

## Day 4, Story 1



*Tancredi, Prince of Salerno, kills his daughter's lover and sends her his heart in a golden chalice. Sprinkling it with poison, she drinks it down and thus dies.<sup>1</sup>*

Our King has certainly given us a harsh topic to speak about today, especially when we consider that, having come together in order to cheer ourselves up, we are obliged to recount stories about others' tears, stories that cannot be told without awakening feelings of pity in speaker and listener alike. Perhaps he chose this topic to temper somewhat the gaiety of the past few days. However, no matter what moved him to do so, since it is not appropriate for me to alter the topic that it is his pleasure to have chosen, I will recount an incident that was not only pitiful, but disastrous, and entirely worthy of our tears.

Tancredi, Prince of Salerno, was a man of benevolent character and a ruler known for his humanity, except that in his old age he sullied his hands with the blood of lovers. In the entire course of his life, he had only a single daughter, and he would have been happier if he had never had her at all. He loved the girl more tenderly than any daughter was ever loved by her father, and not knowing how to part with her because of this tender love, he refused to arrange a marriage for her, even when she was well beyond the age when she should have wed. At long last, he gave her away in marriage to one of the sons of the Duke of Capua, but she lived with him for only a short while before she was left a widow and returned to her father.

Her face and her body were as beautiful as those of any other woman who has ever lived. Youthful and vivacious, and wiser than might have been appropriate in a woman, she lived like a great lady with her doting father in the midst of real luxury. When she saw, however, that because of his devotion to her, he was not giving much thought to arranging a new marriage for her, and since she thought it unseemly for her to ask him to do so, she decided that she would try to find a clandestine lover for herself who was worthy of her affection.

After looking over all the men, both noble and non-noble, who frequented her father's court, men of the sort we see in courts everywhere, and

after considering the manners and conduct of quite a number of them, she found herself attracted to one of her father's young valets above all the rest. He was named Guiscardo, and although his origins were humble, his virtues and his manners sufficed to ennoble him. By dint of seeing him of ten, she soon became secretly inflamed with the most passionate love for him, and her admiration for the way he comported himself grew greater every day. As for the young man himself; he was by no means unperceptive, and from the moment he noticed her interest in him, he took her so deeply into his heart that he thought of virtually nothing else except his love for her.

In this way, then, the two of them went on secretly loving one another. The young girl wished for nothing more than to be together with her beloved, but since she was unwilling to make anyone her confidant in the matter, she thought up a new trick by means of which she could communicate her plan to him. She composed a letter in which she explained what he had to do in order to be with her on the following day, and then she inserted it into the hollow center of a reed, which she gave to Guiscardo, telling him in a joking manner: "Make a bellows of this for your servant girl, and she'll rekindle your fire with it this evening."

Guiscardo took it, and thinking that she would not have given it to him and spoken to him as she did without good reason, he left the room and returned to his lodging with it. When he examined the reed and discovered that there was a crack in it, he opened it up and found her letter inside. As he read it and noted what she wanted him to do, he was the happiest man who ever lived, and he immediately set about making preparations to meet with her, following all the details of the plan she had laid out for him.

Next to the Prince's palace there was a mountain containing a grotto that had been formed in the distant past and that was faintly illuminated by an air shaft, which had been dug out of the solid rock. The grotto, however, had been abandoned, and the mouth of the shaft was almost completely blocked by the brambles and weeds growing over it. From one of the ground-floor rooms of the palace that were occupied by the lady, a hidden stairway led into the grotto, although its entrance was barred by a very strong door. So much time had passed since the stairway had been used that there was virtually no one who still remembered it. Love, however, from whose eyes nothing can be concealed, had reminded the enamored lady of its existence.

To keep anyone else from noticing what was going on, she spent several days working hard on the door with various implements until she finally got it open. Once she had done so, and had climbed down alone into

the grotto and seen the shaft, she sent word about it to Guiscardo, letting him know approximately how high its mouth was from the ground and telling him he should make every effort to get in by that route. With this end in mind, Guiscardo lost no time in obtaining a rope and tying knots and loops in it so that he could use it to descend and climb back out again. Then, without arousing anyone's suspicion about what was going on, the next night he went to the shaft, wearing a leather suit to protect himself from the brambles. After securely tying one end of the rope to a sturdy bush growing out of its mouth, he used the rope to lower himself into the grotto and waited there for the lady to appear.

The next day the lady sent her ladies-in-waiting away on the pretext that she wanted to take a nap, and having locked herself alone in her bedroom, she opened the door to the stairway and descended into the grotto where she found Guiscardo waiting for her. The two of them greeted one another with wonderfully warm affection and then went to her bedroom together where they spent the greater part of the day enjoying themselves in utter delight. After they had agreed on the most prudent plan for keeping their love affair a secret, Guiscardo went back to the grotto, while the lady locked the door and came out to rejoin her attendants. Then, after nightfall, Guiscardo used the rope to climb out of the shaft, exited from the place where he had come in, and returned to his lodging.

Having mastered this route, Guiscardo made the return journey many times after that. Fortune, however, was envious of such great and long-lived happiness, and made use of a calamity to transform the two lovers' joy into tears of sorrow.

From time to time, Tancredi was in the habit of going alone to his daughter's bedroom, where he would stay and chat for a while before he left. One day he went down there after dinner, and having entered her room without being seen or heard by anyone, he discovered that the lady, whose name was Ghismunda, was out in one of her gardens with all of her ladies-in-waiting. Not wishing to deprive her of her recreation, he sat down to wait on a stool located at the foot of the bed near one of its corners. The windows of the room were closed and the bed curtains drawn aside, and after a while Tancredi pulled one of them over him almost as if he were deliberately trying to hide, lay his head against the bed, and fell asleep.

