

Day 5, Story 9



In love with a lady who does not return his affection, Federigo degli Alberighi consumes his fortune, spending it all on courting her, until the only thing he has left is a single falcon. When she comes to call on him at his house, he serves it to her to eat because he has nothing else to offer her. Upon discovering what he has done, she has a change of heart, takes him as her husband, and makes him a rich man.¹

Once Filomena had stopped speaking, the Queen saw that no one else was left except for Dioneo, who had his privilege, and so she said, with a cheerful expression on her face:

Since it is now my turn to speak, dearest ladies, I shall do so gladly and shall tell you a story that partly resembles the preceding one. I do not do so just to make you realize what an effect your charms have on noble hearts, but to teach you how you should, when it is fitting, decide for yourselves how to bestow your favors rather than always allowing Fortune to direct you, for she, as it happens, almost always distributes her gifts with more abundance than discretion.

You should know, then, that Coppo di Borghese Domenichi, who used to live in our city, and perhaps lives there still, was one of the most distinguished and highly respected men of our times, an illustrious person who deserved eternal fame more because of his character and abilities than his noble lineage.² When he was well advanced in years, he often derived great pleasure from talking with his neighbors, and with others as well, about incidents from the past. In this he excelled other men, for he had a good sense of how to order things, possessed a capacious memory, and was quite eloquent. Among his many fine stories, there was one he used to tell about a young man who once lived

in Florence named Federigo, the son of Messer Filippo Alberighi, who for feats of arms and courtly manners was more highly spoken of than any other squire in Tuscany.³

As often happens with gentlemen, Federigo fell in love with a noble lady named Monna Giovanna, who was in her time considered to be one of the most beautiful and refined women in Florence. In an attempt to earn her love, he participated in jousts and tournaments, held banquets, lavished gifts on people, and spent his wealth without restraint. She, however, who was no less honest than beautiful, took no notice of either the things that were done for her or the person who did them.

As Federigo continued to spend money well beyond his means, while acquiring nothing from his lady in return, he went through his entire fortune, as can easily happen, and wound up a poor man, left with nothing except a tiny little farm, the income from which was just enough for him to live very frugally, and a single falcon, which was among the finest in the world. More in love with the lady than ever, but knowing that he could no longer live in the city in the style he preferred, he moved out to Campi where his little farm was located.⁴ There he would go hunting with his falcon whenever he could, and without asking assistance from anyone, he bore his poverty with patience.

One day, while Federigo was living in these extremely straitened circumstances, Monna Giovanna's husband, who was very rich, happened to fall ill, and seeing death approach, drew up his will. In it he left his entire estate to his son, who was still a growing boy, and since he also loved his wife very dearly, he made her his heir in the case that his son should die without lawful issue. Then, shortly after that, he passed away.

Monna Giovanna was left a widow, and as our women normally do every year, she went to the country during the summer, taking her son with her to an estate of theirs not far from Federigo's farm. Consequently, the little boy happened to strike up a friendship with Federigo and developed a passionate interest in birds and dogs. He had often seen Federigo's falcon in flight and was so taken with it that he longed to have it for his own, but since he realized how dear it was to Federigo, he never dared to ask him for it.

So things stood, when, to his mother's deep distress, the boy happened to fall ill. Since he was her only child and she loved him as much as one possibly could, she hovered about him all day long, never ceasing to comfort him. Every so often she asked him if there was anything he wanted, imploring him to tell her, because if it was possible to acquire it, she would see about getting it for him.

Finally, after hearing her make this offer over and over again, the boy said: "Mother, if you could arrange for me to have Federigo's falcon, I think I'd soon get better."

When she heard his request, the lady pondered it a great while as she tried to figure out what she should do in response. Knowing that Federigo had been in love with her for a long time and had not received even a single passing glance from her, she said to herself: "How can I send someone to him, let alone go there myself and ask him for his falcon, which is, from everything I've heard, the finest that ever flew, and more than that, the only thing keeping him alive? How can I be so insensitive as to want to deprive such a noble man of his one remaining pleasure?"

