BOCCACCIO

WRITERS OF THE WORLD SERIES

BOCCACCIO

by

Francis MacManus

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The last of thies three, moste gratiouse souereign Lorde, was John Bocaş of Certaldo, which in lyke wyse as the tother twayne, Dante and Petracha, wer moste exellent in the vulgare ryme, so thys Bocas was aboue all others in prose, as it apperyth by his hundrith tayles and many other notable workes Nor he was noo lesse elegaunte in the prose of his oune tunge then he was in the Latyne tunge, wherin, as Petrak dyd wryte clerkly certeyn volumes in the Latyne tunge, so dyd thys clerke

—*Henry Parker, Lord Morley, in his Dedication to Henry VIII of his englished version of* De Claris Mulieribus

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AVVERTIMENTO

SIX HUNDRED AND THIRTY YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH OF GIOVANNI Boccaccio, in the late autumn of 1943, the armies of the warring nations began to drag "the red-hot rake of the battle-line" up through the Italian peninsula It was a piece of martial gardening not entirely unfamiliar in the land that was a chief source of our civilisation Much that was sacramental of Europe and of old Christendom was blasted out of existence Cities, towns and villages that Boccaccio had known, some in their grim mediaeval origins and some in their mediaeval glory, and stretches of the country that he had travelled either as an ambassador for his free, purse-proud Florence or in the profound restlessness of his soul, were pounded and tossed to the high heavens Churches, villas and humble houses, pictures, statues, frescoes, mosaics and monuments, all those things that were sacramental of human faith in the divine and of visions of beauty, that had brought grace of mind even to barbarians on tour and that might again have brought the West to consciousness of its origin and great heritage, were pulverised It was a source of deep sadness It could have been worse, for, even into the terrible logic of total warfare, something of reverence entered, to stay the hands of the destroyers

In Naples—always overrated by its devotees and underrated by its critics, like any beautiful slut—Giovanni Boccaccio had grown in the sweetness and bitterness of love to manhood, and Naples was shelled, bombed and skilfully sabotaged in the Church of Santa Chiara, roofs and walls toppled on the monuments of the Angevin kings, and King Robert's Gothic tomb, designed by the two Bertinis of Florence, was buried under great depths of rubble, as though even the dead things of the old civilisation could not be buried deep enough for the new, the University library was burned and the Angevin archives destroyed The world knows what was done to Monte Cassino where one day he wept over the neglect of the library In Florence, his city, with the destruction of the approaches to the Ponte Vecchio, the greater part of what had been left of Dante's Florence, his Dante, was erased But

Tuscany was comparatively lucky And so, too, was Ravenna, where he had gone to meet Dante's daughter, and where the destroyers were moved by some reverence for the splendid things that had escaped mortality But his Certaldo where his people had been born and reared, and where he died and, according to his desire, was buried, here the shells fell thickly, and the roof of the church was shattered, the sacristy sacked, and his house where they closed his eyes—not that he was loath to close them on the world's vanity—was damaged grievously

As a man who served a brief term as an observer of war, he would not have been unduly shocked by the destruction, rather would he have been horrified by the measure of the means, by the vast, lavish, ingenious means whereby men try to force their will upon their fellows In his frugal Florentine way, he would probably declare that the dreadful business could be done more cheaply, and in his cautious Florentine way, he would have done a mighty amount of higgling and sales-talk before agreeing to unloose violence As an ambassador, as the son of a business man, he was familiar with higgling and the humanity of even the hypocrite's words As a citizen, he was in love with liberty, and he was aware of the unceasing vigilance needed to preserve liberty from its professional friends as well as its enemies As a European who looked to Rome and Greece, and to the Incarnation of Christ, for true origins, and who appreciated the sacramental nature of human handiwork, he would have mourned the thorough effect of high explosives, and mourned more deeply still for its destructive effect on human society the denial of the beliefs which shaped the West

Had his countrymen laughed between two wars as he had the courage to laugh in his day, Fascism might have been shamed out of some of its strutting inhumanity and its rhetoric. Naples, Monte Cassino, Certaldo, a city, a monastery, and a little town; a few more attempts, or perhaps just one more attempt, and dazed, ruined men will begin where his ancestors began when the shattered Roman Empire left little municipalities like besieged petty kingdoms, walled, entowered, martial, warring with one another, suspicious, speaking strange dialects and accounting foreign their neighbours in the next valley, but all informed by the unifying

spirit of the Faith, so that out of all the disorder rose the Middle Ages with high theology, love of justice, murderous hatred of error, the guilds, the cathedrals, the storytelling, and innumerable saints It is to the sunset, even to the nightfall of the Middle Ages, that Messer Giovanni Boccaccio belonged

The mood of a civilisation was changing Because he was in that period of transition, a process hastened with dreadful shock by the Black Death which had an effect that can only be paralleled by our wars, because he belonged wholly neither to the clear, frosty mood of Dante nor to the randy, luxuriant springtime mood of the Medici, he suffered He was an unsettled man Hence his ordeal One may note ordeal in his oscillating view of sex, of women, of love

This book is, then, partly an account of his ordeal and of how it affected his writings After that solemn declaration, I must hasten to add that it is not a scholar's book because, as any scholar will discern even in the depths of his cups—that is, assuming that cups and scholars still associate—I am no scholar, though I may have met some scholars on their way from school May God bless the good fellows and preserve them ! Following their authority and sometimes their example, I have picked brains Such is my respect for authority, I would even borrow some coughs and sneezes from Master François Rabelais for the proper punctuation of a lawyer's document,—but without acknowledgement either in the text or in a footnote ! This ingratitude, I fear, has been my practice with many facts, and with the multitudinous surmises wherein Boccaccio's history abounds as does a Neapolitan doss-house with fleas, as he knew by experience I have taken, made my acknowledgements in the text as much as possible, and generally in the list of books consulted I have shunned the whys and wherefores of dates, texts, attributions, forgeries and editions as much as any dear reader would like, preferring to consume the fruit in my own way and to leave the cultivation of the garden to the experts Where authorities differ, and they do differ bewilderingly, I have chosen what seems the likeliest of their conclusions

