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Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75)



The Boccaccio family town house in Certaldo

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Monument to Giovanni Boccaccio in the Church of Santi Michele e Jacopo in Certaldo

# *Decameron*





*This is the beginning of the Decameron, a book nicknamed Prince Galahalt.\* It consists of one hundred tales told in the space of ten days by seven ladies and three young men.*

### *The Author's Prologue*

IT IS ONLY NATURAL FOR human beings to pity the afflicted, and pity is especially demanded of those who, when they themselves needed comfort, found it in others. I am one of those, for if there ever was anyone who stood in such necessity, and found comfort precious, and even enjoyed it, then I am he. The reason is that from my earliest youth right up to the present I have been inflamed beyond measure – much more perhaps, were I to tell of it, than might seem appropriate to my humble station in life – by an exalted and noble love. And although those discerning people who did hear of it praised me and I rose in their opinion, it was still very hard to bear. This was certainly not through any cruelty of my beloved. It was the result of excessive ardour, caused by unrestrained appetite which, because it would not leave me content within reasonable bounds, often subjected me to much unnecessary suffering. My suffering was greatly relieved by the consolatory discourse of friends, and I firmly believe that without them I should have died. But it has pleased Him who is Himself infinite to lay down as an immutable law that all the things of this world must come to an end. And so my love, which was more fervent than any other and which no strength of purpose, no advice, no manifest shame, nor trouble that might ensue had been able to destroy or divert, did of itself in the course of time lessen. And it lessened to the extent that now there is nothing left of it but that pleasure which it normally affords to anyone who does not sail too far across love's deepest waters. The result is that, whereas it used to be a burden, now all my trouble has disappeared, and I feel my love remains as a delight.

But although the suffering is at an end, I do not therefore forget those acts of kindness I once received from people whose goodwill led them to feel in themselves the weight of my burdens. I know I shall

remember them until my dying day. Gratitude, in my belief, is the most commendable of all the virtues, and its contrary most reprehensible. So, now that I can say I am at liberty, and in order not to appear ungrateful, I mean to offer what little comfort I can in return for the comfort I received. And I shall offer it, not to those who helped me (who through their own good sense or good fortune do not require it), but to those who stand in need of it. And although my support, or encouragement perhaps, is probably small consolation, it does nevertheless seem to me that it should be offered soonest where the need appears greatest: it will do more good there, and there it will be most welcome.

And who will deny that the ladies, with all their charms, need this comfort more than men do? For in their tender breasts, in fear and shame, they keep their ardour concealed; and how much stronger love is when it is hidden than when it is disclosed, they know who have experienced it. Besides, restricted as they are by the wishes, the whims, the commands of their fathers, their mothers, their brothers, and their husbands, they stay shut within the small compass of their rooms, and sit there more or less idly, wishing and unwishing in the same instant, and turning over various thoughts, which cannot always be happy ones. And if in the course of those thoughts some black mood, fanned by the flames of desire, should come into their minds, it will certainly remain there to their great distress, if some new interest does not drive it away. Moreover, they are much less able to endure than men are. When men are in love, things are different, as we can see quite clearly. Men, when they are afflicted by melancholy or heavy thoughts, have many ways of lightening them or expelling them. If they want to, they can take a stroll, hear things, and see things, or go fowling, hunting, fishing, riding, gambling or trading. All of these pursuits occupy the mind more or less, and distract it from troublesome thoughts, at least for a time. And then afterwards, in one way or another, there will either be some consolation, or the suffering will grow less.

Therefore, in order to atone to some extent for the faults committed by Fortune (always more grudging in support of those whose strength is less, as we see with the weaker sex), I mean to provide some distraction for those ladies who are in love: the others are happy with the needle, the spindle, and the wool-winder. I intend to present a hundred tales or fables or parables or histories (call them what you like), told over ten days by a right-minded group of seven ladies and three young men

brought together during the recent deadly plague. And I shall add a few of the songs which those ladies sang for their delight. Among these stories there will be some of love, both sweet and bitter, and other incidents which have chanced in ancient and modern times. Those ladies I have mentioned previously will, when they read them, derive useful advice as well as delight from the entertaining things revealed. For they will realize what courses are to be shunned and what pursued: and this realization cannot occur, in my opinion, without their troubles passing away. If that does happen (and may God grant that it will), let them give thanks to love who, in freeing me from its fetters, has given me this opportunity to attend to their pleasure.