Unfortunately, Ghismunda had arranged to have Guiscardo meet her that day, and as Tancredi was sleeping, she left her ladies-in-waiting in the garden and quietly returned to her room. Without noticing that anyone was

there, she locked herself in and opened the door for Guiscardo who was waiting for her. The two of them got into bed as they usually did, and while they were playing and enjoying themselves together, Tancredi happened to wake up. When he saw and heard what Guiscardo and his daughter were doing, his grief overwhelmed him. His first impulse was to scream at them, but then he decided to hold his peace and, if possible, remain hidden, because a plan had already taken shape in his mind and he wanted to proceed with more caution, and with less shame to himself, as he put it into effect.

The two lovers remained together a long time, as they usually did, without ever once noticing Tancredi. When they felt it was time to part, they got out of bed, after which Guiscardo returned to the grotto, and the lady left her room. Despite his advanced age, Tancredi then lowered himself down from a window into the garden, and without being seen, returned to his room, sick to death with grief.

At Tancredi's orders, that night around bedtime two of his men seized Guiscardo, who, encumbered by his leather suit, was just coming out of the shaft. They then brought him in secret to Tancredi, who said to him, practically in tears:

"Guiscardo, the kindness I've shown you did not deserve the outrage and dishonor that you've done to what belongs to me, and that I witnessed today with my very own eyes."

All that Guiscardo offered by way of reply was to say: "Love is much more powerful than either you or I."<sup>2</sup> Tancredi ordered his men to take Guiscardo to an inner room, where he would be guarded in secret, and they took him away.

Ghismunda knew nothing of all this, and after dinner the next day, Tancredi, who had spent time thinking up all sorts of strange and terrible possibilities, went to his daughter's room just as he usually did. Having sent for her, he locked her in with him and began weeping.

"I never doubted your virtue and honesty, Ghismunda," he sobbed, "and so, no matter what anyone might have said, it would never have occurred to me that you could have thought of yielding to any man other than your husband, let alone actually doing it. But now that I've seen it with my own eyes, I will be grief stricken whenever I recall it during the little bit of life that is left to me in my old age."

"I would to God that if you had to commit such a dishonorable act, you had chosen a man whose rank was suited to your nobility. Instead, from among all the people who frequent my court, you selected Guiscardo, a young

man of the basest condition who has been raised in our court as an act of charity from the time he was a small child right up to the present. Your behavior has created the most distressing dilemma for me, in that I simply don't know what I'm going to do about you. As for Guiscardo, I had him apprehended last night as he was coming out of the grotto and put in prison, and I've already made up my mind what I will do about him. But God knows, I have no idea how I'm going to deal with you. I am moved, on the one hand, by the love I've always felt for you, a love greater than that which any father ever felt for his daughter. On the other, I'm filled with righteous indignation because of your folly. My love prompts me to pardon you, while my anger wants me to go against my nature and show you no pity. Still, before I reach any decision about you, I'd like to hear what you have to say in reply."

When he finished speaking, Tancredi, like a child who has just been given a sound beating, lowered his head and wept bitter tears.

As she listened to her father, Ghismunda realized not merely that her secret love had been discovered, but that Guiscardo had been captured. This filled her with such incalculable grief that she was frequently on the point of expressing it by screaming and weeping, as most women usually do. Her lofty soul enabled her to triumph over such base behavior, however, and instead, making a marvelous effort to keep her countenance unchanged, she decided that she would sooner die than make any sort of plea on her own behalf, convinced as she was that her Guiscardo was already dead. Thus, presenting herself not like a grief-stricken woman who had been rebuked for a fault, but like an undaunted figure of courage, she turned to her father with dry eyes and a fearless look on her face that did not betray the least hint of distress.

"Tancredi," she said, "I am disposed neither to argue with you nor to beg, because the first won't help me and I don't want the second to do so. I intend no appeal to either your mercy or your love. Rather, I will tell you the truth, and after defending my reputation with sound arguments, I will then, by means of my actions, resolutely follow the lofty promptings of my heart. It's true that I have loved – and still love – Guiscardo. In fact, as long as I shall live, which will not be long, I shall continue to love him. And if there is love after death, my affection for him will never cease. I have been brought to act as I did not so much by my womanly frailty as by your lack of concern to see me married as well as by Guiscardo's own worth.

"It should have been dear enough to you, Tancredi, as a creature of flesh and blood, that you have produced a daughter of flesh and blood, not one of stone or iron. And even though you are now an old man, you should

have been mindful all along of the nature and the strength of the laws of youth. As a man, you may have spent a portion of your best years in martial activity, but you should still be aware of the powerful effects that idleness and luxury can have on old and young alike.

"Being your daughter, I am a creature of flesh and blood, and what is more, I am still quite a young woman. Now, for both of those reasons I am filled with carnal desires whose force has been enormously increased by the fact that I was once married and have known the pleasure that comes from satisfying them. Not being able to resist their force, I decided, being a woman in the prime of life, to follow where they led me, and as a result, I fell in love. But insofar as I was able, I certainly did everything in my power to prevent that to which I was being drawn by my natural sinfulness from conferring shame on either you or me. To that end I was assisted by compassionate Love and benevolent Fortune who found out and showed me how to satisfy my desires in perfect secrecy. No matter who revealed this to you or however you came to know about it, I do not deny that this is what happened.

