

Day 6, Story 7



When Madonna Filippa's husband discovers her with a lover, she is called before a judge, but secures her freedom by means of a prompt and amusing reply, while also getting the statute changed at the same time.¹

Fiammetta had stopped talking, and everyone was still laughing about the novel argument used by Scalza to demonstrate the pre-eminent nobility of the Baronci, when the Queen charged Filostrato to tell a story, and so he began:

Worthy ladies, it is a fine thing to be able to speak well in all circumstances, but it is even better, I think, to know how to do so when necessity requires. A noblewoman I am going to tell you about knew this art so well that she did not merely entertain her auditors and make them laugh, but as you are about to hear, she extricated herself from the snare of a shameful death.

In the city of Prato there was once a statute, no less reprehensible than harsh, that condemned women taken in adultery to be burned alive, making no distinction between one whose husband caught her with her lover and one who was doing it with somebody for money. And while this statute was in force, a case occurred in which a gentlewoman named Madonna Filippa, who was not just beautiful, but exceptionally amorous by nature, was discovered one night in her own bedroom by her husband, Rinaldo de' Pugliesi, in the arms of Lazzarino de' Guazzagliotri, a handsome, young nobleman from that city, whom she loved as much as life itself.² When Rinaldo saw the two of them together, he was so deeply disturbed that he could scarcely keep himself from rushing upon them and killing them, and if he had not been afraid of what could happen to him, he might have given in to his angry impulse

and done it. Although he kept this urge under control, however, he could not be restrained from seeking the death of his wife, and as it was unlawful for him to kill her, he was determined to use the city's statute in order to get what he wanted.

Since Rinaldo had more than sufficient evidence to prove that Madonna Filippa was guilty, he sought no further counsel, but denounced her the next morning and had a summons issued for her. Like most women who are truly in love, the lady was possessed of a lofty spirit, and even though many of her friends and relations discouraged her from doing so, she was firmly resolved to appear in court, confess the truth, and die bravely rather than flee like a coward and live in exile because she had defied the law, thus showing herself unworthy of such a lover as the man in whose arms she had been the night before.

Escorted by a large group of men and women, all of whom were encouraging her to deny the charge, she went before the *podestà* and with a steady gaze and a firm voice asked him what he wanted to question her about. As he gazed at her and noted that she was not only very beautiful and extremely well mannered, but possessed a lofty spirit, to which her words bore witness, he began to feel pity for her and was afraid that she would confess to something for which, if he wanted to do his duty as a judge, he would have to condemn her to death.

Since he could not, however, refuse to interrogate her about what she was charged with, he said: "My lady, as you can see, your husband Rinaldo is here, and he's lodged a complaint against you, alleging that he caught you committing adultery with another man. Consequently, he's demanding that I punish you according to the requirements of a statute that's in force here and have you put to death. I can't do that, however, unless you confess. So, be very careful now about how you reply, and tell me if what your husband accuses you of is true."

In no way intimidated, the lady replied in a pleasant voice:

"Sir, it's true that Rinaldo is my husband and that he found me last night in Lazzarino's arms, where I have been many times because of the deep and perfect love I bear him. Nor is this something I would ever deny. But as I'm sure you know, laws should be impartial and should only be enacted with the consent of those affected by them. In

the present case, these conditions have not been met, because this law applies only to us poor women who are much better than men at giving satisfaction to a whole host of lovers. Moreover, when it was passed, not only were there no women present to give their consent to it, but since then, not once have they ever been consulted about it. And that's why, for all these reasons, it could with justice be called a bad law.

"If, however, to the detriment of my body and your soul, you choose to implement it, that's your business. But before you arrive at any sort of verdict, I beg you to grant me a small favor, and that is to ask my husband whether or not I ever told him no and refused to give myself fully and completely to him whenever, and however many times, he liked."

Without waiting for the *podestà* to ask the question, Rinaldo promptly replied that without doubt, she had always satisfied his every desire and given herself to him whenever he requested it.

"Then I ask you, Messer *Podestà*," she continued without a pause, "if he's always obtained what he needed from me and was pleased with it, what was I supposed to do—in fact, what am I to do now—with the leftovers? Should I throw them to the dogs?³ Isn't it much better to serve some of them up to a gentleman who loves me more than his very own life than to let them go to waste or have them spoil?"

The nature of the case and the lady's fame were such that practically all the citizens of Prato had flocked to the trial, and when they heard her amusing questions, they had a good laugh over them, after which they immediately shouted with one voice that she was right and that it was all well said. Then, at the suggestion of the *podestà*, before they left, they modified their cruel statute, restricting it so that it only applied to those women who betrayed their husbands for money.

Thus, having made a fool of himself with what he had tried to do, Rinaldo left the courtroom feeling utterly abashed, whereas his wife was now happy and free, and having been, as it were, resurrected from the flames, she returned to her house in triumph.

Day 6, Story 10



Frate Cipolla promises a group of peasants that he will show them a feather belonging to the Angel Gabriel, but when he finds lumps of coal in its place, he declares that they were the ones used to roast Saint Lawrence.¹

Now that each member of the company had told a story, Dioneo knew that it was his turn to speak, and so, without waiting for a formal command, he imposed silence on those who were praising Guido's pithy retort and began as follows:

Charming ladies, although it is my privilege to speak about whatever I please, today I do not propose to depart from the topic that all of you have spoken about so very fittingly. On the contrary, following in your footsteps, I intend to show you how one of the friars of Saint Anthony, with a quick bit of thinking, found a clever way to avoid a humiliating trap laid for him by two young men. And if I speak at greater length in order to tell you the whole story as it should be told, you should not feel this is a burden, for if you take a look at the sun, you will see that it is still in mid-heaven.