## First Day

*This is the beginning of the first day of the Decameron. The author explains why those people who are shortly to appear have come together to talk with one another. Then each of them under the guidance of Pampinea speaks on that theme which he or she finds most agreeable.*

SINCE IT CROSSES MY MIND, dear ladies, how tender you all are by nature, I realize that this present work will seem to you to be starting off very seriously, indeed unpleasantly. For I must begin with a sad recollection of the recent deadly plague,\* disastrous to all those who saw it or heard about it. But I should hate this to put you off from going any further, as if everything you read will be to the accompaniment of sighs and tears. No, as you approach this horrible beginning, you are like walkers faced with a steep and rugged mountain, beyond which there stretches a lovely, delightful plain, all the more pleasing after the difficulties of the climb and the descent. And just as happiness always ends in distress, so sorrow is overcome by joy.

This brief trial (I call it brief because it can be expressed in few words) is followed immediately by that pleasure which I have promised to you, which you would not have expected from such a beginning if I had not mentioned it. And to tell the truth, if it had been possible in all honesty to take you where I want you to go by another route than one as rough as this, I would gladly have done so. But since it is impossible, without delving into the past, to show how the things you are about to read happened, I find myself compelled to set about it.

I must tell you, then, that it was thirteen hundred and forty-eight years after the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God that the distinguished city of Florence, more beautiful than any other in Italy, was stricken by the deadly plague. This, whether it came through the operation of the heavenly bodies or was visited upon the human race by God's righteous anger as a punishment for our sins, originated some years before in the East. After claiming innumerable lives, it did not remain in one place, but spread disastrously to the West. All human wisdom

and precautions were ineffectual against it, even though much refuse was cleared out of the city by officials appointed for that purpose, all sick people were denied entry, and instructions were distributed for the preservation of health. Despite even the humble entreaties so frequently made to God by pious people, in processions and in other ways, its extraordinarily grievous effects were apparent almost from the start of the spring of that year. It did not declare itself as it had in the East, where a nosebleed was a sure sign of inevitable death: in both men and women, it began with certain swellings in the groin or armpit, some of which grew to the size of an ordinary apple, while others were egg-shaped and of different sizes. Ordinary people called them buboes. These fatal buboes soon spread from those two parts of the body and began to appear all over. Then the nature of the symptoms changed, and on the arms, thighs, or other parts of people's bodies black or bluish blemishes appeared, some large and far apart and others small and close together. These, like the original buboes, were a sure sign that anyone who had them would die.

No medical advice or medicines seemed to be effective against this disease. Either there simply was no cure, or those ministering to the sick (and the number of such ministers had risen sharply, to include, beside some who were competent, men and women with no previous experience) did not know the cause and for that reason could not provide a remedy. And not only did few of those who were taken sick recover, but almost all died within three days of the appearance of the symptoms, some more quickly than others, and most without developing a fever or other complications.

And what made this pestilence worse was that the healthy could catch it from the sick merely by being in contact with them, just as fire will spread to dry or oily objects when they are too close. And there was something else that made it worse still: not only did speaking and associating with the sick infect those who were healthy, so that they all died together, but merely touching the clothes or anything else which the sick had touched or used seemed to transfer the infection.

What I have to say is so extraordinary that, if it had not been so often witnessed, and I had not seen it with my own eyes, I could scarcely believe it, let alone write about it, even though I had heard of it from a trustworthy observer. This pestilence was, as I have said, very contagious and, not merely was it clearly passed on from one human

being to another but, if something belonging to one who was sick or dead of the malady was touched by a creature of a different species, that creature became contaminated and in a short time died. With my own eyes, as I have just said, I witnessed this on several occasions. One day in particular, the rags of a poor man who had died of the disease were flung into the street. Two pigs came across them and, as is their way, they first nuzzled them with their snouts and then seized them between their teeth and shook them against their cheeks: shortly afterwards, after writhing about as though they had been poisoned, they both dropped down dead upon those rags laid out to their destruction.