Stuck in this quandary, she remained silent, not knowing what to say in answer to her son's request, even though she was certain the falcon was hers for the asking. Finally, however, her love for her son got the better of her, and she decided to satisfy him, come what may, not by sending someone for the falcon, but by going there herself to get it and bring it back to him. "Cheer up, my son," she said, "and just think about getting better. I promise you I'll go to fetch it first thing in the morning, and I'll bring it back here to you for sure." The boy was overjoyed, and that very same day, began showing signs of improvement.

The next morning, taking another woman along with her as company, the lady went over to Federigo's little cottage and asked for him just as though it was nothing more than a casual visit. Since the weather had not been right for hawking for several days, Federigo was in his kitchen garden taking care of one or two little chores, but the moment he heard, to his utter astonishment, that Monna Giovanna was at the door and wanted to see him, he was so happy that he ran there at once to meet her.

When she saw him coming, she got up to meet him with womanly grace. After receiving his respectful greeting, she said, "I hope you are well, Federigo." Then she continued: "I have come to make amends for the harm you have suffered on my account in loving me more than you should have. What I offer you by way of compensation is that I and my companion should like to have a simple dinner here at home with you this morning."

"My lady," replied Federigo in all humility, "I cannot recall ever having suffered any harm on account of you. On the contrary, I have received so much good that if I have ever proved myself worthy in any way, it was entirely due to your merit and to the love I bore you. Moreover, let me assure you that this visit, which is such a generous gesture on your part, is even more precious to me than it would be if I were once again able to spend as much as I have in the past, although on this occasion you have come to a very poor host indeed."

When he finished speaking, he humbly welcomed her into his house and from there led her into his garden, where, not having anyone to keep her company, he said: "My lady, since there is no one else available, this good woman, who is the wife of this farmhand here, will keep you company, while I go to see about having the table set."

Although his poverty was dire, until then Federigo had not realized how desperately needy he had made himself by squandering all his wealth. That morning, however, when he discovered that he had nothing with which he could honor the lady, for whose love he had entertained countless people in the past, he was forced to realize just what it was that he had done. Distressed beyond measure, he silently cursed his fortune, as he ran here and there like a man out of his senses, but he had no success in finding either money or something to pawn. It was already late in the morning, and he was still determined to honor the noble lady with a meal of some sort without asking for assistance from his own farmhand, let alone anyone else, when his eye happened to fall upon his precious falcon sitting on its perch in the little room where he kept it. Since he had no other recourse, he seized the bird, and finding it nice and plump, decided it would make a worthy dish for such a lady. So, without giving the matter a second thought, he wrung its neck and

promptly gave it to a maidservant to be plucked, dressed, and carefully roasted on a spit. Then, when the table was laid with the whitest linen—for he still had some of that in his possession—he returned to the lady in the garden and with a smile on his face told her that their dinner, such as he could prepare for her, was ready.

The lady and her companion arose and came to the table. Then, together with Federigo, who served them with the greatest devotion, they ate the fine falcon without knowing what it was they were eating.

After they had finished dining and the two women had chatted pleasantly with Federigo for a while, the lady felt it was the right time to tell him her reason for coming. Thus, in an affable manner, she began speaking to him:

“Federigo, I haven’t the slightest doubt but that you are going to marvel at my presumption when you hear the principal reason for my coming here, especially when you recall your past life and my honesty, which you may have interpreted as harshness and cruelty. But if you had children, or if you had ever had any, you would recognize just how powerful the love one bears for them can be, and on that account, I feel certain you would, to some extent, forgive me.

“Although you have no children, I, who do have a son, am not exempt from the laws common to all other mothers, and since I have no choice but to obey them, I am forced, against my will and contrary to all the rules of decency and decorum, to ask you to make me a gift of something to which I know you are deeply attached—and with good reason, for it is the only delight, the only recreation, the only consolation left you after the loss of your entire fortune. And that gift is your falcon, for which my son has such a longing that if I do not bring it back to him, I fear his sickness is going to get so much worse that I might well lose him. And therefore, not because of the love you bear me, which places you under no obligation to me, but because of your nobility, by which you have shown yourself superior to everyone else in performing acts of courtesy, I implore you to be so kind as to give it to me so that I may be able to say I have preserved my son’s life by means of this gift and have thereby placed him forever in your debt.”

When he heard what the lady wanted from him and realized that

there was no way for him to be of service to her because he had given her the falcon to eat, Federigo began weeping in her presence before he could so much as utter a word in reply. The lady at first believed his tears arose more from his grief over having to part with his prized falcon than from any other motive, and she was on the point of telling him she no longer wanted it. She held herself back, however, and waited to see how Federigo would respond once he stopped crying.