If readers desire out of idle curiosity or some baser motive to see what are the authorities in an English biography, they cannot do better than go to Edward Hutton's treasure, though it is

Thomas Caldecot Chubb's date, 1336, for instance, which I have taken for the disputed time of Boccaccio's meeting with Maria d'Aquino—whose relationship with the sainted theologian had no noticeable effect on her behaviour, but then the relationship was distant!—chiefly because that date gives Boccaccio time, at twenty-three years of age, to have had the three or four love-affairs of which he boasted so mysteriously 1331 seems too early, for then Boccaccio was only eighteen But, of course, he may have been precocious enough to make fools of all the scholars!

Again, since the book offers in a small way a selection of Boccaccio's prose and verse in the Italian and in English, I have followed authority in translations, first through deference to brilliant workers like Rossetti and Rigg and Wicksteed and Osgood, and secondly, because their thoughtfulness relieved me of hard work For the original texts I relied generally on Moutier's complete edition of the vulgar works, and qualified that reliance by using Fanfani's *Decameron*, Griffin and Myrick's *Filostrato*, Macrì-Leone's *Vita di Dante*, Salvini's *Comento*, Osgood's translation of the vital last two books of the *De genealogia deorum gentilium*, and Corazzini's precious collection of letters and documents, and so forth There were many, many books I wished to get but could not

Lastly, may I observe that where the translators are not specified, I must be accounted guilty for foul play on two languages As for errors of fact and, perhaps, mistaken surmises, it goes without saying that they are mine, but they are, I think, the least of the inflictions suffered by the memory of a poet and great storyteller who brought the *sorriso italiano* to the mouths of his countrymen six centuries ago, but not, alas, to the bleak beaks of some of his commentators! For long his countrymen held that smile May it come back!

FRANCIS MACMANUS

May, 1946

PROLOGUE

DEATH IN RAVENNA

La bellissima e famosissima figlia di Roma, Fiorenza
Florence, the most beautiful and famous daughter of Rome
—Dante, *Il Convivio*, I, 3

Ego intelligo Florentinorum morem, loquacissimi enim sumus, verum in rebus bellicis nihil valemus
It is I who know the stuff of the Florentines, for we are great gabbers but not worth a straw in a fight
—Eclogue by Boccaccio

PROLOGUE

DEATH IN RAVENNA

ON SEPTEMBER 14, THE FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE MOST Holy Cross, 1321, Dante Alighieri, his sins confessed, his body anointed and the Viaticum received, died of a fever in Ravenna He was in his fifty-sixth year, and in the nineteenth of decreed exile from Florence, his native city All hope, though not all desire, of a return had failed

They knew in Ravenna what kind of man had died among them, and so Count Guido da Polenta, who had assuaged the bitterness of those last years with patronage and protection, ordered the body to be placed upon a bier, and with the eyes of that long eagle-face closed, the brows were crowned with the laurel of the poets Citizens of Ravenna carried the bier to the church of the Friars Minor and there the body was laid in stone They returned to the house in which the Poet had lived and Count Guido, according to custom, as would be described by Dante's first biographer, "delivered an ornate and long discourse both in commendation of the deceased, and in consolation of his friends whom he had left in bitterest grief" In a strange house in a strange city where the antique monuments of kings and emperors mouldered stone by stone, the uneasy journeyings of the cast-out poet ended with the bay-leaves fresh and aromatic above the dead face

Over at the other side of the Apennines, in Florence, they saluted the news with a complete and purposeful absence of public lamentation For the Florentines under thirty years of age who had never seen him—or if they had could hardly remember him—the dead poet was a dim figure that might be defined by the gossiping and arguments of the older people the way he walked stooped and absorbed, his dress plain, the way he looked from sharp eyes, like a bird, the eagle, the grave composed manners, the remarkable courtesy; the economy of deliberated speech, his delight in song, his habit of falling into contemplation and deep, unshakable silence, and the story of his devotion to the young

girl, Beatrice As for the exile and the causes of it, those knotty things could be best unravelled by the older people of the old city that lay packed and swarming and noisy between the Baptistery near the first circle of walls and the banks of the Arno about the Ponte Vecchio

The big business men, the merchants, the manufacturers of woollen cloths and silks, the artisans and the bankers, all persons of much authority and great prosperity, those might take time off in their workshops and offices to sip a glass of wine and drop a word or two about the news from Ravenna, but they would not be so frivolous for long, because they had a proverb *Chi non sta in bottega è ladro*, idlers are robbers Or they might sit in the coolness of their city gardens or outside the walls in their country villas, as *padroni* with paunches pleasurably filled, to watch the light fading over their most wonderful possession, the valley of the Arno, with its little streams, the Mugnone, the Affrico and the Mensola, and the wooded, rounded hills

It was the season when promise and effort attained Virgilian fulfilment From maple to maple and elm to elm the fruitful garlands of the vines hung, burdened with the purple-black, the golden yellow, the pink and the deep red grapes, or they were already stripped to the music of the vintagers' songs, new improvised words set to old country airs, their end-notes drawn out like melancholy Eastern cries, or already they had been laid to dry on great cane-trays or crushed in the ample vats The wheat had long been reaped thriftily from between the olive trees that turned mistily and faintly silver like a hint of moonlight in the evening winds,—for reaping began on the Feast of the Baptist, patron saint of the city