Such events and many others like them, and even worse ones, led to various fearful fantasies in those who were still alive. Almost all tended to arrive at the same callous decision, which was to keep the sick and their belongings at a distance, believing that in this way they could save themselves. Then some there were who thought that a sober way of life was a good method of avoiding infection. So they gathered into groups and kept clear of everyone else, shutting themselves up in houses where no one was sick and where they could live comfortably, consuming choice food and wine in moderation, avoiding all excess, not speaking to anyone outside or hearing any news of the dead or sick, but enjoying music and what other pleasures they could muster. Others, drawn into a contrary opinion, declared that heavy drinking, pleasure-seeking, and going round singing and enjoying themselves, gratifying every urge and making mock of what was going on was the best medicine for such a serious disease. And as far as possible they took their own advice, drinking day and night to excess, going from inn to inn, or more often into people's houses, though only those where they heard what they wanted to hear. This was easy to do because many people, presuming they had not long to live, had abandoned their possessions along with themselves, so that most houses had become common property, and strangers, as they happened to come along, treated them as if they were their own. Yet these people, despite their brutish state of mind, took care to avoid the sick as far as possible.

In this great affliction that befell our wretched city all respect for lawful authority, human and divine, had been destroyed: those who should have seen that it was upheld were, like all the others, either dead or sick or with scarcely any subordinates left to perform their duties. So everyone did as they liked. Many people kept to a middle path between



the two extremes I have mentioned, neither restraining themselves as much as the first, nor giving themselves up to such drunkenness and other dissipation as the second, but eating and drinking just what they needed, and not shutting themselves up but going about outside, carrying flowers, or fragrant herbs, or different kinds of spices, which they often raised to their noses. They thought it best to solace their brains with such scents, because the atmosphere reeked with the stench of dead bodies, disease and medicine. Others held to a more heartless opinion, although one that was also perhaps more accurate, saying that there was no better safeguard against the pestilence than to flee before it. Impressed by this argument, and caring for nothing but their own skins, many men and women abandoned their city, their houses, their lands and their possessions, and went into the countryside around Florence, and even beyond. Perhaps they imagined that God's anger was not aroused in order to punish men's wickedness with that plague wherever they were, but only to strike those who happened to be within the walls of the city; or perhaps they thought that no one would be left in the city and that its last hour had come.

Not all who held these various opinions died: not all of them escaped either. Indeed many of every opinion died everywhere and, having set an example when they were healthy to those who were unaffected, they perished more or less abandoned to themselves. And it was not just a matter of the citizens avoiding each other, and most neighbours having no thought for anyone, and relatives keeping at a distance and seldom or never visiting. These tribulations had instilled such fear into the people that brothers abandoned each other, uncles abandoned their nephews, sisters abandoned their brothers, and wives frequently abandoned their husbands. And there is something else which is almost incredible: fathers and mothers were loath to visit and care for their children, almost as if they did not belong to them. And so those who fell ill – of which there was an innumerable multitude – had to have recourse to the charity of friends (and they were thin on the ground) or to the avarice of their servants. There were, moreover, few servants left, despite the excessive wages they could command, and those who did remain were uneducated men and women, and seldom used to performing such services: they did little more than hand necessary articles to the sick, or watch over them while they died. And, as they were discharging such duties, many of them lost their own lives as well as their wages.

Then, not only were the sick abandoned by their neighbours, relatives, and friends, not only were servants scarce, but there also grew up a custom hardly ever heard of previously: no lady, when she fell ill however graceful beautiful, or noble she was minded being cared for by a man, even a young man, and shamelessly letting him see any part of her body, just as she might have done with a woman, simply because her illness demanded it. This may be the reason why those who survived were in future less chaste than they had been. And many also died who, had they been cared for, might well have survived. This lack of assistance for the sick, and the sheer virulence of the plague, meant that so many died in the city both by day and night that it was staggering just to hear of it, never mind see it. So it was bound to happen that, among the survivors, habits grew up which were contrary to their previous usage.

