

Ricardo scratched his head and picked up the loaf of freshly baked bread sitting on the table. Bringing it to his nose, he inhaled deeply, and exclaimed “è meraviglioso!” (It is wonderful!)

Isabella cast her eyes down to the table and gingerly plucked a sprig of grapes from the bowl next to her, eating slowly, silently, without speaking. After a moment she asked Ricardo in a voice clear as a bell: “Seniore, come stanno i tuoi figli?” (Sir, how are your children?)

Grigori, sitting farther down the table, yawned and gestured for more wine. Isabella noticed his frock appeared frayed all the way down the underarm, so badly that threads were hanging off, and there were holes in the armpit. ‘That poor gentleman cannot even afford a new frock’, she thought. Ricardo replied that his children were charming at times and naughty at others, to which Isabella smiled and said “Ho fatto un sogno in cui mi sono svegliata come una ricca ereditiera” (“I had a dream that I woke up as a rich heiress”).

Ricardo huffed loudly and exclaimed “my children will all be rich in wealth and in inheritance, while you can only dream of such things.” Isabella gasped. At that moment, the guest of honor, The Duke of Pisa, glided into the room with 2 servants by his side. He was dressed neither vainly nor plainly, and smelled faintly of orange blossom. He stood near the table and said aloud ‘my guests, my pleasant company, welcome and enjoy yourselves for you are among friends. Your home is my home. Please help yourself to anything you wish.’

A gurgling giggle was heard from across the table and Grigori, a bit tipsy, pointed to Isabella and asked ‘my lady, would you like some wine?’ She frowned, turning away her gaze, and said ‘no sir, for I never take wine at luncheon.’ Ricardo leaned to Isabella and said in a voice loud enough for all present to hear: “Pay him no mind. He is a fool.”

The Earl of Pisa sat at the head of the table, and his servants began bringing him sections of duck and fish. Ricardo abruptly stood and exclaimed “My Lord, the food and drink are absolutely divine! Even the angels do not have such fine food and drink as what you offer at your table! We have all been enjoying it greatly!” There was a moment of silence while he sat. The Duke then stood and in a calm voice, replied “I am pleased that you are pleased.”

Ricardo then lifted up his plate and forked a large section of roasted potato. “My Lord”, he said, making eye contact with the Duke, “please enjoy this last section of roasted potato. There were only 4 brought out, and you should have this last one.” Two servants quickly ran out of the room and began bringing in more roasted potatoes. No one replied and the Duke sipped wine while politely keeping his gaze away from Ricardo. The duke’s servants glanced around the room uncomfortably.

“Let’s have music!” the Duke commanded, and the servants gestured to a flutist who began playing a charming tune. The guests all smiled, while Grigori blew his nose and inspected his handkerchief, then began picking his teeth with the sharp end of his dinner knife.