That was bread and wine, oil would come. Golden pumpkins, melons and water-melons were heaped up, and on the low walls around the threshing floors, the autumn figs and peaches, skinned and split, were drying on flat baskets in the heat and oozing sweet, sticky juices The evenings and the nights were the time for storytelling and argument, and for asking and answering questions about the exile who had died, about the wherefores and the whys of events that time had not simplified into folk-tale, so tangled were they with political ambition and intrigue, domestic alliances

and strife, and bloody battles in the streets, and there was always the question, straight and definite as a cypress, as to why the exile had been so drastically sentenced,—and other exiles with him Dante Alighieri had always protested innocence, he had always entitled himself the *exul immeritus*, the man cast out counter to his deserts

The argument that might develop by way of answer could always be silenced in that warm, fructive air by complacent evasion and side-tracking, and with the loquacity, the ingratiating sales-talk, that had made the Florentines famous universally as a fifth element There was earth, fire, air and water, and there were the Florentine merchants ! Had not the Poet been deeply involved in that old political trouble of twenty years ago ? And had not the same old trouble, with workers fighting and brawling in the streets, shops and factories closed, and masters at their wits' end to bring peace between the parties, had not all that been bad for business when business was thriving ? To be sure it had Who could deny it ? It was a bad time, a fine mess might have been made of everything for good and all But more than that—had not the dead exile—peace to his soul ! Amen !—expressed contempt for the fathers and sons, and even for the grandfathers, who had come in from the Florentine country to set up in business, expand the cloth trade, and make the city a world-centre of banking ? Had he not intrigued with other exiles, the hundreds of them, many poets too, and had he not pleaded with the Emperor, Henry of Luxembourg, to march in force against the city which, thank God and stout Florentine hearts, had resisted siege and seen the downfall of enemies and the death of the Emperor ?

All that was true, but the savage contempt must have left thorns buried for inflammation in the thick flesh of the prosperous men who were doing well out of and in Florence They may not have known the Poet's precise piercing words in their regard, but they must have heard rumours of them, and it is not the nature of rumours to decrease evil He had upbraided the city with arrogance and excess, and accounted those faults as the product of the sudden increase in wealth and the incoming of upstarts (*Inferno*, XVI. 73) His aristocratic pride and, it may be said, his snobbery, had been offended by the immigration of hundreds of

people on the make, farmers, farmworkers, villagers, mere rustics, wood-folk, hill-folk, *la parte selvaggia*, whose primitive thrift, ambition, stamina and energy had raised them to wealth and high office in the government of the city Their grandfathers had been little more than beggars The beginning of Florentine evil was *la confusion delle persone*, the mixing and stewing of strange people,—as it was the beginning of the glory that would be the Medici's The primal citizenry who looked to ancient Etruscan Fiesole or to Rome of the Caesars for its origin, had been polluted, thought Dante Alighieri, in its aristocratic purity by incomers from the countryside who thrust the city beyond its old boundaries and offended fine delicate noses with *lo puzzo*, the stink of the farmyard (*Paradiso*, xvi, 55)

Yet, it was these contemned people who, with their energy and shrewdness, had helped greatly in the rise and establishment of the commercial republic Their industry, and the successful efforts they made to preserve and develop it, is one of the few fixed and undivided factors in a story that is all division and internal strife They had two main sources of wealth wool and banking They trafficked as far in the European east as Constantinople, and in Asia to Cathay, and as far north as Bruges and London, the Orkneys, even Iceland, importing wool and rough cloths, exporting fine finished stuffs They juggled money slickly and at fat usury with kings, princes, lords, knights, khans and sultans, their account books were geographical gazetteers Because they needed liberty for business, they formed the backbone of the Guelfs whose politics were Florence for Florence as against the Ghibellines whose politics were Florence and Tuscany for themselves and the Empire

During the two generations before Dante's birth, they had been trudging to the city, to settle down in the grey austere streets, to work, set up new business, build and watch, one must suppose, which way the mouse of power would jump The year 1266, when Dante was one year old, saw them fighting on Saint Martin's Day in the streets with dart, knife, barricade and stone against the Ghibelline leader, Count Guido Novello, and his German mercenaries, some of that rabble, *la tedesca rabbia*—to use Petrarch's phrase—which periodically crossed the Alps in the Imperial train to bring such blessings as looted cities, smoking walls and trampled

countryside They, for such is the wisdom of the children of this world, thoroughly organised themselves into guilds, of which there were seven greater or key-guilds, the *Arti Maggiori*, that engaged in external trade and commerce, in manufacture, and in devising and enforcing regulations Of these the chief three were the *Arte di Calimala* which included the dressers and dyers of foreign cloths, the *Arte di Lana*, which included the cloth-makers who depended for raw materials partly on the countries of northern Europe and on the Iberian peninsula, and partly on the Maremma where large flocks of sheep were herded, and the *Arte della Seta*, the guild of the silk-workers whose craft had been improved and enlarged by immigrants from Lucca The first two of these held most of the wealth or controlled it, and as well, most of the political power Not much less in importance, of course, were the guilds of the judges and notaries, of the money-changers, and of the physicians and apothecaries with whom were combined the painters and booksellers,—to which guild Dante was ascribed that he might share in public life

On that Saint Martin's Day, then, in 1266, they blocked the streets and poured down stones, darts and imprecations from the high square towers and the small windows upon the Ghibelline horsemen that galloped against the barricades from the Piazza di San Giovanni They defeated them They took the government of the city into their own hands Florence, the commercial republic, had been consolidated and it was on the rise There were diversions to that political and commercial progress in political conspiracies and in wars against neighbouring cities like Pisa and Arezzo which threatened security or obstructed development, and there was the battle of Campaldino, in 1289, when the last attempt by Tuscan Ghibellinism in the field was broken During Dante's life in the city—some thirty-five years—all that had happened the city spreading beyond its walls, noble churches like the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore or public buildings like the Palazzo Vecchio being laid down, a third circuit of walls in the raising, Giotto's frescoes on the walls of the Bargello and Santa Maria Novella, and arrogance mounting to match material power So it was till the troubles that began in the year 1300, when Pope Boniface VIII declared a Jubilee.

