, in regard of an especiall vertue and property, which he well knew to be remaining in it. And these two Knights, hearing the impossibility of these two strict conditions, with no other favour else to be derived from him; sorrowfully returned backe to their Lady, and acquainted her with this unkinde answer, as also his unalterable determination, which well you may conceive, must needs be very unwelcome to her.

After she had an indifferent while considered with her selfe, her resolution became so indauntable; that she would adventure to practise such meanes, whereby to compasse those two apparant impossibilities, and so to enjoy the love of her husband. Having absolutely concluded what was to be done, she assembled all the cheefest men of the country, revealing unto them (in mournfull manner) what an attempt she had made already, in hope of recovering her husbands favour, and what a rude answer was thereon returned. In the end, she told them, that it did not sute with her unworthinesse, to make the Count live as an exile from his owne inheritance, upon no other inducement, but onely in regard of her: wherefore, she had determined betweene heaven and her soule, to spend the remainder of her dayes in Pilgrimages and prayers, for preservation of the Counts soule and her owne; earnestly desiring them, to undertake the charge and government of the Country, and signifying unto the Count, how she had forsaken his house, and purposed to wander so farre thence, that never would she visit Roussillion any more. In the deliverie of these words, the Lords and Gentlemen wept and sighed extraordinarily, using many earnest imprecations to alter this resolve in her, but all was in vaine.

Having taken her sad and sorrowfull farewell of them all, accompanied onely with her Maide, and one of her Kinsmen, away she went, attired in a Pilgrimes habit, yet well furnished with money and precious jewels, to avoyde all wants which might: befall her in travaile; not acquainting any one whether she went. In no place stayed she, untill she was arrived at Florence, where happening into a poore Widdowes house, like a poore Pilgrime, she seemed well contented therewith. And desiring to heare some tydings of the Count, the next day shee saw him passe by the house on horse-backe, with his company. Now, albeit shee knew him well enough, yet shee demanded of the good old Widdow, what Gentleman he was? She made answer, that he was a stranger there, yet a Nobleman, called Count Bertrand of Roussillion, a very courteous Knight, beloved and much respected in the City.

Moreover, that he was farre in love with a neighbour of hers, a young Gentlewoman, but very poore and meane in substance, yet of honest life, vertuous, and never taxed with any evill report: onely her poverty was the maine imbarment of her marriage, dwelling in house with her mother, who was a wise, honest, and worthy Lady.

The Countesse having well observed her words, and considered thereon from point to point; debating soberly with her owne thoughts, in such a doubtfull case what was best to be done. When she had understood which was the house, the ancient Ladies name, and likewise her daughters, to whom her husband was now so affectionately devoted; she made choise of a fit and convenient time, when (in her Pilgrimes habit) secretly she went to the house. There she found the mother and daughter in poore condition, and with as poore a family: whom after she had ceremoniously saluted, she told the old Lady, that she requested but a little conference with her. The Lady arose, and giving her kinde entertainment, they went together into a withdrawing Chamber, where being both set downe, the Countesse began in this manner.

Madame, in my poore opinion, you are not free from the frownes of Fortune, no more then I my selfe am: but if you were so well pleased, there is no one that can comfort both our calamities in such manner, as you are able to do. And beleeeve me answered the Lady, there is nothing in the world that can be so welcome to me, as honest comfort. The Countesse proceeding on in her former speeches said: I have now need (good Madame) both of your trust and fidelity, whereon if I should rely, and you faile me, it will be your owne undoing as well as mine. Speake then boldly, replied the old Lady, and remaine constantly assured, that you shall no way be deceived by me. Hereupon, the Countesse declared the whole course of her love, from the very originall to the instant, revealing also what she was, and the occasion of her comming thither, relating every thing so perfectly, that the Lady verily beleevd her, by some reports which she had formerly heard, and which mooved her the more to compassion. Now, when all circumstances were at full discovered, thus spake the Countesse.

