

Day 1, Story 5

By means of a banquet consisting entirely of hens, plus a few sprightly little words, the Marchioness of Monferrato curbs the foolish love of the King of France.¹

As the ladies listened to Dioneo's story, at first it made them feel a twinge of embarrassment, which manifested itself in their faces as a modest blush, but after a while, that was replaced by a malicious grin, and as they glanced back and forth at one another, they were scarcely able to keep from laughing. Nevertheless, once Dioneo had finished, they scolded him with a few gentle little words, making it clear that such stories were not the sort to be told in the presence of ladies. The Queen then turned to Fiammetta, who was seated next to Dioneo on the grass, and told her to take her turn. With a cheerful expression on her face, Fiammetta graciously began:

Whereas in men it is a sign of great wisdom to court women whose social position is higher than their own, women show how very discerning they are by means of their ability to protect themselves from the love of men stationed above them. For this reason, and also because I am quite pleased to see us using our stories to demonstrate the power of prompt and witty retorts, it occurred to me that I could use the story I have to tell in order to show you, lovely ladies, how a noble woman defended herself by both word and deed from that sort of love and dispelled it in her suitor as well.

The Marquis of Monferrato was a very worthy man who, as a Gonfalonier of the Church, had sailed across the seas leading a Christian army on a Crusade.² Some time after that, when people were talking one day about his merits at the court of Philippe le Borgne, who

was himself preparing to leave France and join the Crusade, a knight remarked that there was no couple beneath the stars like the Marquis and his wife, for just as the Marquis was famed among knights for every virtue, so his wife was considered more beautiful and worthy of more respect than any other woman in the world. These words penetrated the heart of the French King so deeply that without his ever having seen her, he immediately began to love her with a passion, and decided that he would not set sail for the Crusade he was about to go on from any port except Genoa, because in traveling overland to that city he would have an honest excuse for going to see the Marchioness, and with the Marquis out of the way, he thought he would have a good opportunity to satisfy his desires.³

The King put his plan into effect, sending his men on ahead and setting out afterward himself with a small retinue, including a few noblemen. As he approached the territory of the Marquis, he sent word to the Marchioness a day in advance that she should expect him for dinner the next morning. Being both wise and prudent, the lady sent back a cheerful reply, saying that this would be an honor beyond any other and that he would be truly welcome. Then, however, she started wondering what it meant that such a great king would come to visit her when her husband was not at home. Nor did she deceive herself when she reached the conclusion that he had been drawn there by her reputation for beauty. Nevertheless, like the worthy woman she was, she prepared to receive him, and after having summoned the gentlemen who still remained in her court, she solicited their advice, after which she gave orders for all the necessary arrangements to be made, at the same time declaring that she would take care of the banquet and the details of the menu by herself. Then, without a moment's hesitation she had all the hens in the countryside rounded up and ordered her cooks to make a series of different dishes out of them for the royal feast.

The King arrived on the appointed day and was honorably and ceremoniously received by the lady. Now that he actually saw her, it seemed to him that her beauty, worth, and refinement went far beyond anything he had imagined on the basis of the knight's words. Awestruck, he complimented her lavishly, for he was even more inflamed with

passion on finding that the lady transcended his expectations of her. After a short rest in his chambers, which were richly furnished in a manner appropriate for the reception of so great a king, it was time for dinner, and the King sat down at one table with the Marchioness, while the remaining guests were given seats of honor at the other tables according to their rank.

As he was served an elaborate series of dishes one after the other, all accompanied by the finest, most precious wines, the King gazed contentedly from time to time at the radiantly beautiful Marchioness, which filled him with the most intense pleasure. However, as one course succeeded another, he found himself increasingly baffled by the fact that, however different the preparations were, hens supplied the main ingredient in all of them. The King was well enough acquainted with that region to know that it had to have an abundant supply of game of all sorts, and by announcing his arrival to the lady in advance, he had given her plenty of time to organize a hunt. Nevertheless, although he was truly puzzled, he had no desire to do anything except to get her to say something about her hens. So, with a smile on his face, he turned to her and said: "My lady, are hens alone born in this country, and never any cocks at all?"

The Marchioness, who understood perfectly well what he was asking, realized that God had given her just the opportunity she desired to explain what she intended. Turning boldly to the King, she replied to his question: "No, my lord, although they differ from others somewhat in their rank and style of clothing, for all that, the females here are made the same way they are everywhere else."^{*}

On hearing this, the King understood clearly the reason for the banquet of hens as well as the virtue concealed beneath the Marchioness's words. He realized that persuasion would be wasted on such a woman

^{*} The Marchioness's remark needs interpretation. She may be saying that the King should not expect women in Monferrato, and especially her, to be unlike women elsewhere. In other words, they will be faithful to their husbands. There might also be an implied criticism of the King in her choice of "hens" for the banquet. On the equation of hens with women and cocks with men, see the supposedly deaf-mute Masetto's first words to the Abbess near the end of 3.1.

and that force was out of the question. And so, just as he had been foolishly inflamed because of her, he now decided wisely that, for the sake of his honor, his ill-conceived fire had to be extinguished. Fearing her retorts, he refrained from teasing her any further, and with all his hopes dashed, concentrated on eating his dinner. As soon as the meal was finished, in order to cover the dishonorable way he had come by means of a hasty departure, he thanked her for her hospitality, she wished him Godspeed, and off he went to Genoa.

Day 6, Story 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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