Certaldo, as you may perhaps have heard, is a fortified town in the Val d'Elsa, located in our territory, and although it is small, the people living there were once noble and pretty well-to-do.² Because it offered him such rich pickings, one of the friars of Saint Anthony used to go to Certaldo once a year to collect the alms that all the people were simpleminded enough to donate to his order. His name was Frate Cipolla, and the people used to give him a warm welcome there perhaps as much for his name as for any pious sentiment they felt, since the soil in those parts produced onions that are famous all over

Tuscany.* Small of stature, this Frate Cipolla had red hair and a merry face, and was really the most sociable scoundrel in the world. What is more, although he was not learned, he was such a fine speaker and had such a ready wit that someone unacquainted with him would have concluded not just that he was a grand master of rhetoric, but that he was Cicero himself or maybe Quintilian.³ And there was almost no one in those parts who did not consider him a good buddy, a friend, or at least a nodding acquaintance.

As was his custom, he went there for one of his visits in the month of August, and on a Sunday morning, when all the good men and women from the surrounding villages had gathered in the parish church to hear Mass, he waited for a suitable moment and then came forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is, as you know, your yearly custom to send some of your wheat and oats to the poor of our Lord and Master Saint Anthony,⁴ some of you giving more and some of you less, according to your ability and your devotion, in exchange for which the Blessed Saint Anthony will keep your oxen, asses, pigs, and sheep from harm. It's also customary, especially for those of you who are enrolled as members in our confraternity, to pay the small sum that constitutes your annual dues. Now, I've been sent to collect this money on behalf of my superior, that is, Messer Abbot. And so, with God's blessing, I want you to come outside after nones, when you hear the bells ring, and assemble in front of the church where I will, as usual, preach my sermon and you will kiss the cross. What's more, because I know how deeply devoted you all are to our Lord and Master Saint Anthony, I will, as an act of special grace, show you a beautiful and extremely sacred relic that I myself brought from the Holy Land across the sea, and that is nothing less than one of the Angel Gabriel's feathers that was left behind in the Virgin Mary's bedchamber when he came to Nazareth to perform the Annunciation." And having said all this, he fell silent and then returned to celebrating the Mass.

*Frate Cipolla's name means "Brother Onion," a vegetable whose many layers with no real "center" and whose particular odor are quite suggestive when one considers what Frate Cipolla does in the story.

Among the large number of people present in the church while Frate Cipolla was speaking were two very clever young men, one of them named Giovanni del Bragoniera and the other, Biagio Pizzini.⁵ After having had a good laugh between themselves about Frate Cipolla's relic, they decided, even though they were very close friends and cronies of his, to make use of the feather in order to play a practical joke on him.

They knew that Frate Cipolla was going to dine that morning up in the citadel with one of his friends, and as soon as they knew he was at the table, they went down into the street and made their way to the inn where he was staying. Their plan was for Biagio to keep Frate Cipolla's servant occupied in conversation while Giovanni looked through the friar's belongings for the feather, or whatever it was, and stole it so that they could see later on how he was going to explain what had happened to the people.

Frate Cipolla had a servant whom some called Guccio the Whale, others Guccio the Slob, and yet others Guccio the Pig.⁶ He was such a bad character that Lippo the Mouse never came close to being his match. When chatting with his cronies, Frate Cipolla would often make jokes about him.

"My servant," he would say, "has nine failings, and if any one of them had been found in Solomon or Aristotle or Seneca, it would have been sufficient to ruin all the ingenuity, all the wisdom, and all the sanctity they possessed. So, just think what sort of man he must be, who not only lacks these three qualities, but has nine failings altogether!"

On occasion, someone asked him what the nine were, and he would respond with a rhyme he had made up.

"I'll tell you," he would say. "He's slothful, untruthful, and crude; neglectful, disrespectful, and lewd; careless and witless and rude.⁷ Apart from this, he has some other little black marks it would be better not to talk about. But the funniest thing about him is that wherever he goes, he's always looking to find a wife and rent a house, and since he has a big, black, greasy beard, he thinks he's very handsome and attractive, and that every woman who sees him is in love with him. In fact, if you let him have his way, he'd be chasing after all of them so hard that he wouldn't even notice it when his pants fell down. Truth

to tell, though, he's very helpful to me because whenever anyone wants to impart something in secret to me, he always wants to hear his share of it, and if I'm ever asked a question, he's so afraid I won't be able to answer it that he immediately replies yes or no, just as he sees fit."

When Frate Cipolla had left his servant at the inn, he had been told that on no account was anyone to be allowed to touch any of his master's belongings, and especially his saddlebags, which contained the sacred objects. But Guccio the Slob was fonder of the kitchen than any nightingale is of the green branches, especially if he smelled out some serving girl there, and he had indeed caught sight of one about the inn. She was fat and coarse, short and deformed, with a pair of boobs that looked like two big dung baskets and a face like one of the Baronci's, all sweaty and greasy and covered with soot.⁸ And so, Guccio did not bother to lock the door behind him, but left Frate Cipolla's room and all of his things to take care of themselves, and like a vulture pouncing on carrion, swooped down on the kitchen. Even though it was August, he took a seat next to the fire and struck up a conversation with the girl, whose name was Nuta, telling her he was a gentleman by proxy, that he had more than a gazillion and nine florins, not counting those he owed others, which were greater in number, and that he knew how to say and do more stuff than his master could.⁹

Despite the fact that his cowl was covered with so much grease it would have served as seasoning for the soup caldron of Altopascio, and that his doublet was torn and patched, glazed with filth around the neck and under the armpits, and stained in more colors than cloth from Tartary or India, and that his shoes were falling apart and his stockings all in tatters—despite all this, he told her, as though he were the Lord of Châtillon, that he wanted to buy her some new clothes, set her up properly, release her from this servitude of always waiting on others, and while she would not have much of her own, put her in hope of a better fortune.¹⁰ Nevertheless, although he said all this, and much more besides, with great emotion, everything turned out to be as insubstantial as the wind, and like most of his undertakings, it came to nothing.

Upon discovering Guccio the Pig thus occupied with Nuta, the two

young men were quite pleased because it meant that half their work was done for them. With no one to get in their way, they entered Frate Cipolla's room, which had been left open, and the first thing they came upon in their search was the saddlebag containing the feather. When they opened it, they found a tiny casket inside wrapped up in many folds of taffeta, and when they opened that in turn, they found one of the tail feathers of a parrot inside, which they concluded had to be the one he had promised to show the people of Certaldo.