Among my other miseries and misfortunes, which hath halfe broken my heart in the meere repetition, beside the sad and afflicting sufferance; two things there are, which if I cannot compasse to have, all hope is quite frustrate for ever, of gaining the grace of my Lord and Husband. Yet these two things may I obtaine by your helpe, if all be true which I have heard, and you can therein best resolve mee. Since my comming to this City, it hath credibly bene told me, that the Count my husband, is deeply in love with your daughter. If the Count (quoth the Ladie) love my daughter, and have a wife of his owne, he must thinke, and so shall surely finde it, that his greatnesse is no priviledge for him, whereby to worke dishonour upon her poverty. But indeede, some apparances there are, and such a matter as you speake of, may be so presumed; yet so farre from a very thought of entertaining in her or me; as whatsoever I am able to doe, to yeeld you any comfort and content, you shall find me therein both willing and ready: for I prize my daughters spotlesse poverty at as high a rate, as he can doe the pride of his honour.

Madame, quoth the Countesse, most heartily I thanke you. But before I presume any further on your kindnesse, let me first tell you, what faithfully I intend to do for you, if I can bring my purpose to effect. I see that your daughter is beautifull, and of sufficient yeeres for marriage; and is debarred thereof (as I have heard) onely by lack of a competent dowry. Wherefore Madame, in recompence of the favour I expect from you, I will enrich her with so

much ready money as you shall thinke sufficient to match her in the degree of honour. Poverty made the poore Lady, very well to like of such a bountifull offer, and having a noble heart shee said: Great Countesse say, wherein am I able to do you any service, as can deserve such a gracious offer? If the action be honest; without blame or scandall to my poore, yet undetected reputation, gladly I will do it; and it being accomplished, let the requitall rest in your owne noble nature.

Observe me then Madame, replied the Countesse. It is most convenient for my purpose, that by some trusty and faithfull messenger, you should advertise the Count my husband, that your daughter is, and shall be at his command: but that she may remaine absolutely assured, that his love is constant to her, and above all other: shee must entreat him, to send her (as a testimony thereof) the Ring which he weareth upon his little finger, albeit shee hath heard, that he loveth it deerly. If he send the Ring, you shall give it me, and afterward send him word, that your daughter is ready to accomplish his pleasure; but, for the more safety and secrecie, he must repaire hither to your house, where I being in bed instead of your daughter, faire Fortune may so favour mee, that (unkowne to him) I may conceive with childe. Upon which good successe, when time shall serve, having the Ring on my finger, and a childe in my armes begotten by him, his love and liking may be recovered, and (by your meanes) I continue with my Husband, as every vertuous Wife ought to doe.

The good old Lady imagined, that this was a matter somewhat difficult, and might lay a blamefull imputation on her daughter. Neverthelesse, considering, what an honest office it was in her, to bee the meanes, whereby so worthy a Countesse should recover an unkinde husband, led altogether by lust, and not a jot of cordiall love; she knew the intent to be honest, the Countesse vertuous, and her promise religious, and therefore undertooke to effect it. Within few dayes after, verie ingeniously, and according to the instructed order, the Ring was obtayned, albeit much against the Counts will; and the Countesse, in sted of the Ladies vertuous daughter, was embraced by him in bed: the houre proving so auspicious, and juno being Lady of the ascendent, conjoynd with the witty Mercury, shee conceived of two goodly Sonnes, and her deliverance agreed correspondently with the just time. Thus the old Lady, not at this time onely, but at many other meetings besides; gave the Countesse free possession of her husbands pleasures, yet alwayes in such darke and concealed secrecie, as it was never suspected, nor knowne by any but themselves, the Count lying with his owne wife, and disappointed of her whom he more deerly loved. Alwayes at his uprising in the mornings (which usually was before the break of day, for preventing the least scruple of suspicion) many familiar conferences passed betweene them, with the gifts of divers faire: and costly jewels; all which the Countesse carefully kept, and perceiving assuredly, that shee was conceived with childe, shee would no longer bee troublesome to the good old Lady; but calling her aside, spake thus to her. Madame, I must needes give thanks to heaven and you, because my desires are amply accomplished, and both time and your deserts doe justly challenge, that I should accordingly quite you before my departure. It remaineth now in your owne power, to make what demand you please of me, which yet I will not give you by way of reward, because that would seeme to bee base and mercenary: but onely whatsoever you shall receive of me, is in honourable recompence of faire and vertuous deservings, such as any honest and well-minded Lady in the like distresse, may with good credit allow, and yet no prejudice to her reputation.