"My lady," he said, "ever since it pleased God that I should make you the object of my love, I have repeatedly complained that Fortune has been my enemy, but everything she did is trivial in comparison with what she has done to me just now. Nor shall I ever be able to forgive her, for I cannot help thinking of how you have come here to my poor house, which you never deigned to visit when it was rich, and how you want only a trifling gift from me, but she has arranged things so that I cannot give it to you. Why I cannot do so, I will explain to you in just a few words.

"When you did me the kindness of saying you wished to dine with me, I deemed it right and proper, in consideration of your distinction and your merit, to honor you by doing all I could to provide you with choicer fare than that which I generally serve other people. Calling to mind the excellence of the falcon you asked me for, I decided it would make a worthy dish for you, and so, this morning I had it roasted and served to you on a trencher, which was, I thought, the best way to present it. But now, I realize that you wanted to have it in a different sense, and I am so distressed by my inability to be of service to you that I do not believe I shall ever forgive myself."

After he finished speaking, he had the feathers, the talons, and the beak placed before her as evidence. On seeing and hearing all this, although the lady initially reproached him for having killed such a falcon simply in order to feed a woman, she then began commending him to herself and was soon filled with admiration for his magnanimity, which his poverty had not been able to diminish, nor ever would. Now, however, that she could not hope to obtain the falcon, she feared that her son's health was therefore in jeopardy, and so, after thanking Federigo for both his hospitality and his good intentions, she took her

leave of him, utterly despondent, and returned to her child. To the immeasurable grief of his mother, in the space of a few days, whether it was the result of his depression because he could not have the falcon, or simply the case that his illness would have inevitably led him to such a pass, the boy departed from this life.

After a period of bitter mourning and endless tears, the lady was urged by her brothers on more than one occasion to remarry, since she had been left very rich and was still a young woman. Although she would have preferred to remain a widow, they importuned her so insistently that finally, recalling Federigo's great worth and his last act of generosity, that is, his having killed such a splendid falcon in her honor, she said to them: "I would gladly abstain from marriage, if only that would please you, but since you really want me to choose a husband, you may be certain that I shall never take any man other than Federigo degli Alberighi."

"What are you saying, you silly woman?" said her brothers, making fun of her. "How can you want someone who doesn't have a thing in the world?"

"My brothers," she replied, "I am well aware of the truth of what you're saying, but I'd rather have a man without riches than riches without a man."

Seeing that her mind was made up and knowing Federigo to be a very worthy gentleman, despite his poverty, the brothers acceded to her wishes and gave her to him, together with all her wealth. And so, Federigo, finding himself not just married to the great lady he had loved so dearly, but a very rich man to boot, managed his fortune more prudently than he had before and lived with her happily to the end of his days.

Day 5, Story 10



After Pietro di Vinciolo goes out to have supper, his wife invites a young man to come to her house, but hides him underneath a chicken coop when her husband returns. Pietro tells her that while he was eating at Ercolano's place, they discovered a young man who had been brought there by his wife. Pietro's wife criticizes her severely, but then an ass unfortunately steps on the fingers of the young man underneath the coop, and when he screams, Pietro runs out and sees him, thus discovering his wife's deception. In the end, however, because of his own perversion, he reaches an understanding with her.¹

When the Queen's story had come to its conclusion, and everyone had praised God for having given Federigo the reward he deserved, Dioneo, who never waited around to be asked, began speaking:

I do not know whether to term it an accidental failing stemming from our bad habits, or a defect in our nature as human beings, but the fact is that we are more inclined to laugh about bad behavior than about good deeds, and especially when we ourselves are not involved. And since the sole purpose of the task I am about to undertake, as I have undertaken it on previous occasions, is to dispel your melancholy, loving ladies, and to provide you with laughter and merriment, I am going to tell you the following story, for even though the subject matter is a little unseemly, it may well give you pleasure. As you listen to it, you should do what you would normally do when you go out into your gardens, where you stretch out your delicate hands to pluck the roses, but leave the thorns alone. This you will do if you leave the wicked husband to his ill-fated, degenerate behavior, while laughing merrily

at the amorous tricks of his wife, and feeling compassion, as need be, for the misfortunes of others.