It used to be the custom (one that has now been revived) for the female relatives and neighbours of a dead man to gather in his home and mourn him there with those women to whom he was most closely related. Also, many of his male neighbours and other citizens would assemble outside the house, and clergy according to the dead man's status. He was then carried on the shoulders of his peers, with all the funeral rites of candles and hymns, to the church chosen by him before his death. Such customs, as the plague grew in ferocity, more or less fell by the wayside, and others sprang up in their place. Not only were people dying without a group of women around them, but many passed away without any witnesses at all. Very few were vouchsafed the pious lamentations and bitter tears of their relatives. On the contrary, mourning was replaced by laughter and ridicule and conviviality. This practice was followed especially by the women, who had largely given up any womanly concern for the salvation of the dead. Few bodies were accompanied to church by more than ten or a dozen of their neighbours, and even these were not respected citizens. Instead, a band of scavengers, drawn from the dregs of society (they called themselves gravediggers, and they gave their services at a price) bore the bier. And they bore it in a hurry, usually not to the church which had been chosen but simply to the nearest, behind four or five priests with few candles and sometimes none at all. These priests, with the help of the so-called gravediggers, and without taking the trouble to say a long or solemn office, put the body as quickly as they could into any unoccupied grave.

The lower classes, and probably the middle classes for the most part too, presented an even more pitiful spectacle. Most of them, restricted to their own neighbourhoods and their own homes by hope or by poverty, fell sick at the rate of thousands a day, and since they had no care or assistance, virtually all of them perished. Many of them, whether by day or night, finished up on the streets, and many, those who did die in their homes, only made their neighbours aware of their death by the stench from their corrupted bodies. What with these and those others, the city was full of corpses. Most of them were dealt with in the same way by their neighbours, influenced as much by fear of being infected by the rotting bodies as by charity towards the dead. By themselves, or with the aid of bearers (when they could find any), they dragged the newly dead out of their homes and placed them upon their doorsteps, where anyone who passed by, particularly in the morning, could see countless numbers of them. Biers were brought and the bodies placed on them, while some, in default of biers, were simply placed upon boards. On more than one occasion, two or three bodies – indeed frequently those of a wife and husband, a couple of brothers, or a father and son, or other relatives – were carried on a single bier. And countless times it happened that, when two priests with a cross were going in front of a corpse, several biers, on the shoulders of their bearers, joined on behind, so that the priests, who thought they had one corpse to bury, found themselves with six or seven and often more. Nor were these funerals attended by any mourners or candles. On the contrary, things had come to such a pass that dead human beings were treated no better than goats. It became apparent that the sheer scale of this disaster had made ignorant folk fully aware and resigned in the face of that one thing which limited and less frequent misfortunes, such as occur in the natural course of events, had not been able to teach intelligent people to endure with patience. There was not enough consecrated ground to bury the great multitude of corpses arriving at every church every day and almost every hour, particularly if each was to be given its rightful place according to the ancient custom. So, when all the graves were occupied, very deep pits were dug in the churchyards, into which the new arrivals were put in their hundreds. As they were stowed there, one on top of another, like merchandise in the hold of a ship, each layer was covered with a little earth, until the pit was full.

I shall not go any further into our recent sufferings, except to say that the surrounding countryside was not spared the bad times which afflicted the city. Apart from the castles, which were smaller versions of the city itself, throughout the scattered villas and the fields the unhappy workers and their families, with no doctors or servants to bother about them, died by day and night in the streets and on the farmlands and in their homes, and they died not like men but like beasts. Like the city-dwellers, they discarded old habits and neglected their duties and their property. Indeed all of them, as soon as they realized that death was on its way, became deeply concerned, not with any future profit from their livestock and fields and from their previous labours, but with consuming immediately whatever came to hand by any means at their disposal. And so the cattle, the asses, the sheep, the goats, the pigs, the poultry, and even the dogs (such faithful companions to man), driven from their own places, roamed about freely through the fields, where the crops had been left unharvested and indeed uncut. Many of these creatures, after having fed well during the day, returned home at night without needing to be guided by their keepers, as though they were rational beings.