And without a doubt, in those days he could have easily made them believe what he said about it, because the luxuries of Egypt had only just begun to make their way into Tuscany, as they have since done in great quantities everywhere, to the ruin of the whole of Italy. And if such things were little known elsewhere, in that town the people were not acquainted with them at all. In fact, since the rough, honest ways of their forefathers were still followed there, the vast majority had never seen a parrot, let alone heard people mention one.

Delighted to have found the feather, the young men took it out, and to avoid leaving the casket empty, filled it with some lumps of coal they saw in a corner of the room. Then they shut the lid, and after arranging everything the way it had been, went off gleefully with the feather, unnoticed by anyone, after which they waited to see what Frate Cipolla was going to say when he found the coals in its place.

The simple men and women who were in the church, hearing that they were going to see one of the Angel Gabriel's feathers after nones, returned home when Mass was over and spread the news from friend to friend and neighbor to neighbor.¹¹ Then, once they had all finished eating, they thronged the citadel in such numbers that it could scarcely hold them, men and women both, every last one of them desperate to see that feather.

Having had a good dinner and taken a short nap, Frate Cipolla arose a little after nones. When he learned that a huge crowd of peasants had come to see the feather, he ordered Guccio the Slob to come up to him and to bring the bells and the saddlebags with him. Tearing himself away from the kitchen and from Nuta with difficulty, Guccio struggled up with the things he was asked to bring. His body was so bloated from

all the water he had drunk that when he arrived, he was completely out of breath. Still, at Frate Cipolla's command, he went to the church door and began vigorously ringing the bells.

Once all of the people were assembled, Frate Cipolla began his sermon and said a great deal to serve his own purposes, never noticing that any of his things had been tampered with. As he was approaching the moment to show them the Angel Gabriel's feather, first he recited the *Confiteor* with great solemnity and had two large candles lit.* Then, having thrown back his cowl, he slowly unfolded the taffeta wrapping, brought out the casket, and after reciting a short, laudatory speech in praise of the Angel Gabriel and his relic, proceeded to open it. When he saw it was filled with lumps of coal, he did not suspect that Guccio the Whale had done this to him, because he did not think the man capable of rising to such heights, nor did he blame him for having done a bad job of preventing others from playing such a trick. Instead, he silently cursed himself for having trusted Guccio to safeguard his belongings since he knew the man was neglectful, disrespectful, careless, and witless. Without changing color, however, he raised his hands and his eyes to heaven and said in a voice that all could hear, "O God, blessed be Thy power forever and ever." Then he closed the casket and turned to the people.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I want you to know that when I was still quite young, I was sent by my superior into those parts of the world where the sun rises, and at his express command I was charged to seek out the Privileges of the Porcellana, which, although they cost nothing to seal, are much more useful to others than to us.¹² I set out on my journey to find them, departing from Venice and going through Greekburg, after which, riding from there through the Kingdom of Algarve and Baghdad, I arrived in Parione, from which I made it to Sardinia after a while, though not without suffering great thirst.

"But why should I go through every particular country I visited? After having passed the Straits of Saint George, I came to Conland and Clownland, which are populous countries inhabited by a great many

*The *Confiteor* ("I confess") is a prayer recited at the beginning of the Mass.

people, and from there I went to Liarland, where I found a large number of friars, including many who belonged to our own order, all of whom were bent on forsaking a life of discomfort for the love of God, and cared little about others' troubles wherever they saw they could pursue their own advantage.¹³ And in all of those countries I only spent money that had not been minted. Next I came to the Land of Abruzzi, where men and women climb up the mountains in clogs and clothe pigs in their own guts, and a little farther on I found a people who carry bread on sticks and wine in a sack, after which I arrived at the Basqueworm Mountains where all the water flows downhill.¹⁴ In short, I went so far in those parts that I even reached India Parsinippia where I swear to you by the habit I'm wearing that I saw pruningbills fly, which is quite unbelievable if you haven't seen it—and Maso del Saggio will second me on this, for I met him there and he's a great merchant who cracks nuts and sells their shells retail.¹⁵

"But because I couldn't find what I was sent for, and because from that point on you have to go by water, I turned back and came to the Holy Land where in summertime cold bread costs you four pennies, but when it's hot, it doesn't cost you a thing. There I met with the Reverend Father Messer Dontblameme Ifyouplease, the most worshipful Patriarch of Jerusalem, who, out of respect for the habit of our Lord and Master Saint Anthony, which I've always worn, wanted me to see all the relics he had about him.¹⁶ They were so numerous that if I tried to count them all, it would take me miles till I got to the end. Still, since I don't want to disappoint the ladies, I'll tell you about a few of them.

"First of all, he showed me the finger of the Holy Spirit, as whole and sound as it ever was; then the forelock of the seraphim who appeared to Saint Francis; and one of the fingernails of the cherubims; and one of the ribs of the Word-made-flesh-go-right-out-the-window; and the vestments of the Holy Catholic Faith; and some of the rays from the star that appeared to the three Magi in the East; and a vial of Saint Michael's sweat from when he fought with the Devil; and the jawbone of the Death of Saint Lazarus; and lots of others as well.¹⁷

And because I freely gave him *The Dingle of Mount Morello* in the vernacular and several chapters from the *Oldgoatius*, which he had long

been seeking, he made me a part-sharer in his holy relics. He gave me one of the teeth of the Holy Cross, and in a little vial a bit of the sound of the bells from the temple of Solomon, and the feather of the Angel Gabriel, which I've already told you about, and one of the clogs of Saint Gherardo da Villamagna, which a little while ago I gave to Gherardo di Bonsi in Florence, who is particularly devoted to the saint.¹⁸ Finally, he let me have some of the coals on which the most blessed martyr Saint Lawrence was roasted. With the greatest devotion, I brought these things back from over there, and I still have them all in my possession.