There once lived in Perugia, not so very long ago, a rich man named Pietro di Vinciolo who got married, perhaps to deceive his fellow citizens and to improve the low opinion they all had of him, more than because of any desire he had to take a wife.² And Fortune showed herself to be in such conformity with his proclivities that the wife he chose for himself was a buxom young woman with red hair and a fiery complexion who would have preferred to have two husbands rather than one, and who now found herself with a man whose inclinations led him elsewhere rather than in her direction.

In the course of time the wife came to understand the way things stood, and since she was well aware of just how fresh and lovely she was, and how lusty and lively she felt, she got so upset about it that every once in a while, she would quarrel with her husband and call him filthy names. She was miserable practically every moment until it finally dawned on her that if she went on like this, it might well lead to her prostration rather than any reformation of her husband's vice, and so, she said to herself:

"Since this sorry pervert abandons me to go up the dry path in his clogs, I'll do my best to get others to board my boat and carry them through the rain.* I took him as my husband and brought him a fine large dowry, acting on the assumption that he was a man and believing he was interested in the kind of thing men generally like, as they certainly should. After all, if I hadn't thought he was a man, I would never have married him. Furthermore, he knew I was a woman, and if women weren't to his taste, why did he ever take me as his wife? I'm

*The two expressions in this sentence were proverbial: *andare in zoccoli per l'asciutto* ("go in [his] clogs up [lit., through, along] the dry [path]") for homosexual love; and for heterosexual love, *portare altrui in nave per lo piovoso* ("get others to board my boat and carry them through the rain"). The first saying may involve the idea that since clogs had high soles, there was no need for them when walking on a dry surface—i.e., homosexual love is superfluous or irrelevant. But clogs, in and of themselves, generally evoked homosexual love in the period, perhaps through their association with friars. "The dry path" is suggestive in its own right, of course, and the second saying about heterosexual love, involving carrying people on board one's boat when it is raining, should need no comment.

not going to put up with this. Had I wanted to turn my back on the world, I would have become a nun, but in choosing to live in it as I do, if I expect any fun and games out of this guy, I'll probably still be waiting in vain for that when I'm an old woman. And what good will it do me, in my old age, to look back and grieve over having wasted my youth, especially since this husband of mine here has actually been a really good teacher and shown me precisely how I ought to console myself? I should get my pleasure from the same thing he delights in, but whereas that pleasure will be strongly condemned in his case, in mine it will be commendable, for I will merely be breaking the laws of marriage, while he breaks those of Nature as well."

These, then, were the good lady's thoughts, to which she probably returned on more than one occasion, and in order to put them into effect on the sly, she made the acquaintance of an old woman who gave every indication of being a Saint Verdiana feeding the serpents, for she would go around to every pardoning service at church, always carrying her rosary in her hand, and never talking about anything except the lives of the Holy Fathers and the wounds of Saint Francis, with the result that virtually everyone considered her a saint.* When the time seemed right, the wife revealed her intentions in full to the old woman, who said in reply:

"My child, God knows—and He knows everything—that what you'll be doing is right, because even if you had no other reason, you're bound to do it, you and every other young woman, rather than fritter away your youth. To anyone who's had any experience of such matters, there's no grief equal to that of having let your time go to waste. After all, what the devil are we women good for in our old age except to sit around the fire and stare at the ashes? If there are any women who know this and can prove it to you, I'm certainly one of them. Now that I'm old, I experience the sharpest, most bitter pangs of regret in

* According to popular legends recounting the life of Saint Verdiana Attavanti (1182–1242), the most venerated saint in Castelfiorentino, Tuscany, two serpents entered the nun's cell there, and since she thought they were sent by God to tempt her, she fed them and took care of them. The saint's name was thus synonymous with devotion and asceticism.

my heart whenever I realize, all to no avail, how many opportunities I let slip by. Actually, I didn't waste all of them—I wouldn't want you to think me a complete idiot—but I still didn't do as much as I could have. And so, when I recall the past and then contemplate the state you see me in today, God only knows how sorry I feel that I can't find anyone nowadays to light my fire for me.³

"It's not like that for men. They're born with a thousand different talents besides this, and for the most part, the older ones are worth much more than the young. But women are born just to do this single thing, and to make babies, and that's the only reason why they're cherished. Now, if nothing else will convince you of this, then you ought to consider the fact that we women are always ready for it, which is not the case with men. What's more, one woman could exhaust a host of men, whereas a host of men can't tire out a single woman. And since this is the purpose for which we are born, I repeat that you'll be doing the right thing if you give your husband tit for tat, for that way, when you grow old, your heart won't have any reason to lodge a complaint against your flesh.