What more can I say? I shall stop talking of the countryside and come back to the city. Such was the cruelty of the stars, and perhaps to some extent of men also, that between March and the following June, what with the virulence of the plague and the abandonment and neglect of many of the sick by those who were healthy but fearful, it is firmly believed that more than one hundred thousand human beings lost their lives within the walls of Florence, when it is likely that beforehand no one would have estimated that the city had so many inhabitants.

Oh, what grand palaces, what beautiful houses, what noble dwellings, once full of servants and lords and ladies, were left deserted, even by the lowest menial! Oh, what noteworthy families, what vast patrimonies, what conspicuous fortunes were left without any rightful heir! How many brave men, how many lovely ladies, how many graceful youths, whom even Galen, Hippocrates or Aesculapius\* would have said were completely healthy, ate in the morning with their relatives, friends and acquaintances, and then that same evening dined with their ancestors in the other world!

It grieves me to be turning over such great sufferings in my mind, and so I think it not unreasonable to ignore some details. But to

continue: while our city was in the state I have described, almost void of inhabitants, an incident occurred which was reported to me by someone I trust. In the venerable church of Santa Maria Novella, one Tuesday morning when there was practically no one else about, seven young ladies, all dressed in the dark clothing which the times demanded, had just heard the Divine Office. They were all related to one another by friendship, neighbourhood or family ties, all between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven, all sensible people, nobly born, attractive in appearance, well-mannered and graceful. I could tell you their real names, but there is a good reason for not doing so. I would not like them to be discredited at any time in the future by the stories which they were about to tell or listen to. Nowadays the pleasures which are socially acceptable are somewhat restricted, while in those days, for the reasons I have given, there was less restraint, not only for people of their age but even for those much older. I should hate to give envious people, always ready to backbite anything praiseworthy, the chance to denigrate the reputation of these honourable ladies with filthy gossip. And so, to make it clear who said what, I intend to give them names which are more or less appropriate to each of them. The first, who was also the oldest, we shall call Pampinea, the second Fiammetta, the third Filomena, the fourth Emilia, the fifth Lauretta, the sixth Neifile, and the last, not without reason, we shall call Elissa.

Having come together, not by prior arrangement, but simply by chance, in one corner of the church, they sat down in a rough circle, sighed a few times, left off saying their paternosters, and began to discuss the state of things. After a while, when the others had fallen silent, Pampinea began to speak: "My dear ladies, you must often have heard it said, just as I have, that no one harms anyone else by insisting on his lawful rights. It is natural for anyone who is born into this world to nourish, preserve, and defend his own life. This is so generally accepted that men have sometimes, in self-defence, killed others without incurring any blame. And if that is allowed by the law, whose care is for everyone's well-being, how much more is it allowable for all of us to take every step to preserve our own lives, since we are not injuring anyone else! Every time I come to think about our actions this morning and many other mornings, and what we have talked about, I realize and you must too that each of us is fearful for her own safety. I am not in the least surprised at this but I am very surprised, since we all have natural womanly feelings, that you do

not take any precautions against what you are all so rightly frightened of. We are waiting here, it seems to me, as if we wanted to find out how many dead bodies have been carried to the grave, or wanted to hear whether the friars inside, whose numbers are down to almost nothing, sing their office at the appropriate times, or wanted to reveal by our dress, to anyone whom we happen to meet, the scale of our sufferings. And if we go out of here, we shall see bodies of the dead or sick being carried about; see criminals who have been lawfully condemned to exile rampaging around, knowing that those who should enforce their sentences are either dead or ill; we shall see the dregs of the city, who call themselves gravediggers, galloping and rushing everywhere, out for our blood, and in their obscene chants blaming us for our own misfortunes. And all we shall hear is ‘So-and-so’s dead’ and ‘So-and-so’s nearly dead’, and everywhere cries of lament – if there is anyone left to utter them. And if we go home, I don’t know whether it is the same with you as it is with me: but out of all the servants we had, I find not one left apart from my maid, and I am terrified and my hair stands on end, and I seem to see, wherever I walk about inside the house, the shades of the departed, not with the faces I remember, but with the horrifying visages they have recently acquired to frighten me. This is why, whether I am here, outside, or at home, I feel so anxious, and all the more because it seems to me that no one who has the means and somewhere to go to has remained here except ourselves. And I have frequently heard of people, and seen them, who make no distinction between right and wrong, but only consider their appetites, and simply do, alone or in company, by day and night, whatever gives them most pleasure. I am speaking not only of lay people, but of monks in their monasteries who, having convinced themselves that what is forbidden to others is right for them, have broken their rule of obedience, given themselves over to carnal delights, and become lascivious and dissolute, hoping by this means to avoid the plague. If this is true, and it obviously is, what are we doing here, what are we waiting for, what are we thinking of? Why are we more careless of our safety than the rest of the citizens? Do we consider we are worth less than all the others? Or do we believe that our lives are bound to our bodies by stronger ties than other people’s are, and consequently imagine that we need not bother about anything with power to harm them? We are mistaken, deceived. How foolish we are, to think like this! We need only recall all those fine young men and ladies who have been overcome by