This was the year that Giovanni Villani, merchant, returned from his pilgrimage to Rome and, contrasting with the solid thriving streets and buildings of his own native Florence the declining capital of Christendom where weed-crowned walls toppled to grass-grown streets and churches stood under gapped roofs open to wind and rain, decided to begin his famous chronicles because it was fitting to describe in detail what was great

"In the said time," he wrote complacently, "our city of Florence was in the greatest and happiest state which had ever been since it was rebuilt, or before, alike in greatness and power and in number of people, forasmuch as there were more than thirty-thousand citizens in the city, and more than 70,000 men capable of arms within her territory, and she was great in nobility of good knights, and in free populace, and in riches, ruling over the greater part of Tuscany, whereupon the sin of ingratitude, with the instigation of the enemy of the human race, brought forth from the said prosperity pride and corruption, which put an end to the feasts and joyaunce of the Florentines For hitherto they had been living on many delights and dainties, and in tranquillity and with continual banquets, and every year throughout almost all the city on the first day of May, there were bands and companies of men and of women, with sports and dances"

This was the time, the year and month, that citizens like Villani could recall twenty years later when they heard the news of the death of Dante in Ravenna In the recollection there would be regret, confusion perhaps, pride and some echoes of terror, feelings not quite in keeping with the satisfaction of having done a good day's work and eaten a good supper in that autumn of 1321 when an old story, as it were, could be held to the ear like a shell and the roar of a storming sea be heard in its murmuring.

The storms rose from an earlier time than the Year of Jubilee They found their origin in the Guelf party which, riding in power and becoming more tyrannical in wealth than the nobles had ever been in feudalism, quarrelled over the sharing of government The quarrel was complicated by the hostility of two families, and further by a feud of families in Pistoia which was governed from Florence The Guelfs split into Blacks and Whites. The efforts of Pope Boniface to use the Blacks as a means of curbing the city's

arrogance and of placing the city's power in some sort of European perspective, did not help to keep the peace On May day of 1300, as men could remember, while the girls were dancing on the Piazza di Santa Trinità, there had been scuffles and fights, and that was the beginning of the bloody violence that went on during the whole summer

A peacemaker was sent by the Pope He was Charles of Valois, brother of King Philip the Fair of France, and he came with French and Italian horsemen to swear, as son of a king, in Santa Maria Novella, that he would preserve the peace of the city This oath he swore, as men could testify, before the heads of government, the bishop and the people, and on the same day, with a haste that pacificators have not been slow to emulate, the Black Guelfs with the French burst into the city, released the prisoners from the jails, and began to kill, wound, rob and burn the city and the countryside They made grain very dear that autumn and there was hunger among the poor For eight days it went on the bells ringing, horsemen riding and preying through the streets to break down locked and barricaded doors and drag out terrified inhabitants, the heaping up of loot, clothes and tapestries, good gold florins and silverware, and rooms left wrecked and wine spilt on the floors, the smoke and smuts drifting through acrid air already nipping with winter from the snow-topped Apennines and Vallombrosa

When, at last, some sort of order was restored, and the Black Guelfs of the Valois persuasion were in power, the work of proscribing the Whites commenced Liquidation was thorough Among the first victims was Dante Alighieri Against him two sentences were directed by the first which was of January 27, 1302, he was accused of embezzlement, extortion, corruption, and agitation against the Pope, Charles of Valois, the Guelfs and the peace of the city and, it seems excessive to add, he was fined, by the second of the following March 10, since he had neither paid the fine nor answered the charges against him, he was condemned to be burned alive till he was dead and dust That, it appeared, was the end of the Poet

It was not. For he had loved Florence, his Florence, with such a love as made his exile a misery of restlessness and as could not

be appreciated by the merchantry who dealt not in ideas, certainly not in mystical ideas, but in goods and moneys, honest solid stuff that the hands could grip and the fingers feel He no longer possessed his city nor did his city possess him The decrees which meant either death or banishment—and he chose banishment in the hope of returning exonerated and honoured—had not transmuted that love to hate, though they had, it is probable, added savagery to his denunciations of what he considered the predominant sins of the city Not only did he perceive that the perfection desired for the thing beloved was withheld within the city in the relation of Florentine to Florentine by greed and ignobility, but that outside the city, in the pattern of world rule under the empire which he envisaged with scholastic order and a political mysticism, that same perfection was also wilfully denied by the arrogant stance of Florence towards Emperor, Pope, Prince and whomsoever should interfere with liberty and the rise to wealth and power