"In this world, you only get what you grab for, especially in the case of women, so it's far more important for them than for men to make the best use of their opportunities while they've still got some, because as you can see for yourself, when we get old, neither our husbands nor any other man can bear the sight of us. On the contrary, they chase us away into the kitchen to tell tales to the cat and to count the pots and pans. What's worse, they make up rhymes about us and sing:

For young gals, all the best mouthfuls in town;
For old ones, stuff that gets stuck halfway down.

And they have lots of other sayings just like that.

"But to avoid detaining you any longer with my chatter, let me tell you that you couldn't have revealed your thoughts to anybody else in the world who was better able to help you. For there's no man so refined that I would hesitate to tell him what's required of him, nor is there anyone so hard and churlish that I couldn't really soften him up and get

him to do what I want. All you have to do is to show me which one you like, and then leave the rest to me. But let me ask one thing of you, my child, and that is to always keep me in mind, for I'm a poor old woman, and from now on I want you to take a share in all of my indulgences and all the Our Fathers I recite, so that God may turn them into so many lights and candles for your own dear departed ones."

When the old woman had had her say, the young lady came to an understanding with her, telling her that if she ever happened to see a certain young fellow who often walked through that part of the city and whose features the young lady described to her in great detail, she would know what she had to do. She then gave the old woman a piece of salted meat and sent her on her way with God's blessings.

It only took a few days for the old woman, acting on the sly, to get the guy the young lady had been talking about into her bedroom, and then, a little after that, another one and yet another one, as they happened to catch the young lady's fancy. And although she lived in constant fear of her husband, she never failed to take advantage of any opportunity that presented itself to her.

One evening, when her husband was supposed to go out to have supper with a friend of his named Ercolano, the wife gave the old woman the order to bring her one of the prettiest, most agreeable youths in Perugia, an order that she carried out with alacrity.⁴ But the wife had just sat down at the supper table with young man when, lo and behold, there was Pietro at the entrance shouting for her to open the door.

When she heard her husband's voice, the lady thought she was as good as dead, but all the same, she wanted to conceal the young man if she could, and since she did not see how she could send him away or think of any other place for him to hide, she got him to take refuge underneath a chicken coop in the shed adjoining the room in which they were having supper. Then she took the cover of a straw mattress, whose contents had been emptied out earlier that day, and threw it over him. This done, she rushed to the door and opened it for her husband, saying to him as he entered the house: "You sure gulped down that supper of yours in a big hurry."

"We didn't even get to taste it," he replied.

"How come?" the lady asked.

"I'll tell you how come," he said. "We'd just sat down at the table, Ercolano, his wife, and I, when we heard someone sneezing nearby. We took no notice of it the first time, or the second, but when the guy who had sneezed did it again a third and then a fourth and a fifth time, and a good many more times after that, it got us all to wondering. Already a little irritated by his wife because she'd left us standing in the entryway for ages before opening the door, Ercolano just about flew into a rage and blurted out, 'What's the meaning of this? Who's doing all that sneezing?' Then he got up from the table and walked over to some stairs nearby, which had an enclosure made of wooden boards at the bottom, the sort of thing we often see people use for storage when they're tidying up their houses.

"Since it seemed to Ercolano that the sneezing was coming from inside there, he opened the little door, and the moment he did, out flew the worst smell of sulfur in the world. We had actually gotten a whiff of the stench before then, but when we had complained about it, Ercolano's wife had said, 'That's because I was using sulfur earlier to bleach my veils, and even though I sprinkled it over them in a large pan so they would absorb the fumes and then placed it under the stairs, it's still giving off an odor.'

"Since Ercolano had opened the closet door and the fumes had now dispersed to some extent, he looked inside and caught sight of the guy who'd been sneezing. In fact, he was still doing it because of the overpowering stench of the sulfur, and despite all his sneezing, the sulfur was choking him to the point that if he'd stayed in there much longer, he wouldn't have sneezed, or done anything else for that matter, ever again.