this pestilence. Now, so that we may not be led by stubbornness or overconfidence into a situation we could somehow avoid if we really wanted to, I have a proposal to make, with which you may or may not agree. I suggest that we, just those of us who are here, do what so many others have done and are still doing – leave the city and go to stay in one of our many places in the countryside, avoiding like the plague the licentious examples we now see before us. There we can feast and enjoy ourselves without overstepping in any way the bounds of what is right. There we can hear the singing of the little birds, see hills and plains grow green, see fields of corn swelling like the sea, with so many kinds of trees, and a more open sky which, however overcast it may be, is still more attractive than the walls of our empty city. And there, besides, the air is fresher, the necessities of life are available in abundance, and there are fewer things to annoy us. Although peasants die there as citizens do here, the sorrow is less, because the people and their houses are more spread out. Moreover, we would not in my opinion be abandoning anyone here; in fact, it is truer to say that we have ourselves already been abandoned: our families, either by dying or by fleeing from death, have left us alone in great distress as though we were nothing to do with them. So no one can blame us for acting as I suggest: if we do not do so, we lay ourselves open to grief and misery and perhaps death. Therefore, if you agree, let us go away now with our maids, and have all we need sent after us, and let us seize what happiness and pleasure we can in these circumstances, today in one place, and tomorrow in another. Let us live like this until we find, if we are not overcome by death first, what conclusion Heaven has destined for this state of things. And bear in mind that it is no more wrong for us to go away decently than it is for so many others to stay here indecently.”

The other ladies did not merely approve of Pampinea’s advice, but were so keen to follow it that they had already begun to discuss the details, and it looked as though they were about to get up and go immediately. But Filomena, who was extremely prudent, said: “Ladies, although what Pampinea has said is very well said, we should not rush into it, as you seem to want to do. Remember that we are all women, and none of us is so immature that she does not know how unreasonable women are when they are in a group, and how little they are able to arrange things without the guidance of a man. We are fickle creatures, stubborn, suspicious, and very cowardly. I fear therefore, if we have no

one to guide us but ourselves, that this company will break up much sooner than it otherwise might do, and with less honour to us. And so we must sort this out before we start.”

Elissa then said: “Certainly men should rule over women, and it is seldom that any of our ventures comes to a good end without their guidance. But where can we find these men? We all know that most members of our families are dead and the others who survive, scattered here and there in various groups (who knows where?), are in flight as we are. It would not be appropriate to go with people from outside our families, because if we wish to assure our safety, we need to find some way of arranging things so that, wherever we go for pleasure and repose, discord and scandal do not follow us.”

While this discussion was taking place, three men came into the church. They were all youngish, although the youngest was at least twenty-five. Neither the abnormal times nor the loss of friends and relatives nor fear for their own safety had managed to extinguish the flames of love in them, or even cool them down. The first was called Panfilo, the second Filostrato, and the last Dioneo, and all of them were pleasant and well mannered. For some solace in these turbulent times, they were trying to find their loved ones, all three of whom happened to be among the seven ladies I have mentioned, while some of the other ladies were relatives of some of them.

No sooner did they see the ladies than the ladies saw them. Pampinea smiled and said: “See how fortune favours us at the start, placing before us young men who are intelligent and brave, and who will be happy to act as guides and servants to us, if we do not disdain to accept them.”