"True, my superior has never allowed me to display them until such time as they were verified as authentic, or not, but now that this has been established to his satisfaction by means of certain miracles they have wrought, and by letters sent to us from the Patriarch, he's given me permission to show them. But I'm afraid to entrust them to anyone else and always keep them with me.

"Now, as a matter of fact, I carry the Angel Gabriel's feather in one casket to prevent it from being damaged, and I have the coals on which Saint Lawrence was roasted in another. The two caskets are so much alike that I often mistake one for the other, and that's what happened to me today, for although I thought I was bringing you the casket with the feather, I actually brought the one with the coals.

"I don't think this was a mistake, however. On the contrary, it's clear to me that it was the will of God and that He Himself placed the casket containing the coals in my hands, for I've only now remembered that the Feast of Saint Lawrence is just two days away.* And since God wanted me to show you the coals on which the saint was roasted and thus rekindle the devotion you should feel for him in your hearts, He had me bring here, not the feather I intended to take, but those blessed coals, which were extinguished by the humors that came from the saint's most sacred body.† Therefore, my blessed children, you should take off your caps, and then you may, with reverence, come

*The Feast of Saint Lawrence takes place on August 10. Tradition has it that he was martyred by being burned to death on a gridiron, which served as his symbol throughout the Middle Ages.

† Humors: fluids, such as blood or sweat.

forward to behold them. But first, I want you to know that whoever is marked with the sign of the cross by these coals may rest assured that for an entire year he won't be burned by fire he doesn't feel."

When Frate Cipolla was finished speaking, he chanted a hymn in praise of Saint Lawrence, opened the casket, and displayed the coals. For a little while, the foolish multitude gazed at them in reverent wonder, after which they all pressed forward in a huge crowd around Frate Cipolla, and giving him much better offerings than usual, begged him to touch each one of them with the coals. Accordingly, Frate Cipolla picked up the coals with his hand and began making the largest crosses he could manage on their white smocks and doublets and on the women's veils, declaring that, as he had seen it happen many times, no matter how much the coals were worn away from making those crosses, they would grow to their former size again in the casket.

Thus, thanks to his quick-wittedness, Frate Cipolla not only profited enormously by scrawling crosses on the people of Certaldo, but made fools of those who thought they had made a fool of him. The two young men had attended his sermon, and as they had listened to the ingenious and truly far-fetched verbal display he used to turn the situation to his advantage, they had laughed so hard they thought their jaws would break. Then, after the crowd had dispersed, they went up to him, as merry as could be, and revealed what they had done, after which they gave him back his feather, which proved no less lucrative to him the following year than the coals had been that day.

Day 7, Story 2



When her husband returns home unexpectedly, Peronella stashes her lover in a barrel. Her husband has sold it, but she says that she herself had already done so to a man who had climbed inside to see if it was in good condition. Leaping out of the barrel, the lover gets the husband to scrape it out and then to carry it back home for him.¹

Emilia's story was received with gales of laughter. When it was finished, and everyone had praised the prayer as being indeed a good and holy one, the King asked Filostrato to continue, who began as follows:

My dearest ladies, so numerous are the tricks that men, and husbands in particular, play on you that when a woman sometimes happens to play one on her husband, you should not only be glad to have heard about what had occurred, but you should go around telling the story everywhere yourselves, so that men will come to realize that if they know how to do such things, for their part, women know how to do them, too. All of this cannot help but be advantageous to you, for when a man recognizes that others are equally in the know, he will not lightly undertake to deceive them. Who, then, can doubt that if men could hear what we are going to say today on this topic, they would have every reason to refrain from deceiving you, knowing that you also are capable of tricking them if you want to? It is therefore my intention to tell you about what a young woman, though of low birth, did to her husband on the spur of the moment in order to save herself.

Not so very long ago in Naples, a poor man took to wife a beautiful, charming young girl named Peronella.² Although they did not earn very much, the two of them, he by plying his trade as a mason, and she

by spinning, supported themselves as best they could. One day this Peronella caught the eye of a young man-about-town who, finding her very attractive, fell in love with her, and by soliciting her one way and another, soon managed to get on familiar terms with her. In order to be able to spend time together, the two of them came up with this plan: since her husband got up early every morning either to go to work or to look for a job, the young man would station himself in a place from which he could see him leaving the house, and as the neighborhood where she lived, which is called Avorio, was pretty deserted, the young man would go to her house as soon as the husband left. And that is just what they did on many occasions.

One particular morning, however, when the good man was out of the house and Giannello Scrignario—for that was the young man's name—had gone inside to spend some time with Peronella, the husband, who was usually away all day, happened to return after just a short absence.³ Upon finding the door locked from within, he knocked on it, and after doing so, he said to himself: "O God, praised be Your name forever, for although You've ordained that I should be poor, at least You've given me the consolation of having a good, honest young woman as a wife! You see how quickly she locked the door from the inside as soon as I left so that nobody could get in and cause her trouble."

Peronella knew it was her husband from the way he was knocking, and said: "O no, Giannello my love, I'm a dead woman! Look, it's my husband there, goddamn him. He's come back home, and I really don't know what that means, because he's never returned at this hour. Maybe he caught sight of you when you came in! But no matter what the reason may be, for the love of God, get into this barrel you see here, while I go and open the door. Then we'll find out what's brought him back home so early this morning."

Giannello promptly climbed into the barrel, after which Peronella went to the door and opened it for her husband. Giving him a withering look, she said: "What's the story here? Why have you come back home so early like this? It seems to me, seeing you here with your tools in your hands, that you want to take the day off. If you carry on like this, how are we going to live? Where are we supposed to get our bread

from? Do you think I'm going to let you pawn my gown and the other rags I have for clothing, when I do nothing all day and night but spin until I've worked my fingers to the bone, just so there's enough oil to keep our lamp burning? Husband, husband, there's no woman in the neighborhood who doesn't marvel at it and make fun of me for all the work I put up with, and you, you come home with your hands dangling uselessly by your sides when you should be out working."