"The moment he saw the guy, Ercolano yelled: 'Now I see, woman, why you made us wait so long outside the door just now before you got around to opening it. But I'm going to pay you back for this, if it's the last thing I do!' When his wife heard this threat and realized that her sin had been discovered, she got up from the table without saying a word to excuse herself and fled away, nor do I have the slightest idea where she went. Not noticing that she'd taken off, Ercolano repeatedly

told the guy who was sneezing to come out, but he was on his last legs and didn't budge no matter what Ercolano said. So, Ercolano grabbed him by one of his feet, dragged him out, and then ran off for a knife with the intention of killing him. But I was afraid we'd be arrested by the watch, myself included, and so I got up and wouldn't let him murder the guy or even do him any harm. In fact, as I was defending him from Ercolano, it was my shouting that brought some of the neighbors to the scene, and they picked up the young man, who was now more dead than alive, and carried him to some place out of the house, although I have no idea where. Because of all these goings-on, our supper was disrupted, and as I said before, not only did I not gulp it down, I didn't even get to taste it."

When the wife heard her husband's story, she realized that there were other women who were just as clever as she was, even though some of their plans occasionally met with misfortune. She would have been glad to speak out in defense of Ercolano's wife, but thinking that if she condemned someone else's misdeeds, she would have a freer scope for her own, she said:

"What fine goings-on! What a good, saintly person that woman must be! What a faithful, honest spouse! Why, I was practically ready to make my confession to her, she seemed so devout! And the worst part of it is that someone her age should be setting such a fine example for young women! I curse the hour she came into the world, and curse the wicked, deceitful woman for allowing herself to become a universal figure of shame and scorn for all the women in the city! Not only has she thrown away any concern for her honor, the vow of fidelity she made when she got married, and her reputation in society, but she felt no remorse at involving her husband in her disgrace, despite the fact that he's treated her very well and is such a proper man and a well-respected citizen—and all for the sake of some other guy! So help me God, women of that sort should be shown no mercy. They should be killed. In fact, they should be burned alive until they're reduced to ashes!"

Then, recollecting that she had concealed her lover underneath the chicken coop next to the room they were in, she began coaxing Pietro to go to bed, telling him that it was time to do so. But he was much more

interested in food than in sleep and kept asking her whether there was anything for supper.

"Sure, we've got something for supper!" she replied. "We always go ahead and make supper when you're not here! What do you take me for, Ercolano's wife? So, why don't you just go off to bed for tonight? It would be a lot better for you!"

Now, that evening, it just so happened that some of the farmhands who worked for Pietro had brought him a load of provisions from his farm and had tethered their asses in a little stable located next to the shed. They had not bothered to give the animals anything to drink, and one of them, desperately thirsty, had slipped its head out of its halter, strayed away from the stable, and gone sniffing around everywhere to see if it could find water. As it went roaming about, it wound up, by chance, bumping into the chicken coop under which the young man was hiding. Since he was forced to crouch there on all fours, the fingers of one of his hands, which he had stretched out on the ground, were protruding slightly from underneath the coop, and it was just his luck—or rather, his bad luck, we should say—that the ass stepped right on them with his hoof, causing the young man such excruciating pain that he started shrieking at the top of his lungs.

When he heard the noise, Pietro was astonished, and realizing that it was coming from the interior of the house, he went outside the room, where the guy was still howling, for the ass had not yet lifted up its hoof from off his fingers and was continuing to press down on them just as hard as ever. "Who's that there?" yelled Pietro, and he ran right over to the coop, lifted it up, and discovered the young man who was not only suffering from the pain of having his fingers crushed by the ass's hoof, but was shaking all over with fear that Pietro might do him some injury. Recognizing the young man as someone he had long pursued for his own wicked purposes, Pietro asked him, "What are you doing here?" The young man said nothing in reply to this question, but instead, begged Pietro, for the love of God, not to harm him.

"Get up," said Pietro. "There's no reason to worry. I'm not going to hurt you. Just tell me how you wound up in here, and why."