Neifile then, who had blushed crimson in embarrassment because she was one of those loved by one of the young men, said: “Goodness Pampinea, mind what you’re saying. I know perfectly well that nothing bad can be said of any one of them, and I believe they are more than capable of doing what we wish. And I think they would be good and honest company not merely for us but for ladies much more dear to them and attractive than we are. But, since it is also obvious that they are in love with some of us here, I fear that we will incur infamy and reproach, without any fault of ours or theirs, if we take them with us.”

At this Filomena said: “That does not matter at all. If I live decently, and my conscience does not trouble me, then anyone may say what he likes against me: God and truth will take up arms in my defence. If



they are willing to come, then indeed, as Pampinea says, we shall know that Fortune is favouring our venture.”

The others, hearing her speak like this, fell silent. Then they agreed unanimously that they should call to the young men, explain the plan to them, and ask if they would be willing to keep them company. And so without more words Pampinea, who was a blood relation to one of the men, rose to her feet and went towards them as they stood there watching. She greeted them pleasantly, made her purpose clear, and asked them, on behalf of all the ladies, kindly to keep them company in a chaste and brotherly way.

The young men thought at first that they were being made fun of, but when they realized that the lady was speaking in earnest, they answered happily that they were ready to go, and without any delay they gave orders for everything to be made ready for their departure. The very next morning, a Wednesday, at daybreak, everything having been prepared, and some necessities sent on ahead of them, the ladies with some of their maids and the three young men with three servants left the city and set off. They had scarcely gone two miles\* when they came to the place where they had decided to stay.

This was on a tiny hill, a good distance from any road, and a joy to see with its various shrubs and plants and their green foliage. On the top of the hill was a palace, with a fine large courtyard in the middle, and with loggias, halls and bedrooms, all very fine in themselves and remarkable for the cheerful paintings which adorned them, with meadows all round and wonderful gardens, and wells providing clear fresh water, and cellars containing rare wines: these last were more appropriate for connoisseurs than for sober and respectable ladies. When they arrived, they found to their great delight that everything had been thoroughly cleaned, and the beds made, and the house was full of all the seasonal flowers, and the floors were covered in rushes.

They had hardly sat down when Dioneo, who was a pleasant young man and full of wit, said: “Ladies, it is your good sense rather than our shrewdness that has brought us here. I don’t know what you intend to do with your anxieties, but I left mine inside the city when I went out of it a short time ago with you. And so, you must either be prepared to be happy and laugh and sing with me (as far, of course, as it befits your dignity), or you must allow me to return to my anxieties and stay in the afflicted city.”

To this Pampinea, who appeared to have cast her own anxieties away, replied happily: “Dioneo, you have spoken well: we do want to enjoy ourselves, which is in fact why we fled from our troubles. But nothing disorganized can last long. So I, who began the conversation which led to the formation of this company, have considered how we may prolong our pleasure. I think we must have a leader, one of our number, whom we must honour and obey, and who will concentrate on making sure that we enjoy ourselves. And so that we may all experience the cares as well as the pleasures of power, and also see things from both sides and consequently feel no envy, I suggest that each of us be given the burden and the honour of office for one day. All of us must decide who is to rule first, and then, as the hour of vespers approaches, whoever has been elected will choose a successor. Whoever is chosen will have the power, during his or her period of office, to decide where and how we shall live.”

Everyone was delighted by this proposal, and with one voice they elected Pampinea to be their ruler for the first day. Filomena ran across to a laurel bush (she had often heard how much honour was owed to the foliage of this tree and also how much honour was bestowed on anyone crowned with it), and plucked some branches from it to make a splendid, striking garland. That was placed upon Pampinea’s head, and it became, while their company lasted, a clear sign to everyone of royal authority.

