

Day 6, Story 2

By means of a single phrase, Cisti the baker makes Messer Geri Spina see how he has made an inappropriate request.¹

adonna Oretta's remark received high praise from all the women as well as the men. When the Queen then ordered Pampinea to follow suit, she began as follows:

Lovely ladies, for my part I am unable to decide which sin is greater, that of Nature in assigning a noble spirit to an inferior body, or that of Fortune in assigning a body endowed with a noble spirit to an inferior profession. The latter happened in the case of our fellow citizen Cisti, as well as in many others we have had occasion to observe, for although Cisti was endowed with a most exalted spirit, Fortune made him a baker.

I would certainly curse Nature and Fortune alike if I did not know that the former is very discerning and the latter has a thousand eyes, albeit fools picture her as being blind. I am convinced that since both are very shrewd, they do what mortals do when they are unsure about the future. For they often bury their most precious belongings in the most unprepossessing places in their homes, places where one would least expect to find them, so that then, when the need is greatest, they can be brought out again, the humble nature of their hiding place having kept them safer than if they had been in some elegant chamber. In the same way, the two arbiters of all worldly things often hide their most precious treasures beneath the shadow of the basest professions, so that when the need arises for them to be brought forth, their splendor will be all the more apparent. I will prove this to you by means of

a very short tale, which I was reminded of by the last story we heard. It involves an episode, in itself of no great importance, in which Cisti the baker got Geri Spina, who was Madonna Oretta's husband, to open the eyes of his mind and see the truth.

Let me say, then, that when Pope Boniface, who held Messer Geri Spina in the highest esteem, sent certain noblemen as his ambassadors to Florence on urgent papal business, they stayed at Messer Geri's house.² He joined them in their negotiations, and almost every morning, for one reason or another, it just so happened that they would all walk past Santa Maria Ughi where Cisti the baker had his shop and plied his trade in person.

Although Fortune had assigned Cisti to a very humble profession, she had been sufficiently kind to him as he practiced it that he had become extremely wealthy, and while he felt no desire to change his profession for any other, he nevertheless lived in the most splendid style and had, among all the other fine things he called his own, the best white and red wines to be found in Florence or the surrounding region. As he watched Messer Geri and the Pope's ambassadors walking past his door every morning, it occurred to him that it would be very courteous on his part, seeing how hot the weather was, to offer them a drink of his good white wine. But being conscious of the difference in social rank between himself and Messer Geri, he felt it would be an unseemly act of presumption for him to make such an invitation, and so he thought up a plan, instead, by means of which he could induce Messer Geri to make the proposal himself.

Accordingly, every morning, Cisti would always put on the whitest of doublets and a freshly washed apron, which made him look more like a miller than a baker, and around the time he thought Messer Geri was going to walk past with the ambassadors, he would station himself near the entrance to his shop where a shiny tin pail of fresh water had been set up alongside a new little Bolognese pitcher filled with his good white wine and two goblets so luminous they seemed made of silver. There he would sit, and as they passed by, after clearing his throat once or twice, he would start drinking this wine of his with such gusto that he would have made the dead feel thirsty.

After Messer Geri had observed this two mornings in a row, on the third he asked: "How is it, Cisti? Is it good?"

"Yes, sir," replied Cisti, springing to his feet, "but I can't really make you understand just how good it is unless you taste some of it."

Whether it was the weather, or his having exerted himself more than usual, or maybe the sight of Cisti drinking with so much relish, Messer Geri had developed such a thirst that he turned to the ambassadors with a smile and said: "Gentlemen, we would do well to sample this worthy man's wine. Perhaps it's such that we won't regret having done so."

Messer Geri and the ambassadors all walked over to Cisti, who immediately had an attractive bench brought out from inside the shop and invited them to have a seat. He then turned to their servants, who were already coming up to wash the glasses, and told them:

"Stand aside, friends, and leave this duty for me to take care of, because I know as much about serving wine as I do about baking. As for you, just don't you think that you're going to taste a drop of this yourselves!"

After he had spoken, Cisti washed four beautiful new goblets with his own hands, had a little pitcher of his good wine brought out for them, and with meticulous care, poured some of it for Messer Geri and his companions, none of whom had drunk anything that fine in years. Messer Geri was enthusiastic in his praise of the wine, and for the rest of the time that the ambassadors were in Florence, he went there with them almost every morning to drink it.

When the ambassadors had finished their business and were about to depart, Messer Geri held a magnificent banquet for them to which he invited a number of the most prominent citizens. He also sent an invitation to Cisti, who could not be persuaded to come under any circumstances. Whereupon Messer Geri ordered one of his servants to go for a flask of Cisti's wine and to give half a glass of it to each person during the first course.

The servant, who was perhaps annoyed that he had never been allowed to taste the wine, took a large flagon with him, and as soon as Cisti saw it, he said: "Son, Messer Geri's not sending you to me."

The servant kept insisting that Messer Geri had indeed done so, but when he could not extract any other answer from Cisti, he returned to his master. After the servant explained what Cisti had said, Messer Geri told him: "Go back to him and tell him that I really did send you to him, and if he still responds like that, ask him to whom I'm sending you."

The servant returned and said: "Cisti, I assure you that Messer Geri really is sending me to you."

"And I assure you, son," replied Cisti, "he's really not."

"Then," said the servant, "to whom is he sending me?"

"To the Arno," replied Cisti.³

When the servant reported this exchange to Messer Geri, the eyes of his mind were immediately opened, and he said to the man: "Let me see the flask you're taking to him." The instant he saw it, Messer Geri declared, "Cisti's right," and then, after giving the servant a scolding, he had him take a flask of a suitable size.

When he saw the flask, Cisti said, "Now I'm certain he's sending you to me," and happily filled it up for him.

Later the same day, Cisti had a little cask filled with a wine of the same vintage and had it carefully transported to Messer Geri's house. He followed right behind, and upon encountering Messer Geri in person, he said to him: "I wouldn't want you to think, sir, that I was taken aback by that large flagon this morning. It's just that I thought you'd forgotten what I've shown you over the last few days with the help of my little pitchers, namely that this is no wine for servants. All I wanted to do this morning was to refresh your memory. Now, since I don't intend to be the guardian of this wine for you any longer, I've had it all brought here, and from this point forward, you may dispose of it as you please."⁴

Deeply appreciative of Cisti's gift, Messer Geri thanked him in an appropriate manner, and from that time forth he held Cisti in high esteem and considered him his friend forever.