"I did not take a lover at random, as many women do, but made a deliberate choice of Guiscardo, selecting him ahead of everyone else. With thoughtful planning I drew him to me, and by dint of prudence and persistence on both of our parts, I have been satisfying my desires with him for a long time now. What you are blaming me for with such bitterness, far more than for my carnal sin itself, is that I am consorting with a man of base condition, as if it wouldn't have bothered you for me to have chosen a nobleman as my lover. In doing this, you are following common opinion rather than the truth, for you fail to see that you are not really blaming my sin, but Fortune, who has very frequently raised the unworthy to great heights, while keeping the most deserving down low.

"But leaving all this aside, just consider the basic principles involved, and you will see that we are all made of one flesh and that the same Creator has created all our souls, giving them equal faculties, powers, and virtues. Since we are all born equal, and always have been, it is virtue that made the first distinctions among us, and those who not only had, but actually made use of a greater portion of it were the ones considered noble, while the rest were not. Since then, practices to the contrary have obscured this law, but it has never been erased from Nature or good manners, so that a person who behaves virtuously shows unmistakably that he is noble, and if anyone calls him something else, then that person, not the other, is in the wrong.

"Just take a look at your noblemen, and compare their lives, manners, and general behavior with those of Guiscardo. If you judge them all without prejudice, you will say that he is the true nobleman and the rest of them are mere commoners. In estimating the virtues and valor of Guiscardo, I did not trust the judgment of other people, but that which was contained in your own words and which my own eyes have confirmed. What person ever commended him as much as you did for performing all those praiseworthy deeds for which men of valor merit commendation? And you were certainly not wrong to do that, because if my eyes have not deceived me, you have never praised him for something I didn't actually see him do, and usually in a manner more wonderful than your words could ever express. Thus, if I was ever deceived at all in this, you were the one who deceived me.

"Will you say, then, that I have allied myself with a man of base condition? Well, you're simply not telling the truth. Perhaps if you'd said I'd done so with a poor man, that might be conceded – but it would be conceded to your shame, because it reveals you have failed to reward such a worthy servant with the advancement he deserves. In any case, poverty does not take away a man's nobility of character; only wealth can do that. There have been many kings, many great princes, who were once poor, and many a farmer and many a shepherd were once immensely wealthy and are so again.

"As for the last doubt you entertain, namely, about what you should do with me, banish it altogether. If you are ready in your extreme old age to do what you were never accustomed to do when you were young, that is, to treat me with savage cruelty, then go ahead and use all of it on me, since I myself am the real cause of this supposed sin. I am determined not to offer you any sort of plea for mercy, and I swear to you that whatever you have done to Guiscardo, or are planning to do to him, if you don't do the same thing to me, I will do it to myself with my very own hands. Now get out of here. Go shed your tears with the women. And then, when you are inclined to cruelty again, kill us both with the same blow if you think we've merited it."

The Prince recognized the lofty nature of his daughter's spirit, but for all that, he doubted she was so resolute as to do what her words suggested. As a result, once he left her, he lost any desire he had to take out his anger on her and decided, instead, that he would cool off her fervent love by punishing her lover. Consequently, he ordered the two men who were guarding Guiscardo to strangle him noiselessly that night, and then to take out Guiscardo's heart and bring it to him. The two of them did as they were ordered, and the next day the Prince sent for a beautiful large chalice made of gold, into which he

put the heart. Then he had one of his most trusted servants take it to her, bidding him to say the following words as he handed it over: "Your father sends you this to comfort you for the loss of the thing you love best, just as you have comforted him for the loss of what he loved best."

After her father had left her, Ghismunda, who was unflinching in her fierce resolve, had them bring her poisonous herbs and roots, which she distilled into a liquid so as to have it at the ready in case what she feared actually came to pass. When the servant then appeared and presented her with the cup and the Prince's message, she took it, and with her countenance unchanged, removed the cover. As soon as she saw what it contained, she understood the meaning of the Prince's words and had no doubt whatsoever that this was Guiscardo's heart. Raising her head, she looked straight at the servant.

"A heart like this," she said, "deserves nothing less splendid than a sepulcher of gold. At least in this case, my father has acted wisely." And having spoken, she raised the heart to her lips and kissed it.

"In every respect," she said, "right down to the very end of my life, I have always found my father's love for me to be most tender, and now it is more so than ever. Consequently, on my behalf, I ask you to give him the last thanks I shall ever give him for so great a gift." Having said this, she turned to the chalice, which she held firmly in her grip, and stared at the heart.

"Ah," she said, "sweetest vessel of all my pleasures, I curse the cruelty of the man who now compels me to look at you with the eyes of my body! It was enough for me to have beheld you at all hours with those of my mind. You have finished the course of the life that Fortune has allotted you, you have reached the end to which everyone hastens, and having left behind all the misery and weariness of the world, you have received from your enemy himself the sepulcher that your worth deserves. Your funeral rites lacked nothing but the tears of the woman you loved so dearly while you were alive, and God prompted my pitiless father to send you to me so that you might have them now. I shall weep for you, even though I intended to die with my eyes dry and my countenance completely unmarked by fear. "But once I have paid you the tears I owe you, I will make no delay in sending my soul, with your help, to join the one that you have guarded so tenderly.<sup>3</sup> Is there another companion with whom I would be happier or more secure as I travel to that unknown place? I am certain that your soul is nearby right now, looking down on the scene of all the delights we shared, and since I am sure it loved me, I know that it awaits my soul, which loves it beyond all measure." When



Ghismunda finished speaking. she bent her head over the chalice, and suppressing all sounds of womanly grief, she began weeping in a way that was wondrous to behold. As her tears poured forth like water from some fountain in her head, all the while she gave the dead heart an infinite number of kisses. Her ladies, who were standing around her, did not understand whose heart it was or what her words meant, but overcome with pity, they, too, began to weep. Filled with compassion, they asked her to reveal the cause of her lamentation, but it was all in vain, nor could they comfort her, despite all their best efforts to do so. When Ghismunda had wept her fill, she raised her head and dried her eyes. "O my dearly beloved heart," she said, "now that I have discharged the duty I owe you, the only thing I have left to do is to send my soul to you and unite it with yours as your eternal companion." Having made this pronouncement, she sent for the little vial containing the liquid she had made the day before, and poured it into the chalice where lay the heart she had bathed with so many of her tears. Then, without a trace of fear, she brought it to her lips and drained it dry, after which, with the chalice still in her hand, she climbed up onto her bed. There she arranged her body as decorously as she could, placed the heart of her dead lover next to her own, and without saying another word, waited for death.