Two years after the decrees against him he had written or helped to write a letter to Nicholas, Bishop of Ostia and Velletri, Papal Legate and Papal Pacificator It was from Arezzo the letter came, where the banished White Guelfs had gathered to plot and plan for a return, and in the letter it was declared that they had no other purpose " save the tranquillity and liberty of the people of Florence " (*Epistola* 1) And Dante uttered those words, not just because they were politic but because they were true He demonstrated the truth of them in what he wrote and in the years of exile that inscribed his face with the deep unuttered cry of the protracted agony Nevertheless, it was a declaration that the merchants and traders of Florence, whose sins but not whose mentality he understood, could not take altogether at its face value

How could they ? There was that September—just nine years ago—as the men in their gardens or villas could remember who obstinately refused to memorialise the death in Ravenna It had been a magnificent harvest, the best for three decades, rich in grain, wine, fruit and in promise of oil And suddenly there were pillars of smoke toiling up the still autumn air from farms and villas in the east and north about the city, and refugees, entire households, bearing

their bundles and baggage and driving their white oxen and mules and horses, thronged in through the gates The armies of Henry of Luxembourg, elected Emperor as Henry VII, were on the move They would make one more attempt which would fail as the attempts of his predecessors had failed to revive the fading vision of the Holy Roman Empire He had ridden, with a falcon on his wrist, down from the Alps through the passes of Mont Cenis, and received the iron crown of Lombardy at Milan, as well as allegiance and supplies from many cities The Ghibellines and the exiled White Guelfs welcomed him At Rome, his soldiers had fought hand-to-hand for six weeks against Florentine and Neapolitan troops in the ruins, and they had been beaten Therefore, he was crowned Emperor, not in the capital at St Peter's but in St John Lateran In September, he turned towards Florence

His advent to Italy had been welcomed by Dante Alighieri as " the acceptable time wherein arise the signs of consolation and peace " (*Epistola* v) The signs of peace and consolation were the columns of smoke that rose and spread like giant trees above the burning houses and fields, thick with rich harvest It is not inexplicable that the merchants and traders did not see eye to eye with the Poet To Dante Henry was no less than " a second Moses ", he was the " divine and triumphant Henry " Italy was commanded to rejoice henceforth As persuasive propaganda, it was not very subtle, but subtlety was not the quality which distinguished the Poet's pronunciamentos when Henry of Luxembourg seemed about to make the steely logical structure of *De Monarchia* a reality

While Henry was besieging Cremona—mistakenly of course when he should have been hammering at Florence !—Dante had written and urged him not to ignore the fount and source of Italian rebelliousness The source was Florence where " the fox of this stench skulks in safety from the hunters " (*Epistola* vii) " She," he continued, " is the viper that turns upon the entrails of her mother She is the sick sheep that infects the flock of her lord with her contagion She is the foul and impious Myrrha that burns for the embraces of her father Cinyras " There was much more in the same strain, designed, it is obvious, to placate the breasts of merchants, traders and bankers who faced ruin, probably

exile and possibly liquidation, if Henry should succeed "In sooth," as Walter Savage Landor put in the mouth of Boccaccio during the tedious dialogues with Petrarch in the *Pentameron*, "our good Alighieri seems to have had the appetite of a dogfish or shark, and to have bitten the harder the warmer he was I would not voluntarily be under his manifold rows of dentals"

The Florentines came under the "manifold rows of dentals" but not voluntarily when Dante wrote to them "the day before the Kalends of April, on the confines of Tuscany, under the source of the Arno, in the first year of the most auspicious progress to Italy of Henry the Caesar" He inquired "Wherefore, then, stirring up so vain a thought as this, do ye, a second race of Babylonians, desert the compassionate empire and seek to establish new kingdoms, making the civic life of Florence one, and that of Rome another?" It was a rhetorical question not meant to be answered explicitly but only with heads bowed in shame and silence, like the polls of erring sons who are being castigated by a stern father, though it could have been answered with few words by the citizens of Florence, especially by the merchants, traders and artisans, who liked to govern themselves after their own fashion Their answer was to be found, in any case, in their defence walls and outworks which, as Dante assured them complaisantly, would fall into dust when, "terrible in gold" the eagle from beyond the Alps would swoop down, the populace would rise in the wrath of empty bellies, the churches be given to the despoilers, the city to the hands of aliens, and the few people left after the slaughter and enslavement would look on and weep (*Epistola* VI) It does not sound unfamiliar to modern ears And with this piece of exhortatory *schrecklichkeit* rather than *terribilità*, Dante exclaimed: "Oh, most wretched offspring of Fiesole!" *O miserrima Fesulanorum propago!*

In due time the eagle swooped down So suddenly did he come from the south with his horsemen, across the Arno where it receives the little stream of the Mensola—where poets might glimpse the authentic nymphs bathing and a god or two—that the Florentines could not believe the terror in gold was almost on the walls. He halted, sick and shivering with fever, three-quarters of a mile eastward from the open, unguarded city gates and the uncompleted

walls, and there he sojourned at the monastery of San Salvi The city was ripe as a fig to his hand had he acted, for the Florentine horsemen were miles away He was feverous He hesitated One might say that on the hesitant state of mind, on that attack of clouding fever, reposed the fortunes of Florence and perhaps of all Italy for many hundreds of years

The liberties of the communes might have been destroyed with Caesar and the Ghibellines in power, and there might have been a different Europe But the smoke was going up, like signals, from the burning houses all along the line of march through that splendidly autumnal countryside, and they saw it from the city, and the bells were rung till nerves jangled with fear The people rushed to arms, merchants, traders and artisans, masters and apprentices running from their workshops and offices, whipping off their *grembiuli*, their aprons, and they sorted themselves out into companies under the banners of the guilds on the Piazza della Signoria, and the Bishop of Florence with the clergy mounted, armed himself All moved to defend the threatened eastern gates and the moats Sleepless for two days they guarded, building palisades of wood along the moats and raising tents and booths within the walls, while across the countryside, above the tents of the imperial armies, the smoke of the devastated land drifted