Although poverty might well have tutored the Ladies tongue, to-demand a liberall

recompence for her paines; yet shee requested but an 100 pounds, as a friendly helpe towards her daughters marriage, and that with a bashfull blushing was uttered too; yet the Countesse gave her five hundred pounds, besides so many rich and costly jewels, as amounted to a farre greater summe. So shee returned to her wonted lodging, at the aged widdowes house, where first shee was entertained at her comming to Florence; and the good old Lady, to avoyde the Counts repairing to her house any more, departed thence sodainly with her daughter, to divers friends of hers that dwelt in the Country, whereat the Count was much discontented; albeit afterward, he did never heare any more tidings of hir or her daughter, who was worthily married, to her Mothers great comfort.

Not long after, Count Bertrand was recalled home by his people: and he having heard of his wives absence, went to Roussillion so much the more willingly. And the Countesse knowing her husbands departure from Florence, as also his safe arrivall at his owne dwelling, remained still in Florence, untill the time of her deliverance, which was of two goodly Sonnes, lively resembling the lookes of their Father, and all the perfect lineaments of his body. Perswade your selves, she was not a little carefull of their nursing; and when she saw the time answerable to her determination, she tooke her journey (unknowne to any) and arrived with them at Montpellier, where she rested her selfe for divers dayes, after so long and wearisome a journey.

Upon the day of all Saints, the Count kept a solemne Feastivall, for the assembly of his Lords, Knights, Ladies, and Gentlewomen: upon which Joviall day of generall rejoycing, the Countesse attired in her wonted Pilgrimes weed, repaired thither, entring into the great Hall where the Tables were readily covered for dinner. Preassing through the throng of people, with her two children in her armes, s presumed unto the place where the Count sate, and falling on her knees before him, the teares trickling abundantly downe her cheekes, thus she spake. Worthy Lord, I am thy poore, despised, and unfortunate wife; who, that thou mightst returne home, and not be an exile from thine owne abiding, have thus long gone begging through the world. Yet now at length, I hope thou wilt be so honourably-minded, as to performe thine owne too strict imposed conditions, made to the two Knights which I sent unto thee, and which (by thy command) I was enjoyned to do. Behold here in mine armes, not onely one Sonne by thee begotten, but two Twins, and thy Ring beside. High time is it now, if men of honour respect their promises, and after so long and tedious travell, I should at last be welcommed as thy true wife.

The Count hearing this, stooode as confounded with admiration; for full well he knew the Ring: and both the children were so perfectly like him, as he was confirmed to be their Father by generall judgement. Upon his urging by what possible meanes this could be brought to passe: the Countesse in presence of the whole assembly, and unto her eternall commendation, related the whole history, even in such manner as you have formerly heard it. Moreover, she reported the private speeches in bed, uttered betweene himselfe and her, being witnessed more apparantly, by the costly jewels there openly shewne. All which infallible proofes, proclaiming his shame, and her most noble carriage to her husband; he confessed, that she had told nothing but the truth in every point which she had reported.

Commending her admirable constancy, exceliency of wit, and sprightly courage, in making such a bold adventure; he kissed the two sweete boyes, and to keepe his promise, whereto he was earnestly importuned, by all his best esteemed friends there present, especially the honourable Ladies, who would have no deniall, but by forgetting his former harsh and

uncivill carriage towards her, to accept her for ever as his lawfull wife, folding her in his armes, and sweetly kissing her divers times together, he bad her welcome to him, as his vertuous, loyall, and most loving wife, and so (for ever after) he would acknowledge her. Well knew hee that she had store of better beseeming garments in the house, and therefore requested the Ladies to walke with her to her Chamber, to uncase her of those Pilgrimes weeds, and cloath her in her owne more sumptuous garments, even those which shee wore on her wedding day, because that was not the day of his contentment, but onely this; for now he confessed her to be his wife indeede, and now he would give the king thanks for her, and now was Count Bertrand truly married to the faire Juliet of Narbona.

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