When her ladies had seen and heard all these things, even though they did not know the nature of the liquid that she had drunk, they sent word of it to Tancredi. He was afraid of what was in fact transpiring and immediately descended to his daughter's room, arriving just as she was positioning herself on her bed. When he saw the condition she was in, he tried-too late-to comfort her with sweet words, and then dissolved in a flood of bitter tears.

"Tancredi," said the lady, "save your tears for some misfortune less desired than mine is. Just don't shed them for me, for I don't want them. Who ever heard of anyone, aside from you, weeping when he gets what he wanted? But if you still retain even a bit of the love you used to feel for me, grant me one last gift: since it displeased you that I lived quietly with Guiscardo in secret, let my body be publicly laid to rest beside his wherever it may be that you had them throw it after his death."

His anguished sobbing did not permit the Prince to respond, where-upon the young lady, who felt her end approaching, pressed the dead heart to her bosom, and said: "God be with you, for now I take my leave of you." Then, her vision grew blurry, her senses failed, and she left this life of sorrow behind her.

Thus, as you have heard, the love between Guiscardo and Ghismunda came to its sad conclusion. Tancredi grieved deeply over what had happened, and although his repentance for his cruelty came too late, he did have the couple honorably buried in the same tomb, to the universal mourning of all the people of Salerno.

## Day 4, Story 2,



*Frate Alberto, having given a lady to understand that the Angel Gabriel is in love with her, assumes the angel's form himself and sleeps with her on numerous occasions, until scared by her relatives, he throws himself out of her house and takes refuge in that of a poor man. The next day the latter leads him to the piazza dressed up like a wild man, where he is recognized and apprehended by his fellow friars who proceed to incarcerate him.<sup>1</sup>*

More than once, Fiammetta's story had brought tears to the eyes of her companions, but when it was done, the King looked at them sternly and declared:

"I think it would be a small price to pay if I were to give up my life in exchange for even half the pleasure that Ghismunda had with Guiscardo. Nor should any of you find this surprising, seeing as how every hour of my life I die a thousand deaths without ever having received even a tiny morsel of pleasure. However, setting my affairs aside for the present, I want Pampinea to continue the storytelling with some savage tale that partly resembles my own predicament, and if she will just follow Fiammetta down the way she has set out on, I shall doubtless begin to feel some drops of dew falling upon the fire that burns within me."

Because of the way she felt herself, Pampinea was far more responsive to her companions' mood than to the King's after what he had just said, and so, when she heard herself ordered to speak, although she was perfectly willing to obey his command, she was more inclined to amuse them a bit than to satisfy him. Consequently, she decided that, without straying from the prescribed theme, she would tell them a tale that would make them laugh, and thus, she began:

The people have a proverb that goes like this:  
A man who's wicked, yet thought to be good,  
Can always do wrong: no one thinks that he would.

This proverb provides me not just with ample material to discuss in connection with the theme that has been proposed, but also with an opportunity to reveal both the nature and the extent of the clergy's hypocrisy. When they go about begging, they don long, flowing robes, make their faces look pale by artificial means, and keep their voices mild and low, but they become loud and haughty when they attack others for their own vices, or show how the people will achieve salvation by giving alms to them, while they do so by taking alms from the people. Furthermore, unlike the rest of us, they do not act as if they have to work to get into Paradise, but as if they already owned it and had been made its rulers, assigning everyone who dies a better or a worse place depending on the amount of money he has bequeathed to them. In this they make every effort to deceive, first, themselves, if they really believe what they say, and then, all those who put faith in their words. If I were permitted to reveal their tricks, I would soon open the eyes of many simple people and show them just what it is that they keep hidden underneath those ample habits of theirs.

But now, may it please God that what happened to a Franciscan should happen to them on account of all of their lies.<sup>2</sup> No longer a young man, that friar was considered to be among the most authoritative churchmen in Venice<sup>3</sup> and it will give me the greatest pleasure to tell you a story about him so that your spirits, which have been filled with pity for the death of Ghismunda, may perhaps be lifted up to some degree if I can get you to laugh and enjoy yourselves.

In Imola, worthy ladies, there once lived a wicked, corrupt man by the name of Berto della Massa whose ignominious deeds were so well known to the people of the town that no one there was willing to believe anything he said, no matter whether he was lying or telling the truth.<sup>4</sup> When he perceived that his scams would no longer work in Imola, as a last resort he moved to Venice, that receptacle of every sort of filth, thinking he would find a different way to practice fraud there than he had anywhere else before then.<sup>5</sup> And so, pretending he was conscience stricken because of his past misdeeds, he gave everyone the impression that he was overcome by the utmost feeling of humility, and then, as if he were the most pious man alive, he went and became a Franciscan, adopting the name of Frate Alberto da Imola. Wearing the habit of that order, he put on a show of living an austere life, greatly commending both penance and abstinence, and never eating meat or drinking wine, at least when he did not find any to his taste.