It was no good time to remember, those two days,—and no thanks to Messer Dante and the rest of them Henry's men might have attacked, they might have been beaten off once, perhaps twice, and then they would have burst into the city, bringing with them the multitude of camp-followers that could do a thorough job of burning, looting, raping and killing At the end of the two days, the Florentine horsemen returned—the defenders must have run, shouting, to grip the stirrup-leathers and leapt, maudlin with the reassurance of deliverance, along the streets More horsemen came, allies from Lucca, Siena, Pistoia, Prato, Volterra and many other places far off

Within eight days of the siege being declared Henry's forces were outnumbered He had told the Florentines that a cart was to pass over the walls of their city, so flat would it be laid, but now the defenders were in such good heart that they mostly went about unarmed, and all the gates were left open except that eastern

Porto San Ambrogio, the carts rumbled in and out, laden with wools and cloths, grain and greens and fruit, as if there were no war, men were busy at their benches and looms and dyeing vats, and the chaffering and higgling went on in the Mercato Vecchio all the mornings They could have fought They could, by reason of their numbers, have sallied out and driven the Emperor's forces from that place which would be named Campo di Arrigo, Henry's Field, as if he had been a visitor worthy of commemoration But why should they fight? That was a game for fools who, if they survived and were fortunate in victory, yet found themselves poorer among ruins Why waste time, energy and lives in doing something that really brought no sound returns? Better to wait, since they had the advantage if fighting must be done, and see if some other means of getting rid of Arrigo might not be found

The means was found in Henry's indecision, and in disease The siege which was no siege, dragged on till the end of October when men would be tending the presses and the jars for the olive-harvest Henry, still sick, departed to direct his troops aimlessly about the Florentine countryside where, naturally, they lived off the land, looted, burned and destroyed Also, very happily as the Florentines thought, they died by the hundreds of disease All that meant anxiety, trouble, watchfulness, shortage of foodstuffs, but no consuming terror Within a year, as it pleased God, the Emperor was dead at Buonconvento Officially in Florence, they announced "the blessed tidings" to their allies It was time for them, also, to depart Business could go on

Therefore, after they had received news of the death of Dante Alighieri on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Most Holy Cross, 1321, they did not toll any bell or mourn publicly. What he had symbolised for them, he of *il popolo vecchio*, the ancient aristocracy, had been safely put away with decree, intrigue, organisation and a love of liberty marvellously blended with sound business instincts, and they of the rising, wealthy industrial middle class, *il popolo grasso*, were well shut of the old troubles

But they had not put away Dante. By the Lord they had not! For his fame would grow, not just outside the city but within, and an image of him would ascend above the Arno, dark, scornful, commanding and creative of a deeper civic *pietas*, and it would not

be denied the rehabilitation of his name They of Florence would yet plead for his bones In the change of mind that would be brought about in them towards the cast-out man, a vital part would be played by one of their own business men's sons, who, though not gifted to measure fully Dante's ascetic intellect that exalted love till it was an unbreatheable air and drove hate down to the darkness of Hell, would worship the image and help to raise it and give it the homage of a lifetime The ancestors of the business man were natives of one of those places which the Poet named when he sniffed disgustedly *lo puzzo* of the incomers who polluted the ancient noble race with their farmyard blood and manners, and the place was a huddle of red-brick houses, pitched in the wind on a hill, a half-day's ride from Florence on the great high road, the Via Francigena, leading to Rome by Siena It is Certaldo where the father of Giovanni Boccaccio was born They grew fine onions there

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Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base? base?
—*King Lear*

WHEN DANTE DIED, GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO WAS ABOUT EIGHT YEARS old Whatever elders said to praise or decry the Poet, Giovanni must have pricked up his ears, for he was writing verse, if he himself is to be believed, since he was seven Rhyming had been a fashion, an aristocratic pastime, a recognised way of making love, and in the fields and in the workshops, the labourers and the artisans sang, fitting new words to old airs Now, the most suavely fluent noble rhymer as well as the most loquacious Florentine artisan needed time and mental solitude to think of words that would fall easily into the discipline of a musical or a verbal pattern Solitude in the home was a condition of Giovanni's childhood Whatever impelled him to write verse so early, and one may get rid of the problem by calling in the Muses, his verse and the solitary mind it implied were probably part of the accidents of his birth and rearing For Giovanni Boccaccio was an illegitimate son, living rather unwanted in a house where a stepmother ruled

It happened somewhat like this But before telling how it happened, one must digress, Boccaccio-wise, to utter a warning Little is known directly about his birth, birthplace, mother, father, and youth He himself could have told much, and he did tell much that he wrapped up in allegory, suggested, announced oracularly, and indicated with a thick trail of communicative puzzles Consequently, he has been fair game for the stews that scholars concoct May their tribe never grow less They have deduced, guessed, detected, scented rats and worried wisps, clawed, railed, meditated in tranquillity and raved in *odium* They have scuffled up materials that must be fitted together like a jig-saw puzzle with plentiful holes which are godsends to men of fancy

It happened, then, like this Boccaccio senior, Boccaccio del fu Chellino, a bachelor from Certaldo who had settled in Florence

as a merchant with his brother Vanni, travelled to Paris whence, no doubt, he hoped to return, as all wandering Florentines wished to return, with a substantial fortune like Ner Piccolin of Cecco Angiolieri's sonnet who minced back so flush with florins and French phrases that he twitted other men for being mice, or like Musciatto Franzesi of the story in the *Decameron* who became counsellor to the King of France Boccaccio senior's line of business as indicated by a French tax book for the year 1313 was *Boccasin lombart et son frère, changeurs* Lombard Boccace and his brother, money-lenders