After she finished, she started to cry, but then she started up all over again: "Oh, alas, poor me! In what an evil hour was I born! Under what evil star did I come into the world! I could have had a proper young man, but turned him down and came instead to this guy who never gives a second thought to the woman he's taken into his home! Other women have a good time with their lovers—and there's no one around here who doesn't have two or three of them—and they enjoy themselves while they make their husbands think the moon is the sun. But me, poor little me, because I'm a good girl and don't get involved in such hanky-panky, I'm the one who gets to suffer, I'm the one with all the bad luck. I don't know why I don't get me one of these lovers the way other women do! Listen up, husband of mine, if I wanted to be bad, I'd soon find someone to do it with, for there are plenty of good-looking guys here who are in love with me and are my admirers. They've sent me offers of lots of money, or dresses and jewels if I prefer, but my heart's never allowed me to do it, because I'm not the daughter of that kind of lady. And here you come home to me when you should be out working!"

"Oh, for God's sake, woman," replied her husband, "don't get down in the dumps about it. Believe me, I know you and the kind of woman you are, and as a matter of fact, I saw proof of it this very morning. Now, it's true that I went out to work, but what you don't seem to realize, any more than I did, is that today is the festival of Saint Galeone, and since everyone's taking a holiday, that's why I came back home at this hour.⁴ But even so, I've been a good provider and found a way to keep us in bread for more than a month, for I've sold the barrel, which you know has been cluttering up our house for some time now, to the man you see here with me, and he'll give me five silver ducats for it."⁵

"Well, that really makes me mad," said Peronella. "You'd think that

since you're a man and you get around, you'd know how the world works, and yet here you've gone and sold the barrel for five ducats. Now, I'm merely a woman, and I've hardly ever gone beyond our threshold, but I, too, could see that the barrel was cluttering up our house, and so I sold it to a good man here for a full seven ducats. In fact, when you came home, he had just climbed inside to see if it was in good condition."

Upon hearing this, her husband was overjoyed and turned to the man who had come with him for the barrel.

"God be with you, my good man," he said. "You heard my wife. She's sold it for seven, and the most you offered me for it was five."

"All right, then," replied the good man, and away he went.

"Now that you're home," said Peronella to her husband, "come on up here and take care of this business with him yourself."

While he was waiting, Giannello had been keeping his ears open in case there was anything he had to fear or needed to prepare himself to deal with. On hearing Peronella's words, he immediately leaped out of the barrel, and then, as if he had not heard anything about her husband's return, he said: "Where are you, my good woman?"

"Here I am," said the husband, who was just coming up. "What can I do for you?"

"Who are you?" asked Giannello. "I'd like to see the lady who was selling me this barrel."

"Don't worry," the good man answered, "you can deal with me, because I'm her husband."

"The barrel seems in pretty good condition to me," said Giannello, "but I think you let the lees from the wine remain in it, because it's entirely crusted over with something or other that's dried onto it, and it's so hard I can't get it off even if I use my nails. Now, unless it's cleaned out first, I'm not going to take it."

"Our bargain's not going to fall through just because of that," said Peronella. "My husband will clean the whole thing for you."

"That I will," declared her husband, who laid his tools down and stripped to his shirt. Then, after asking for a lighted lamp and a scraper, he got into the barrel and started working away at it. Pretending she wanted to watch what he was doing, Peronella leaned her head over

the edge of the barrel, which was not very wide, along with one of her arms and shoulders.

"Scrape here, and here, and over there," she said to him, and "Look, there's still a little bit left here."

While she was standing there, giving her husband directions and telling him where to scrape, Giannello, who had not fully satisfied his desires that morning before the husband had arrived, and realizing that he could not do it the way he wanted to now, decided to take care of things as best he could. So, he came up behind Peronella, who was blocking off the entire mouth of the barrel, and just as the unbridled stallions of Parthia, burning with love, assail the mares in the open fields, so he satisfied his youthful appetite, which reached its climax almost at the very same moment that the scraping of the barrel was finished, at which point he backed off, Peronella removed her head from the barrel, and her husband climbed out.⁶

"Take this light, my good man," said Peronella to Giannello, "and see if it's all been cleaned out to your satisfaction."

After taking a look inside, Giannello said that everything was fine and that he was indeed satisfied. He then gave the husband seven ducats and got him to carry the barrel home for him.

They then concluded, however, by saying: "We forgive you this time because you were drunk, but as you value your life, from now on you better watch out that we never hear any more stories like this, for if another one ever reaches our ears, you may rest assured we'll pay you back for that one, and for this one as well."

Having said their piece, away they went, leaving Arriguccio standing there like someone who had lost his mind, unsure if what he had done was real or if he had been dreaming, and without uttering another word on the subject, from then on he left his wife in peace. Thus, thanks to her quick-wittedness, not only did Monna Sismonda manage to escape her imminent peril, but she opened the way to enjoy herself as much as she liked and never had to fear her husband again.

Day 7, Story 9



Nicostrato's wife, Lidia, is in love with Pirro, who asks her to do three things to persuade him that she is sincere, and not only does she do all of them, but in addition, she makes love to him while Nicostrato is watching and gets her husband to believe that what he saw was unreal.¹

The ladies enjoyed Neifile's story so much that they simply could not stop laughing and talking about it, even though the King, who had ordered Panfilo to tell his own tale, repeatedly called for them to be silent. Once they finally quieted down, however, Panfilo began as follows:

I do not believe, esteemed ladies, that there is any enterprise, no matter how difficult or dangerous, that someone passionately in love would not dare to undertake. Although this has been shown in many of our stories, nevertheless, I believe I can offer even better proof with the one I intend to tell you. In it you will hear about a lady whose deeds were far more favored by Fortune than guided by reason, which is why I do not advise any of you to risk following in her footsteps, because Fortune is not always so well disposed, nor are all the men in the world equally gullible.