Almost no one perceived that the man who had suddenly turned into a great preacher had been a thief; a pimp, a forger, and a murderer, let alone that he had never really abandoned any of his vices, which he would practice on the sly whenever he could. To top it off, after being ordained a priest, every time he went up to the altar to celebrate the Mass, provided that there were a lot of people present, he would weep over the Passion of Our Savior, for he was the kind of guy it cost very little to shed tears whenever he wanted. In short, between his sermons and his tears, he knew how to lure in the Venetians so successfully that not only was he made the trustee and executor of practically every will written in the city, but many people asked him to safeguard their money, and the vast majority of both men and women named him their confessor and advisor. Having thus changed from a wolf into a shepherd, he acted in such a way that he gained a reputation for holiness in those parts much greater than that which Saint Francis had ever enjoyed in Assisi.

Now it just so happened that a group of women went to this holy friar one day in order to be confessed, and among them there was a frivolous, empty-headed young lady named Madonna Lisetta da Ca' Quirino, the wife of an important merchant who had sailed away to Flanders with his galleys.<sup>6</sup> She was kneeling at his feet, and being a Venetian, all of whom are chatterboxes, she had only gotten through a few of the things she had done, when Frate Alberto asked her whether she had a lover.

"Hey, Messer Friar," replied Madonna Lisetta, giving him a black look, "don't you have eyes in your head? Do you think my charms are just like everybody else's? I could have lovers to spare if I wanted, but my kind of beauty is not something for just anybody who happens to be attracted to it. How many women have you seen whose good looks are anything like mine? Why, I'd be counted a beauty even in Paradise." And she added so much more about this beauty of hers that it was a pain to listen to her.

Frate Alberto saw immediately that this one was something of an idiot, and since she seemed like good soil for him to plow, he fell passionately in love with her then and there. He decided, however, to postpone any courtship until a more suitable moment. Instead, in order to keep up his saintly appearance for the time being, he began scolding her, telling her this was all vainglory and making her listen to a lot more of his nonsense. In reply, the lady told him that he was an ass and that he could not tell one woman's beauty from another's. Since he wanted to avoid irritating her unduly, Frate

Alberto heard the rest of her confession and allowed her to go on her way with the other women.

A few days later, Frate Alberto went to Madonna Lisetta's house with a trusted companion, and withdrawing into a separate room with her where he could not be seen by anybody, he threw himself on his knees before her.

"My lady," he said, "I beg you for God's sake to forgive me for what I said to you on Sunday when you were talking to me about your beauty. I was punished so severely for it the following night that I have not been able to get out of my bed until today."

"And who was it who punished you like that?" asked Lady Blockhead.

"I'll tell you," replied Frate Alberto. "When I was praying that night, as I usually do, all of a sudden I was aware of a great light shining in my cell, and before I could turn around to see what it was, there was an incredibly beautiful young man standing over me with a large club in his hand. He grabbed me by my habit, pulled me down to the floor at his feet, and really let me have it until he'd bruised practically every bone in my body. When I asked him why he had treated me like that, he replied, 'Because today you presumed to disparage the celestial beauty of Madonna Lisetta, and except for God Himself, there is no one in the world I love more than her:'

"'Who are you?' I asked, and he replied that he was the Angel Gabriel.

"'O my lord,' I said, 'I beg you to forgive me.'

"'I forgive you on this condition,' he replied, 'that you go to her as soon as you can and persuade her to forgive you. And if she doesn't, I'm going to come back here and give it to you so soundly that you'll be sorry for the rest of your life.' What he said to me after that I don't dare to tell you unless you forgive me first."

Lady Pumpkinhead, who was somewhat lacking in wit, was enormously gratified upon hearing his words and took them all to be the utter truth.

"Well, Frate Alberto," she said, after a brief pause, "I told you that my beauty was celestial, didn't I? But so help me God, I do feel sorry for you, and in order to spare you any further injury, I will forgive you, but only on the condition that you tell me what else the angel said to you."

"Now that you've pardoned me, my lady," replied Frate Alberto, "I'll do so gladly. But let me ask you to bear one thing in mind, and that is never to tell anyone in the world what I'm about to say to you, if you don't want to ruin everything for yourself. Truly, you're the luckiest lady alive, for the Angel

Gabriel told me to tell you how he'd taken such a liking to you that he would have come to spend the night with you on many occasions if he hadn't been worried about frightening you. Now he's sent me to inform you that he wants to come one night and -end time in your company, and because he's an angel and you would not be able to touch him in that form, he says that for your own pleasure he would like to come in the form of a man. Therefore, you should let him know when you want him to be here and in whose shape, and he'll do it. And so, now you know why you should consider yourself more blessed than any other woman alive."

Madonna Simple declared she was very pleased that the Angel Gabriel loved her, seeing how she certainly loved him and never let the opportunity go by to light a four-penny candle for him wherever she saw his image in a painting. And he would be very welcome to visit her whenever he pleased, and he would always find her all alone in her room. Nevertheless, there was this proviso, that he would not leave her for the Virgin Mary, whom, it was said, he loved very much, and it did appear that way because wherever she saw him, he was always on his knees in front of her.\* For the rest, she said, it was up to him to come in whatever form he wanted as long as she would not be frightened.

• Madonna Lisetta is thinking about paintings of the Annunciation in which the Angel Gabriel typically kneels before the Virgin as he tells her she has been chosen by God to bear the Christ child.