The young man told him everything, and Pietro, who was as happy

to have discovered him there as his wife was upset about it, took him by the hand and led him back into the room where she was waiting for him, just as frightened as she could be. Pietro sat down right in front of her and said: "When you were cursing out Ercolano's wife just now, saying that she should be burned and that she was a disgrace to all you women, why didn't you say the same things about yourself? Or if you wanted to avoid speaking about yourself, how did you have the gall to talk about her since you knew you'd done exactly what she did? The only reason you said it, of course, is that you women are all alike: you're always looking to use other people's faults to cover up your own transgressions. I wish that Heaven would send down a fire and burn up the whole disgusting lot of you!"

Seeing that in the first flush of his anger Pietro had done nothing worse than abuse her verbally, and sensing that he was thoroughly delighted to be holding such a good-looking youth by the hand, his wife took heart and said: "I'm not surprised that you'd like to have a fire come down from Heaven and burn us all up, because you're the kind of guy who's as fond of women as a dog is of a cudgel, but by God's Cross, you're not going to see that wish of yours fulfilled. Still, I'd like to discuss this with you a bit more, because I want to know what it is you're complaining about. As far as I'm concerned, it would certainly be fine with me if you wanted to put me on an equal footing with Ercolano's wife, because at least that breast-beating old hypocrite gets what she wants out of her husband, and he's as fond of her as any man is of his spouse—which is more than can be said in my case. Sure, I grant you do a good job of providing me with clothes and shoes, but you know only too well how I'm doing in another respect and how long it's been since the last time you slept with me. I'd rather go around barefoot and in rags, and have you treat me well in bed, than to have all that stuff and to be treated by you the way I am. Now, you need to understand me clearly here, Pietro: I'm a woman just like the rest, and I want the same thing they do. And if I can't get it from you, you have no cause to bad-mouth me just because I go and find it for myself somewhere else. At least I do you the honor of not getting involved with stable boys and other riffraff."

Pietro realized that she could go on talking like this all night long, and since he was not particularly interested in her anyway, he said: "All right, woman, that's enough. I'll make sure that you get what'll really satisfy you. But now, will you be so kind as to arrange for us to have something to eat, because it seems to me that this young man here hasn't had any more supper than I have."

"Of course he hasn't had any supper yet," said the lady, "because we were just sitting down at the table to eat when you showed up, damn you."

"Well go then," said Pietro, "and see to it that we get some food. After that, I'll take care of things so that you won't have any more reason to complain."

Seeing that her husband was content, the lady got up and soon had the table set again. Once it was spread with the food that she had prepared, she ate supper merrily with her pervert of a husband and the young man.

What exactly Pietro had worked out to satisfy all three of them after supper has slipped my mind, but this much I do know. When the young man was escorted back to the piazza the next morning, he was not entirely sure whether he had been more of a wife or a husband that night. And that's why my advice to you, dear ladies, is to do unto others as they do unto you. And if you can't do it right then and there, bear it in mind until you can. That way, just like that ass bumping into the wall, you'll give as good as you get.*

*Dioneo's final comment repeats almost exactly a comment made by one of the merchants when they are talking together at the start of 2.9. The point of the comment is that when an ass bumps into a wall, he is, in a sense, bumped back by the wall. In short, Dioneo's advice is that it is a game of tit for tat: women should feel free to cheat on their husbands since their husbands feel free to cheat on them.

Day 6, Story 4



Chichibio, Currado Gianfigliuzzi's cook, saves himself by means of a prompt retort that converts his master's anger into laughter, allowing him to escape the unpleasant fate with which Currado had threatened him.¹

When Laretta was silent and everyone had heaped praise on Nonna, the Queen ordered Neifile to follow suit, and she said:

Affectionate ladies, although a ready wit will often supply a speaker with things to say that are useful, beautiful, and appropriate for the circumstances, it sometimes happens that Fortune will come to the aid of people who are scared and will suddenly put words in their mouths that they would never have been able to come up with if they were not under pressure—which is what I want to show you with this story of mine.