In Argos, that most ancient Greek city, whose former kings brought it great renown despite its small size, there once lived a nobleman by the name of Nicostrato, on whom, as he was approaching old age, Fortune bestowed a wife of distinction, a woman who was no less bold than beautiful, and who was called Lidia.² As befits a man both rich and noble, he maintained a large household, owned numerous hawks and hounds, and took the greatest delight in hunting. One of his retainers was a lively, elegant young man named Pirro, who was handsome and

adept at whatever activity he chose to pursue, and Nicostrato loved and trusted him above all the others.

Lidia fell so passionately in love with this Pirro that she could think of nothing else day and night. Pirro, however, showed no interest in her passion, either because he did not notice it, or because he did not want to, and this filled the lady's heart with unbearable pain. Fully determined to make him aware of her feelings, she summoned one of her chambermaids, a woman named Lusca, who was her close confidante, and said to her:

"Lusca, all the favors you've had from me in the past should have earned me your loyalty and obedience, and therefore, you must take care that no one ever hears what I am about to tell you, except for the man to whom I will ask you to repeat it. As you can see, Lusca, I'm young and vigorous, as well as being abundantly supplied with everything a woman could desire. In short, I have nothing to complain about, with one exception, which is that my husband is much too old for me, so that I have been getting far too little of that which gives young women the greatest pleasure. And because I desire it no less than others do, I made up my mind long ago that since Fortune didn't show herself my friend when she bestowed such an elderly husband on me, I should at least avoid being my own worst enemy and try to find another way to obtain my happiness and my salvation. Now, to make sure that my enjoyment in this should be as complete as it is in everything else, I've decided that our Pirro is the one to take care of my needs with his embraces, for he is worthier in this regard than any other man, and such is the love I bear him that I feel sick whenever I'm not gazing at him or thinking about him. In fact, unless I can be with him very soon, I truly believe I'm going to die. Therefore, if you value my life, you must acquaint him with my love for him in whatever way you think best, and beg him on my behalf to be so good as to come to me whenever you go to fetch him."

The maid said she would be happy to do it, and as soon as she found a convenient time and place, she took Pirro aside and, to the best of her ability, delivered her mistress's message. Pirro was completely taken by surprise when he heard it, for such a thing had never occurred to him,

and he was worried that the lady might have sent him the message in order to test him. Consequently, speaking harshly, he gave quite an abrupt reply: "Lusca, I can't believe these words come from my lady, so you'd better be careful about what you're saying. Even if they really did come from her, I don't believe she was sincere when she spoke with you. And even if she was, my lord has done me so much more honor than I deserve that I would never, on my life, commit such an outrage against him. So, you watch out and never talk to me about such things again."

"Pirro," said Lusca, undeterred by the severity of his speech, "if my lady orders me to speak to you about this, or about anything else, I'll do so as often as she tells me to, whether you like it or not. But you now, you really are an ass!"

Somewhat chagrined by what Pirro had said, Lusca returned to her mistress, who simply wanted to die when she heard his answer. A few days later, however, she spoke to her chambermaid about the matter once more.

"You know, Lusca," she said, "it's not the first stroke that fells the oak. So it seems to me you should go back again to this man who has such a strange way of wanting to prove his loyalty at my expense. Find a convenient time to give him a full account of my passion, and do your best to make sure you succeed. For if things remain as they are, I'm going to die, and he'll just think we were making a fool of him, so that instead of the love we're seeking, we'll wind up earning his hatred."

After comforting her mistress, the maid went in search of Pirro, and when she found him in a cheerful and agreeable mood, she said to him: "Pirro, a few days ago I explained to you how your lady and mine was being consumed by the flames of the love she feels for you, and I'm here to assure you yet again that if you remain as unyielding as you were the other day, she won't be alive much longer. I therefore implore you to be so kind as to provide her with the solace she desires. I used to consider you very wise, but if you persist in being stubborn like this, I will take you for an utter fool."

"What greater glory can you have than to be loved above everything else by such a lady, who's so beautiful and noble and rich? Furthermore, don't you realize how grateful you should be to Fortune for having

given you quite a valuable prize, a woman who is perfectly suited to your youthful desires and who will also provide you with a secure refuge from all your material needs? How many of your peers will have a life more blissful than yours, if you'll just act and use your intelligence here? Which of them will be your equal when it comes to arms and horses, clothing and money, if you will just grant her your love? So, open your heart to my words, and return to your senses. Remember that Fortune greets a man only once with a smiling face and open arms, and if he does not know how to accept what she gives him and later on winds up an impoverished beggar, he has only himself, not her, to blame.

"Besides, there doesn't have to be the same sort of loyalty between servants and masters as that which exists between friends and family. On the contrary, to the extent that they can, servants ought to treat their masters the same way their masters treat them. If you had a beautiful wife, or a mother or daughter or sister, and Nicostrato took a liking to her, do you really believe he'd spend as much time thinking about loyalty as you are doing with regard to his wife? You're a fool if you give it a moment's thought, for you can be sure that if his flattery and entreaties weren't sufficient, he'd make use of force on her, no matter what you might think about it. So let's treat them and their belongings the same way they treat us and ours. Make the most of what Fortune's offering you, and don't chase my mistress away. Go out and meet her halfway as she approaches, because you may be sure that if you don't do that, not only will her death be inevitable, but you'll wind up reproaching yourself so often for what you did that you, too, will want to die."

Pirro had spent a great deal of time mulling over what Lusca had said to him during their previous exchange, and he had already made up his mind that if she ever approached him again, he would give her a different answer and would do everything he could to satisfy the lady, provided that it could be proved she was not simply testing him. And so, he replied by saying: "Look here, Lusca, I recognize the truth in everything you've said to me, but on the other hand, I also know that my master is not merely very wise, but very shrewd as well, and since he has placed the managing of all of his affairs in my hands, I'm really afraid that Lidia is doing all this with his advice and consent so

as to put me to the test. However, if she's willing to do three things I'll ask of her in order to reassure me, then you may depend on me to do whatever she wishes without a moment's hesitation. And these are the three things I want her to do: first, she must kill Nicostrato's fine sparrow hawk right in front of his eyes; then she should send me a tuft of hairs from his beard; and finally, she should get me one of the soundest teeth he has left."