"Spoken like a wise woman, my lady," said Frate Alberto. "I'll be sure to arrange everything with him just as you've suggested. But you can do me a great favor that will cost you nothing, namely, you should have him use this body of mine when he comes to you. Let me explain how you'll be doing me a favor: the moment he enters my body, he's going to remove my soul and place it in Paradise, where it will remain for as long as he's down here with you."

"What a good idea," said Madonna Noodlepate. "I'd really like you to have this consolation to compensate for all the blows he gave you on my account."

"You should make sure he'll find the door to your house open tonight so that he can get in," said Frate Alberto, "because he'll be coming in human form, and when he arrives, he'll have to enter that way."

The lady replied that she would take care of it, and after Frate Alberto left, she strutted around so high and mighty that her shift did not reach down to cover her butt. And still, to her it seemed like a thousand years before the Angel Gabriel arrived.

Thinking he was going to play the horseman, not the angel, that night, Frate Alberto fortified himself with sweets and other delicacies so that he would not be easily thrown from his mount. Then, at nightfall, after having obtained permission to leave the monastery, he went with a trusted companion to the house of a lady friend of his, a place he often used as a starting post for racing after his fillies, and when the time seemed right, from there he went on in disguise to the lady's house. Once inside, he transformed himself into an angel by putting on the gewgaws he had brought with him, after which he climbed up the stairs and entered the lady's room.

When she saw the brilliantly white object in front of her, she fell on her knees before it. The angel gave her his blessing, raised her to her feet, and gestured to her to get into bed. Eager to obey, she did so immediately, and the angel lay down beside his devotee. Frate Alberto was a physically attractive man, quite robust, and with a more than sufficiently sturdy pair of legs on him, so that when he was with Madonna Lisetta, who was herself soft and fresh, he showed himself to be quite a different partner in bed than her husband. Many times that night he took flight without wings, causing the lady to cry out loud with satisfaction at what he did, which he supplemented by telling her all about the glories of Heaven. Then, as day approached, having made arrangements for his return, he took all his gear and went to rejoin his companion to whom the good lady of the house had offered her friendly company in bed so that he would not feel frightened if he had to sleep all by himself

As soon as she had eaten, the lady went with her maidservant to see Frate Alberto and told him her news about the Angel Gabriel. She rehearsed what he had said about the glories of the life eternal and described his appearance, while adding to her account all sorts of marvelous inventions of her own.

"My lady," said Frate Alberto, "I don't know how you fared with him. What I do know is that when he came to me last night and I gave him your message, in an instant he transported my soul among so many more Bowers and so many more roses than have ever been seen down here, and there, in one of the most delightful spots that ever existed, he permitted my soul to remain until matins this morning. As for what happened to my body, I just don't know."

"Isn't that what I've been telling you?" said the lady. "Your body, with the Angel Gabriel inside, spent the entire night in my arms. And if you



don't believe me, take a look under your left breast where I gave the angel such a passionate kiss that its mark is going to be there for days to come."

"Well, then," said Frate Alberto, "today I'm going to do what I haven't done in a long time, and that is, I'm going to undress myself to see if you're telling the truth."

Finally, after a lot more chitchat, the lady returned home, which, from that day on, is where Frate Alberto also went to pay her many a visit, unimpeded, in the form of the angel.

One day, however, when Madonna Lisetta was talking with a close friend of hers, engaged in a dispute about physical beauty, she was determined to place her own charms up above everyone else's, and having precious little wit in her pumpkinhead, she declared: "If you only knew who was taken with my beauty, you'd certainly stop talking about how attractive other women are."

Because her friend certainly understood the kind of woman she was dealing with, she was very curious about what Madonna Lisetta had to say.

"Mylady," she said, "you may well be telling the truth, but still, since his identity remains unknown, it's difficult for one to change one's opinion."

"I shouldn't be telling you this, neighbor," replied Madonna Lisetta, who got all worked up very easily, "but my sweetheart is the Angel Gabriel, who loves me more than he loves himself, and according to what he tells me, it's all because I'm the most beautiful woman to be found anywhere in the world or in the Maremma."<sup>5</sup>

Her friend wanted to laugh, but held herself in check so that Madonna Lisetta would continue talking.

"I swear to God, my lady," she said, "if the Angel Gabriel is your sweetheart and tells you that, then it must be true. But I didn't think that the angels did such things:

"That's where you've got it wrong, neighbor," replied Madonna Lisetta. "By God's wounds, he does it better than my husband, and in fact, he tells me they all do it up there, too. And because he thinks I'm more beautiful than anyone in Heaven, he's fallen in love with me and frequently comes to stay with me. Now do you get it?"

After her friend left Madonna Lisetta's, it seemed like a thousand years before she found someone to whom she could repeat what she had heard. Finally, while attending a party where there was a large group of women, she told them the entire story from start to finish. These women told it to their husbands and to other women, and they told it to yet others, and

thus in less than two days the news was all over Venice. But among those whose ears it reached were Madonna Lisetta's brothers-in-law. Without saying a word about it to her, they decided they would find that angel and discover if he really could fly, and for the next few nights in a row they lay in wait for him.

Some vague news about all this happened to reach the ears of Frate Alberto, and so he went one night to give her a scolding. No sooner had he undressed, however, than her in-laws, who had spotted him coming, were at the door to the room and in the process of opening it. When Frate Alberto heard them and realized what was up, he got out of bed, and seeing no other way to escape, opened a window overlooking the Grand Canal and threw himself into the water. Since the canal was deep there, and he was a good swimmer, he got away without suffering any harm. Having swum over to the other side of the canal, he hurried through the open door of a house and begged the good man he found inside, for the love of God, to save his life, making up some tall tale about how he had come there at that hour and why he was completely naked. The good man took pity on him, and since he was obliged to go off and tend to some affairs of his, he had Frate Alberto get into his bed and told him to stay there until he returned. Then, after locking him in the house, he went about his business.