As all of you ladies will have heard and seen for yourselves, Currado Gianfigliuzzi has long been a noteworthy citizen of Florence, a generous and magnanimous individual who always led the life of a gentleman and delighted in hawks and hounds, to say nothing for the moment of his more significant activities. One day a falcon he owned brought down a crane in the vicinity of Peretola,² and finding it to be young and plump, he sent it to an accomplished cook of his, a Venetian named Chichibio, ordering him to dress it well and then roast it for supper.*

Chichibio, who was as much of a birdbrain as he looked, prepared the crane, set it over the fire, and began to cook it with great care. When it

* Chichibio's name is derived from an onomatopoeic Venetian word for the song of the chaffinch: *cicibío*. The implication is, of course, that he is a birdbrain.

was almost done and was giving off a most appetizing smell, a little gal from the country named Brunetta, with whom Chichibio was utterly infatuated, happened to come into the kitchen. On catching sight of the crane and sniffing its aroma, she pleaded lovingly with him to give her one of its thighs.

Chichibio replied to her in his singsong way and said: "You're not a-goin' a get it from me, Donna Brunetta, you're not a-goin' a get it from me."*

Donna Brunetta was rather peeved and said, "I swear to God, if you don't give it to me, you'll never get what you want out of me ever again." In short, they went on exchanging words like this until finally Chichibio, not wishing to anger his ladylove, cut off one of the crane's legs and gave it to her.

A little later, when the crane was set before Currado and his guests, he was surprised to find that one of its legs was missing. He had Chichibio summoned and asked him what had happened to it, and the lying Venetian promptly replied: "My lord, cranes only have one thigh and one leg."

"What the devil do you mean they have only one thigh and one leg?" said Currado in a rage. "Do you think I've never seen any cranes except this one?"

"It's just the way I'm telling you it is, sir," continued Chichibio. "If you like, we can go and see some live ones, and I'll show you."

Out of consideration for his guests, Currado decided not to pursue the argument any further, but said: "I've never seen or even heard of any one-legged cranes, but since you've said you'll show me some live ones, I want to see them tomorrow morning for myself, and then I'll be satisfied. But I swear by the body of Christ that if you don't prove it,

* Making fun of Chichibio's Venetian dialect, Boccaccio has him "sing" his response and use Venetian forms of Italian words, which must have made the dialect sound somewhat songlike to a Florentine. Chichibio is also satirized for his use of a courtly vocabulary with his ladylove: he uses *donna* for her, meaning "lady," calling her *donna Brunetta*, and addresses her as *voi*, employing the plural and more polite form for "you," rather than the singular, more familiar *tu*.

I'll have them take care of you in such a way that you'll feel sorry every time you call my name to mind for the rest of your life."

Thus, the discussion was closed for that evening, but the next morning, as soon as it was light, Currado, whose anger had not abated while he slept, got out of bed, and still seething with rage, ordered them to bring the horses. After making Chichibio mount an old nag, he led him toward a riverbank where cranes could always be spotted at daybreak, and said to him: "We'll soon see which one of us was lying last night."

Perceiving that Currado was still angry and that he was going to have to make good on his lie, Chichibio, who had no idea how to manage it, was in a state of absolute terror as he rode along behind his master. If he could have run away, he would have done so gladly, but since that was impossible, he kept looking ahead of him and behind him and on either side, and everywhere he turned, the cranes he saw all seemed to be standing on two legs.

But just as they were approaching the river, Chichibio spotted a dozen cranes or more on its bank well before anyone else did, and all of them were standing on one leg as they normally do when they are sleeping. Chichibio immediately pointed them out to Currado and announced: "Now, if you'll take a look at those cranes over there, sir, you can see quite clearly that I was telling you the truth last night when I said that they have only one thigh and one foot."

Currado looked at them and said, "Wait a bit, and I'll show you they have two." Then, moving a little closer to them, he shouted, "Ho, ho!" At this outburst, the cranes put down their other feet, and after taking a couple of steps, they all began flying away. After that, Currado turned to Chichibio and said: "What do you say to that, you gluttonous rogue?³ Do they have two legs, or not?"

Chichibio was utterly confounded, but managed to come up with a reply even though he did not have the slightest idea where the words were coming from.

"They do indeed, sir," he said, "but you didn't cry 'Ho, ho!' to the one last night. Had you yelled like that, it would have stuck out its other thigh and its other foot just the way these here did."

Currado enjoyed this answer so much that all his anger was transformed into merry laughter.

"You're right, Chichibio," he said. "That's exactly what I should have done."

Thus, by means of his prompt and amusing reply, Chichibio made peace with his master and avoided an unpleasant fate.