Money-lending was a good line, though the theologians frowned on it, because one needed only small gear, a knowledge of gold and silver, a room and some capital The percentages would look after the rest Boccaccio senior, as one of the son's first biographers, Filippo Villani tells, was renowned for the respectability of his morals, and for his free, easy-going and gay manners He liked to relax occasionally He was in a strange city As Villani puts it, " he began to burn violently " for a young Parisian woman who was not averse and the result was a union without benefit of clergy, and a child, born in 1313 Villani says he married her Domenico Bandino hints that he did not, and the son's allegorical references agree with Bandino's hint The child was Giovanni, son of Boccaccio, son of the late Chellino of Certaldo

Boccaccio senior returned to Florence, at a date not known, and apparently without the substantial fortune Did the mother die or did he desert her ? The son hints at abandonment, or rather describes an abandonment in an allegory which some scholars regard as autobiographical The return must have taken place when Giovanni was three or four years of age because the name of the father occurs in the city records of Florence from 1317 In 1318 he was in partnership with three men, Cante and Jacopo di Ammanati and Simone Orlandini, and he became one of the five consuls of the Arte dei Cambiatori, the Guild of the Money-changers, which meant that he had a voice in government councils The sojourn in France had not been a failure, therefore He had a house in the *borgo* of San Pier Maggiore, east of the new cathedral then being built on the site of Santa Reparata. He was a respected and respectable citizen Not later than 1320, he married Margharita,

daughter of Gian Donata de' Martoli, and a son was born, Francesco

There was also that other son, Giovanni, who had been carried down the long dusty road from Paris, from the mother he would remember only vaguely like an unreal figure in an allegory The memory, vague as it was, might have been obliterated happily by the affection of the stepmother, but there does not seem to have been affection To his father he would show in his writings an unfilial lack of devotion, even harshness, as if he had been done a grievous hurt His father, no doubt, did not tell him in so many words that he was illegitimate, that the mother was dead More than likely the fact of the birth reached the boy through the mouth of the stepmother, Margharita, not, to be sure, in a kindly manner It was not unnatural, however, that Margharita should care more for her own son Francesco and daily draw between him and Giovanni a dividing line with gesture, look, tone of voice, and eagerness of affection Besides, as Chubb remarks, "it is not always easy for a wife of however great tolerance to have continually before her a living reminder that her husband is liable to stray"

There, then, is the boy Giovanni, solitary in his father's dark and draughty house in the old quarter of the city He is not the child of his father's wife, he discovers By the attrition of hints, gestures, a look, a word, perhaps by an outburst about the brat overheard between father and mother, he begins to suspect Single children are solitary, eldest children often are, and he was, in a sense, both a single child and the eldest To this circumstance was added the condition of the house He brooded on it, though he did not know that it would make him as scornful of patrons as he was of his father But one must not conclude that he moped about like the bastard in *King Lear*, calling on the gods to stand up for bastards, or that he had a mania There was, however, a hurt, a wound, that haunted him after it had been scarred over, like a memory of a bad dream when he cried in pain, and this memory he expressed in various ways in some of his writings In his first book, for instance, the long and meandering novel, *Il Filocolo*, which he took to be Greek for "the love-weary", he tells the story through Idalagos, a man who has been metamorphosed for

love into a pine-tree It is prose moved by poetry as stately as the rocking of a forest in an easy wind

> Come quando Zeffiro soavemente spira si sogliono le tenere sommità degli alberi muovere per li campi, l'una fronda nell' altra ferendo, e di tutte dolce tintinno rendendo, in tal maniera tutto l'albero tremando si mosse a queste parole
>
> (As when the wind softly breathes, the pliant tops of the trees are wont to move themselves throughout the countryside, every leaf rubbing against its neighbour and all giving forth a sweet tinkling, so the entire tree, trembling at first, was moved by these words)

Thus Idalagos, the pine-tree, begins the story of his birth which is Boccaccio's figuratively Idalagos was the son of Eucomos, a shepherd, who grazed his flocks on a little hill in Tuscia in a fertile part of Italy From there Eucomos was called away to tend the gentle flock of Franconarcos, king of the White Country, whose many lovely daughters used to go in company through the fields to offer incense in a holy temple dedicated to Minerva, in a wood Here Eucomos, with the music of a reed-pipe and false words, seduced a daughter, Giannai—which scholars have declared to be Gianna, that is, Jeanne, the woman of Paris Two sons were the result of the union, one of them being Idalagos Eucomos then abandoned her and returned, with the children, to his own fields where he courted and married Garamita,—which name, the scholars declare also, sounds like Margharita Presently, Idalagos found himself unwanted "When one day I wished to enter the paternal house, two most fierce and terrible bears appeared before me with burning eyes and desirous of my death"

For all the solitude and the freezing of domestic piety in the boy, Florence was his native place and the Arno his river In the dictionary of place-names that he would compile in Latin at a late age, he would place the Arno first, not only on account of alphabetical order, but because it was the river of his fatherland and was familiar to him before all other rivers, even from his infancy Florence made him It schooled him and reared him. He was sent to a grammar-school—*grammatica*—which were only about one-twentieth as well attended as the more useful schools which

taught *arıtmetrıca* He studıed ın Donatus or Prıscian, perhaps, or ın some dıgest thereof, ın whıch lınes of magnıfıcent and ındıfferent verse were murdered for grammar and metrıcs, and there were cıtatıons from Vırgıl—a god and a wonder-worker for the Mıddle Ages—from Terence, Cıcero, Plautus, Horace, Lucan, Ovıd, Statıus and Lucretıus From a study of such books under a capable teacher a boy learned no "small grammere" as well as a smatterıng of Latın antıquıty Then, of course, there was the Psalter to be gabbled through, and Ovıd's *Metamorphoses* to be dıpped ınto, whıch had a lastıng and formatıve ınfluence on that part of Boccaccıo's mınd whıch ran to allegory—to dreams ın solıtude