These terms seemed hard to Lusca and much, much harder to her mistress, but Love, that great provider of comfort and excellent teacher of cunning, made her resolve to attempt it. Consequently, she sent Pirro word through her maid that she would do everything he asked, and soon. Furthermore, since he thought Nicostrato was so smart, she told him that she would arrange for them to make love right in front of him and get him to believe that it was not really happening.

Pirro therefore waited to see what the lady would do, and a few days later, when Nicostrato was entertaining certain gentlemen at one of the great banquets he used to give with some frequency, the tables had no sooner been cleared away than the lady came out of her room, wearing a green velvet dress richly adorned with jewels, and entered the hall where the gentlemen had been dining. Then, as Pirro and all the others watched, she went over to the perch where the sparrow hawk that Nicostrato treasured so much was sitting, untied it as if she intended to set it on her hand, and having seized it by the jesses, dashed it against the wall and killed it.*

Nicostrato shouted at her, "Oh no, woman, what have you done?" She, however, said nothing in response, but turned instead to the gentlemen with whom he had been dining and said: "My lords, I'd hardly be able to revenge myself on a king who insulted me if I lacked the courage to take it out on a sparrow hawk. What you need to know is that this bird has long deprived me of the attention that men should devote to their ladies' pleasure, for Nicostrato always gets up at the crack of dawn, mounts his horse, and with his sparrow hawk on his hand, rides

*Jesses were strips of silk or leather fastened to the legs of a falcon to which a leash could then be attached.

off to the open plains in order to watch it fly, leaving me behind in my bed, just as you see me here, all alone and discontent. That's why I have often wanted to do what I did just now, and all I was waiting for was a chance to do it in the presence of men who would judge my cause justly, as I trust you will do."

Supposing that her feelings for her husband were exactly what her words implied, the gentlemen all started to laugh, and turning to the angry Nicostrato, they said, "Come on now, your wife did the right thing to avenge her wrongs by killing the sparrow hawk!" And with a host of witty remarks on the subject—the lady having returned to her room in the meantime—they managed to transform Nicostrato's irritation into laughter.

Pirro, who had observed all this, said to himself: "My lady has given my happy love a noble start. May God let her stay the course!"

Not many days after killing the sparrow hawk, Lidia found herself in her bedroom with Nicostrato, and when she began caressing and joking around with him, he gave her hair a playful little tug, which provided her with an opportunity to fulfill the second of Pirro's demands. She then promptly took hold of a little tuft of hairs in his beard, and laughing all the while, pulled it so hard that she tore it right out of his chin. In response to Nicostrato's complaints, she said: "Now what's the matter with you that you're making such a face? Just because I tore maybe half a dozen hairs out of your beard? That's nothing compared to what I felt when you were yanking at my hair just a moment ago." And so, they continued jesting and playing around with one another. Meanwhile, the lady carefully preserved the tuft of hairs she had pulled from his beard and sent it to her precious beloved the very same day.

The third task gave the lady a lot more to think about, but since she was a person of superior intelligence and Love had made her wits even sharper, she figured out a way to take care of it.

In his house Nicostrato had two young boys of gentle birth who had been entrusted to him by their fathers so that they might learn proper manners, and when he was dining, one of them used to carve for him, while the other poured him his drink. Having sent for them, the lady gave them to understand that their breath stank, and taught them that

whenever they served Nicostrato, they were to hold their heads as far back as possible, and also, that they were never to mention the subject to anyone.

The boys believed her and began acting as she had told them to, until eventually, one day, she asked Nicostrato: "Have you noticed what these boys do when they're waiting on you?"

"I certainly have," said Nicostrato, "and in fact, I've been meaning to ask them why they do it."

"Don't bother," said the lady, "because I myself can tell you why. I've kept quiet about it for quite some time because I didn't want to upset you, but now that I see others are starting to notice, there's no reason to hide it from you any longer. This is all happening to you simply because your breath smells atrocious. Now, I don't know why it does, because it never used to, but it really is terrible, and since you spend your time in the company of gentlemen, we've got to figure out some way to cure it."

"What could be causing it?" said Nicostrato. "I wonder if one of the teeth in my mouth is rotten."

"Perhaps it is," replied Lidia, and leading him to a window, she made him open his mouth. After having inspected both sides of it, she said: "Oh, Nicostrato, how can you have put up with it for so long? You've got one on this side, and as far as I can see, it's not just decayed, but rotten through and through. If it stays in your mouth much longer, it'll be sure to ruin the teeth on either side. So, my advice to you is to have it out before it gets any worse."

"If that's what you think," said Nicostrato, "well, then, I agree. Send for a surgeon right away and have him extract it for me."*

"God forbid that we should have a surgeon come here and do that," replied the lady. "The way your tooth looks to me, I think I can do a very good job of pulling it out myself and won't need help from anyone else. Besides, those surgeons are so cruel when they perform such operations that I'd be utterly heartsick and couldn't bear to see and hear you suffering at their hands. No, I absolutely insist on doing it myself, because

* Surgeons were socially placed well beneath doctors in the period, handling minor injuries, setting fractures, pulling teeth, and even cutting hair.

then, if you're in too much pain, I'll stop at once, which is something a surgeon would never do."

She then had them bring her the necessary instruments and sent everyone out of room except for Lusca, whom she kept right by her side. After locking the door, they made Nicostrato stretch out on a table, put the pincers in his mouth, and grabbed one of his teeth with them. And although he roared out loud because of the pain, one of the women held him firmly down, while the other, using all her might, yanked out a tooth, which she hid away and replaced with another one, horribly decayed, that she had been holding in her hand. She showed it to Nicostrato, who was whimpering, practically half dead, and said to him: "Look at what you've had in your mouth for all this time."

Nicostrato did not doubt her story, and although the pain he was suffering was excruciating and he was still complaining bitterly about it, now that the tooth was out, he felt as if he were cured. And so, after he had been consoled in one way and another, and his pain had diminished, he left the room. The lady then took the tooth and promptly sent it to her lover who was now completely convinced of her affection for him and declared that he was prepared to minister to her every pleasure.