When the lady's in-laws entered her room, they found that the Angel Gabriel had flown away, leaving his wings behind. Disconcerted, they directed a stream of verbal abuse at the lady, after which they took the angel's trappings and returned home, leaving her all alone in a state of utter dejection. By now it was broad daylight, and while the good man was on the Rialto,!) he heard the story about how the Angel Gabriel had gone to bed that night with Madonna Lisetta and been discovered there by her brothers-in-law, how he had been terrified and thrown himself into the canal, and how no one knew what had become of him. He immediately realized that this was the guy he had in his house. Upon his return he confirmed his suspicions, and after listening to a lot more stories from Frate Alberto, he got him to send for fifty ducats if he wanted to avoid being handed over to the lady's in-laws. Once the money was taken care of, Frate Alberto was anxious to get away.

"There's only one way for you to do that," said the good man, "provided you're willing to go along with my plan. Today we're holding a festival in which people will be led about in various disguises, one dressed up like a bear, someone else like a wild man, and so on, and so on. Then they'll stage a hunt in the Piazza San Marco, and when that's over, the festival will

come to an end, and everyone will be free to take the person he brought there with him and go wherever he wants.<sup>10</sup> So, if you're willing to have me lead you around wearing one of those disguises, I can take you away wherever you want to go before someone spots you. Otherwise, I can't see any way for you to get out of here without being recognized, because the lady's in-laws have concluded that you're somewhere in this quarter, and they've placed guards all over the place in order to capture you."

Although it seemed hard to Frate Alberto to go about in such a disguise, nevertheless his fear of the lady's relations persuaded him to do so, and he told the good man where he wanted to go, leaving the choice of a disguise up to him. The good man then smeared Frate Alberto from top to toe with honey, scattered downy feathers all over him, and after attaching a chain to his neck and putting a mask over his face, gave him a large club to hold in one hand and two huge dogs in the other that he had gotten from the slaughterhouse.<sup>11</sup> Then he sent a man ahead to the Rialto to announce that whoever wanted to see the Angel Gabriel should go to the Piazza San Marco—that was Venetian trustworthiness for you!

Once everything was ready, the good man waited a bit longer and then took Frate Alberto outside, making him lead the way while holding him from behind by the chain. As they went along, they stirred up a lot of commotion among the throngs of people there, all of whom were asking, "What's that? What's that?" The good man led Frate Alberto on toward the piazza, where, between those who were following them from behind and those who had heard the announcement and had come from the Rialto, the crowd had grown so large that it was impossible to count all the people in it. When they finally arrived at the piazza, the good man tied his wild man to a column in an elevated spot where everyone could see him. Then, he pretended to wait for the hunt to begin, while Frate Alberto, because he was smeared all over with honey, was suffering intense pain from all the gnats and gadflies.

When the good man saw that the piazza was almost completely full, he made as if he was going to unchain his wild man, but pulled off Frate Alberto's mask instead and declared:

"Gentlemen, since the boar is not going to make an appearance, there won't be any hunt today. However, I didn't want you to have come here in vain, and so I've decided to let you have a look at the Angel Gabriel who descends at night from Heaven to earth in order to console the women of Venice."

No sooner was his mask off than Frate Alberto was instantly recognized by everybody, who all started yelling at him, using the foulest words and the worst insults ever hurled at any scoundrel, at the same time throwing filth of every sort in his face. They kept this up for a very long time until, by chance, the news reached his fellow friars. As many as six or so of them came to the piazza, threw a cloak over his shoulders, and unchained him, after which, followed by a general hue and cry, they led him to their monastery where they locked him up. And there it is believed he finally died, having spent the remainder of his life in utter misery.

Thus this guy, whose evil deeds were never believed because he was thought to be a good man, had dared to turn himself into the Angel Gabriel. After being transformed into a wild man, however, he was put to shame as he deserved to be, and for a very long time he wept in vain for the sins he had committed. May it please God that the same thing should befall all the others like him.

## Day 4, Story 5



*After Lisabetta's brothers kill her lover, he appears to her in a dream and shows her where he is buried. She secretly digs up his head and puts it in a pot of basil, weeping over it for hours every day, but when her brothers take it away from her, shortly afterward she herself dies of grief.<sup>1</sup>*

When Elissa's tale was finished and the King had bestowed a few words of praise on it, Filomena was told to speak next. Overwhelmed by compassion for poor Gerbino and his lady, she heaved a piteous sigh and thus began:

My story, gracious ladies, will not concern people of so lofty a rank as those Elissa has been speaking of, but it will, perhaps, arouse just as much pity in you. I was reminded of it by the mention that was just made of Messina, which is where it all occurred.

There once lived in Messina three young men who were brothers. All of them were merchants and had been left very rich after the death of their father, who had come there from San Gimignano. They also had a sister named Lisabetta, but although she was a young woman who was quite beautiful and well mannered, for some reason or other, they had still not arranged for her to be married.

In addition to the three brothers, there was a young Pisan named Lorenzo in their trading establishment who oversaw and managed all of their operations, and who, being quite handsome and charming, had often caught Lisabetta's eye. Having noticed from time to time that she was unusually attracted to him, he abandoned all his other love relationships and in like fashion set his heart on her. And thus the business went on in such a way that with the two of them equally drawn to one another, it was not long before they took all the necessary precautions and did what each of them desired to do more than anything else.