Pampinea, now that she was crowned queen, commanded everyone to be silent, once she had ordered the servants of the three young men and the maidservants, who were four in number, to appear before her. Then she broke the silence by saying: “In order to set a good example to all of you, and so that everything may get better and better and our company live in an orderly and pleasant way as long as we wish, without anything for us to be ashamed of, I first appoint Parmeno, Dioneo’s servant, as my steward, and to him I commit the management of the household and the dining arrangements. I appoint Sirisco, Panfilo’s servant, to be our treasurer, under the orders of Parmeno. Tindaro, who serves Filostrato, will also look after the other two gentlemen in their rooms, whenever the other servants are not able to, because they are performing their other duties. Misia, my maid, and Licisca, Filomena’s, will stay in the kitchen, concerned with the careful preparation of those dishes which Parmeno orders. I wish Chimera,

Lauretta's maid, and Stratilia, Fiammetta's, to look after the ladies' bedrooms, and also to see that all the rooms we use are kept clean. Finally, I wish and command all of you servants to take care, wherever you go, wherever you come from, whatever you see or hear, not to bring us any news from outside that is not good news."

Having issued these brief orders, with which everyone was happy, Pampinea rose to her feet in good spirits and said: "Here we have gardens and meadows, and many other delightful haunts, through which we may all wander for our own amusement. Then when terce sounds, everyone must be back here, so that we may have our lunch in the shade."

So the happy band had the new Queen's permission to leave, and the young men and ladies strolled through a garden, engaged in pleasant conversation, weaving beautiful garlands from the branches of various trees, and singing songs of love. When they had used up the time they had been given, they went back indoors and saw that Parmeno had started on his duties with some zeal: they found, when they entered a room on the ground floor, tables covered with pure white tablecloths, goblets with a silver shine, and everywhere adorned with blossoms of broom. They all rinsed their hands, as the Queen desired, and then went and sat down in the places which Parmeno had allotted to them.

Beautifully prepared dishes were brought in, choice wines were available, and without more ado the three attendants served them in silence. Since everything was so pleasantly and carefully arranged, they were all happy, and they ate to the accompaniment of cheerful and witty conversation. Once the tables were cleared, the Queen – knowing that all the ladies were skilled in round dancing, as were the young men, some of whom could also play and sing expertly – commanded that instruments should be brought. And at her request, Dioneo took up a lute and Fiammetta a viola, and they played melodious dancing music. The queen sent the servants away to eat, and joined the other ladies and youths in a gentle round dance. Afterwards they sang delightful songs of joy. They amused themselves like this until the Queen decided it was time to sleep, and they were all sent away, the young men to their rooms and the ladies to theirs, where they found the beds made and the rooms as full of flowers as the hall had been. They undressed and fell asleep.

Nones had hardly sounded when the Queen arose and roused the others, including the young men, saying that it was unhealthy to sleep

too much during the day. They went out into a meadow where the grass was tall and green, and where the sun's heat could not penetrate and there, feeling a light breeze arise, they did what their queen suggested and sat down in a circle on the grass. This is what she said to them: 'As you can see, the sun is high in the sky and it is very hot, and there is nothing to be heard but the cicadas in the olive trees. Therefore I think it would be really foolish to go anywhere at present. It is nice and cool here and, as you can see, there are tables and chessboards laid out, and everyone may amuse themselves as they wish. But, if you take my advice, we will spend our time in the heat of the day not in playing games (where one player becomes upset, without there being much enjoyment for the other player or for the onlookers), but in telling stories. While one of us tells a story, we shall all have the pleasure of listening to it. By the time you have all told a brief tale, the sun will be setting, the heat will have abated, and you may go where you like and amuse yourselves as you wish. I am thinking only of pleasing you, so if you like this idea, let us do what I suggest. If you do not like it, we may all follow our own inclinations until the hour of vespers.'

All of them, men and women, approved of her proposal.

"Well then," said the Queen, "since you give your consent, you'll be free on this first day to tell a story on whatever theme you wish."

Turning to Panfilo, who was seated on her right, she asked him if he would kindly start things off with one of his stories. Immediately, Panfilo, with all of them listening intently, began to speak.

## 1

*Ser Cepparello deceives a holy friar with a false confession and dies. Although his life was very wicked, after death he is reputed to be a saint and becomes known as St Ciappelletto.*

"It is only right and proper, dear ladies, that whatever men do should begin with the glorious and sacred name of Him who is the maker of all things. Therefore I, with whom our storytelling must commence, begin with one of His wonderful works, so that hearing it may strengthen our faith in Him who never changes, and we may always praise His name.