The lady wanted to reassure him even more, however, and although every hour she was not with him seemed like a thousand to her, she was determined to keep the promise she had made to him. Consequently, she pretended to be sick, and one day, when Nicostrato came to visit her after dinner, and she saw that there was no one with him except Pirro, she asked him if they would help her down to the garden in order to give her some relief in her illness. And so, with Nicostrato supporting her on one side and Pirro on the other, they carried her into the garden and placed her on the lawn at the foot of a lovely pear tree. After sitting there for a while, the lady addressed herself to Pirro, to whom she had already sent word about what he was to do. "Pirro," she said, "I have a great longing for a couple of those pears, so would you climb up there and throw down some of them."

Pirro immediately scampered up and began tossing down the pears, and as he was doing so, he said: "Hey, what are you doing there, sir?

And you, my lady, aren't you ashamed to permit it in my presence? Do you two think I'm blind? Up until a moment ago you were terribly sick: how did you get well so quickly that you can do such things? Really, if you want to carry on like that, you've got plenty of fine bedrooms. Why don't you go and do it in one of those? That would be much more decent than doing it in front of me!"

The lady turned to her husband and said: "What's Pirro talking about? Has he gone crazy?"

"No, my lady, I'm not crazy," replied Pirro. "Do you think I can't see you?"

"Pirro," said Nicostrato, who was completely baffled, "I really do think you're dreaming."

"No, my lord," Pirro replied, "I'm not dreaming, not one little bit, and neither are you. In fact, you're doing it with so much vigor that if this tree were shaking like that, there wouldn't be a single pear left on it."

"What can this mean?" said the lady. "Can he really be seeing what he says he's seeing? God help me, if my health were what it was before, I'd climb up there and see these marvels that he claims to be observing."

Meanwhile, from up in the pear tree, Pirro kept talking and telling them the same strange story, until Nicostrato said, "Come down." When Pirro was on the ground, Nicostrato asked him, "Now what is it you say you saw?"

"I do believe that you two take me for a madman or a dreamer," replied Pirro, "but since you force me to tell you, I saw you there on top of your wife, and then, when I was descending, you got off and sat down here where you are now."

"You really were out of your mind," said Nicostrato, "because from the time you climbed into the pear tree, we haven't budged from this spot."

"What's the point of having this debate?" said Pirro. "I really did see you, and if I did, then what I saw was you there on top of yours."*

* Pirro says he saw Nicostrato *in sul vostro*, which means literally "on top of yours." This most likely refers to the notion that a man's wife was considered his belonging or property; ironically, Nicostrato is sitting in his garden and in that sense is thus quite literally *on* his property.

Nicostrato grew more and more astonished. Finally, he declared: "I want to find out for myself if this pear tree is enchanted and what kind of marvels you can see from it!"

So up he went, and no sooner was he in the tree than his wife and Pirro started to make love together.³ Nicostrato saw it and began yelling at them: "Oh, you vile woman, what are you doing? And you, Pirro, whom I trusted more than anyone else?" And as he was speaking, he started to climb down again.

"We're just sitting here," said Pirro and the lady at first, but upon seeing him descend, they went and seated themselves the way they had been before. The moment that Nicostrato reached the ground and saw them sitting where he had left them, he fell to berating them.

"Nicostrato," said Pirro in response, "now I must confess that what you were saying before was right, that my eyes were, in fact, deceiving me when I was up in the pear tree. And my only reason for saying this is that I now know for a fact that you, too, have had the same experience I did. Moreover, to convince you that I'm telling the truth, just stop and think about your wife for a moment. If a woman of such unequalled honesty and wisdom as she is wished to commit an outrage in this way against your honor, do you really think she would ever bring herself to do it right before your eyes? Of myself I say nothing, except that I would sooner allow myself to be drawn and quartered than even contemplate such a thing, let alone come and do it in your presence.

"Hence, whatever is causing our faulty perception must surely be emanating from the pear tree. For nothing in the world would have kept me from believing that you were having carnal relations with your wife here, until I heard you say that I myself appeared to be doing something that I know for sure I never did, let alone even thought of doing."

At this point the lady pretended to be terribly upset and got to her feet. "Damn you," she said, "for thinking me so stupid that, if I had wanted to engage in that disgusting behavior you claim to have seen, I'd come and do it right before your eyes. But there is one thing you can be certain of: should I ever feel such a desire, I wouldn't come out here to satisfy it. On the contrary, I think I'd be capable of finding one

of our bedrooms and arranging to do it there in such a way that I'd be very surprised if you ever found out about it."

Nicostrato believed that the two of them were telling the truth and that they would never have brought themselves to commit such a deed in front of him. Consequently, he stopped shouting and berating them the way he had been doing, and instead began talking about the strangeness of what had happened and about the miraculous way people's eyesight was transformed when they climbed into the tree.

But his wife, who was still pretending to be upset over the opinion Nicostrato supposedly had of her, said: "If I can help it, there's absolutely no way this pear tree will ever put me or any other woman to shame again. Go, run and fetch an axe, Pirro, and at one stroke you can avenge both of us by chopping it down, although it would be much better if you took the axe and hit Nicostrato on the head with it for not giving the matter a second thought and allowing the eyes of his intellect to be blinded so easily. For although things may have appeared the way you said they did to those eyes in that head of yours, you should never have allowed the judgment of your mind to imagine, let alone admit, that they were true."

Pirro went for the axe as fast as he could and cut down the pear tree. And as soon as she saw it on the ground, the lady turned to Nicostrato and said: "Now that I've seen the fall of my honor's enemy, I'm not angry anymore." Then, she graciously pardoned Nicostrato, who had been begging her to do so, charging him never again to presume to think such thoughts about the woman who loved him more than her own life.

And so, the poor, deluded husband returned with his wife and her lover to the palace, where from that time on, it became much easier for Pirro to get together with Lidia at frequent intervals for their mutual pleasure and delight. And may God grant as much to all of us.