As they continued their affair, to their mutual joy and pleasure, they did everything they could to keep it a secret, but one night, as Lisabetta was making her way to Lorenzo's sleeping quarters, she was observed, without knowing it, by her eldest brother. This young man was quite discreet, and

however great the distress he felt over his discovery, he made the prudent decision, out of concern for their family honor, not to make a sound, let alone to say anything about it, and he bided his time all night long, turning over in his mind many possible responses to what had happened.

The next morning he told his brothers what he had seen of Lisabetta and Lorenzo the night before, and the three of them discussed the matter at great length. Determined to spare both themselves and their sister any loss of reputation, he decided they would pass it over in silence and act as if they had neither seen nor heard anything at all until such time as it would be safe and convenient for them to rid themselves of this shame before it went any further.

Keeping to their plan, the three of them chatted and joked around with Lorenzo just as they always used to do until one day came when they pretended they were going on an outing to the country and took Lorenzo along with them. Once they had reached a very remote and isolated spot, they saw their opportunity, and catching Lorenzo off guard, they killed him and buried his body, doing it all in such a way that no one had any idea what had happened. On their return to Messina, they put it about that they had sent Lorenzo away on business, something people readily believed, since the brothers frequently used to have him make such trips for them.

Lorenzo's failure to return weighed heavily on Lisabetta, and in her anxiety, she kept asking her brothers about him. One day, when she happened to be particularly persistent in questioning them, one of her brothers said to her:

"What's the meaning of all this? What do you have to do with Lorenzo that you keep asking about him all the time? If you question us anymore on the subject, we'll give you the kind of answer you deserve."

This made the young woman sad and miserable, and from then on, filled with fear and foreboding, she refrained from asking them about him. At night, however, she would repeatedly call out to him in a pitiful voice and beg him to come to her, occasionally dissolving in a flood of tears because of her grief over his absence. Nor was anything capable of cheering her up, as she went on and on, waiting for him to return.

One night, after crying so much over Lorenzo's absence that she finally cried herself to sleep, he appeared to her in a dream, pallid and terribly disheveled, his clothes torn to shreds and rotting, and it seemed to her that he said: "Oh, Lisabetta, you do nothing but call out to me, bemoaning my long absence and cruelly accusing me with your tears. You should know that I can't

ever come back here, because on the day when you saw me for the last time, I was killed by your brothers." He then described to her the place where they had buried him, told her not to call him or wait for him any longer, and disappeared. Lisabetta awoke, and believing that the vision she had seen was true, wept bitter tears.

When she got up the next morning, she decided to go to the place Lorenzo had shown her and seek confirmation of what she had seen in her dream. She did not dare to say anything about it to her brothers, but got their permission to go on a little outing in the country, accompanied by a maid who had served the two lovers at one time and was privy to all her affairs. She went to the spot as quickly as she could, and after clearing away the dry leaves, began digging where the soil seemed looser. Nor did she have to dig very deep before she uncovered her unfortunate lover's body, which as yet showed no sign of decay or decomposition and offered her clear proof that her vision had been true.

Lisabetta was the saddest woman alive, but knew that this was no time for tears. Although she would have willingly taken the entire body away and given it a proper burial if she had been able to do so, she realized how impossible that would be. And so, instead, she took out a knife, and after severing the head from the trunk as best she could, she wrapped it up in a towel and gave it to her maid to hold. She then covered the rest of the body with dirt, after which, unobserved, she left the scene and made her way home.

Taking the head to her room, she shut herself in and cried bitterly, weeping so profusely that she bathed it thoroughly with her tears, and at the same time planting a thousand kisses all over it. Then she wrapped it in a lovely piece of cloth and put it inside a beautiful large pot of the sort people use for growing marjoram and basil. Covering it with soil, she planted in it a number of sprigs of the finest basil from Salerno, and refused to sprinkle anything on it other than the water of roses or orange blossoms, or her own tears.<sup>3</sup> It became her custom to sit with this pot always by her side and to stare at it, concentrating all her desire on it, since her Lorenzo lay concealed within. After she had gazed at it raptly for a long period, she would bend over it and begin to weep, and would go on weeping until the basil was thoroughly watered by her tears.

Because of the constant, unremitting care she gave it, and because the soil was enriched by the decomposing head inside the pot, the basil grew luxuriantly and was exceptionally fragrant. And as the young woman maintained this routine consistently, on several occasions it came to the

attention of her neighbors, who reported it to her brothers. "We've noticed," they said, at hat she keeps doing the same thing every day."

The brothers had been puzzled by the fact that Lisabetta was losing her looks and that her eyes had become sunken in her head. When they heard their neighbors' account and then observed her behavior for themselves, they chided her for it several times, but to no avail, which prompted them to have the pot secretly removed from her room. Upon discovering that it was missing, she kept asking to have it back with the greatest insistence, but they refused to return it to her. And so, she went on crying and lamenting until she fell ill, and from her sickbed all she ever asked for was her pot of basil.

The brothers were very puzzled by her persistent entreaties and decided to find out what was inside the pot. When they dumped out the soil, they saw the cloth and the head wrapped inside it, which was not yet sufficiently decomposed that they could not help but identify it, from the curly hair, as being Lorenzo's. Utterly confounded by what they had discovered, and fearful that news of it would get around, they buried the head, after which, without saying another word, they made all the arrangements for an orderly departure from Messina, secretly left the city, and moved to Naples.

The young woman never stopped weeping and asking over and over again for that pot of hers. And so weeping, she died, thus bringing her ill-fated love to its end. In the course of time, however, people did learn the truth about the affair, and one of them composed the song that we still sing today, which goes:

Who was that wicked Christian man who stole my pot of herbs from me, etc.