Whether hıs father ıntended to put hım ın for the Church (there would be dıfficultıes wıth the ıllegıtımacy) or for the Law when he sent hım to the grammar-school, or whether he judged coldly that a lıttle clerkly scholarshıp would be good for the boy's manners and therefore good for busıness, we do not know But Gıovannı was shıfted to another school to study *arıtmetrıca* That, beyond all doubt, would be useful It would start hım on the road towards the bankıng busıness whıch was weavıng ıtself a strong sensıtıve web over the western world—and after a start ın the bankıng busıness, who knows? Rıches, power, ınfluence wıth the powerful, counsel for kıngs? The mınd of the boy had another ambıtıon

He may have heard hıs father and stepmother, hıs father's partners and frıends, dıscussıng hıs future, talkıng ın theır full florıd way after supper, exchangıng storıes whıch were theır news wıth guests come back from abroad and weighıng the chances of bankıng, and of the cloth trade wıth whıch theır lıfe was so pervaded that ıts technıcal terms became the ıdıoms of theır common speech, but the boy knew hıs future No money-lendıng for hım, and the scrapıng together of the crumbs of gold There ıs a streak of prıggıshness ın many of hıs references to the busıness and money-gatherıng habıts of the man who had engendered hım ın Parıs In the few precıously dırect pages of autobıography ın hıs *De genealogıa deorum gentılıum* whıch he wrote on the threshold of old age when men are ınclıned to sımplıfy—to theır own credıt—the struggles, entanglements, pressures and stresses of chıldhood and youth, he saıd (John Addıngton Symonds translatıng)

"Nature, as experience has proved, drew me from my mother's womb with special aptitudes for poetry, and in my opinion this was the law for which I was created Well enough do I remember how my father used his best endeavours, from my earliest boyhood, to make me a man of commerce Before I entered on the period of youth, but had acquired some knowledge of arithmetic, he put me to a merchant of great consequence, with whom I did nothing for six years but waste irrecoverable time Being soon forced to perceive that my bent was rather for study than for trade, he next decided that I should apply myself to canon law, with a view to making money, accordingly, I laboured in vain, for about the same space of time, under a very eminent professor

"My mind, however, revolted against both these industries to such an extent that neither the learning of my master nor the authority of my father, by whose commands I was perpetually harassed, nor yet the prayers, or rather the recriminations of my friends, could bend it in either direction It was wholly drawn by strong affection towards poetry Not a sudden impulse, but the oldest and most deeply rooted instinct led me upon that path, for I well remember that before I reached the age of seven, before I set eyes on any works of fiction, before I went to school, and when I hardly knew the rudiments of letters, my nature was already urging me to invent, and I began to produce trifling poems These indeed possessed no value, since my intellectual powers at that tender age were insufficient for such arduous performances

"However, when I had well-nigh reached maturity, and was become my own master, then, at no man's bidding and through no man's teaching, against the opposition of my father who condemned such studies vehemently, I resorted spontaneously to the little which I knew of the poetic art, and this art I have since pursued with the greatest eagerness, studying the works of its professors with incredible delight, and straining all my ability to understand them And, wonderful to relate, while yet I had no knowledge on what or on how many feet a verse should run, and though I sturdily repelled the appellation, all my acquaintances used to call me poet, which, alas! I am not yet I doubt not that if my father had been indulgent to my wishes while my mind was pliable in youngest years, I should have turned out one of the

world's famous poets The fact, however, is that through bending my abilities first to lucrative business, and next to a lucrative branch of study, I failed to become either a merchant or a canonist, and missed the chance of being an illustrious poet

" To other departments of learning I have paid little attention, for though they pleased me, they did not compel me with the same attraction The study of the sacred volumes engaged my attention, but I abandoned it as unfit for my advanced years and moderate abilities, judging it unbecoming for an old man, as it were, to begin the rudiments of a new science, and most indecent for anybody to attempt that which he cannot believe himself capable of performing Consequently, since I think God was pleased to make literature my vocation, in this I am determined to persevere "

Though it is the gravity of a man past his maturity that weighed those words, I have quoted the lengthy passage as an expression of Giovanni's conscious determination to fulfil what he considered his destiny, as an expression of the feeling of deprivation for which he held his father's hard commercialism responsible, though we need not believe that paternal opposition prevented him from becoming a great poet, and as a foreshadowing for the reader of the pattern of the life

Many things, therefore, drove him on his own resources and made him independent of the best laid paternal schemes It is no strain on probability to see him riding out alone on a mule to the villa at Corbignano that the father had bought and there diverting himself, carefree of Margharita and the drudgery of school, along the reedy banks of the murmuring Mensola and Affrico—streams that would one day give him a generous draught of verse, murmuring too, and aqueously lucid, nor is it a strain to see him riding the long road down to Certaldo for which place he would be moved by warm local piety and find roots for his affection among his father's people and images to treasure at the wheat-harvest or the fig-gathering or the crushing of the grapes

As for Florence, there he had the streets, and his companions, for he was of a friendly nature and he delighted in talk We can look back through Filippo Villani's description of the man to glimpse the features of the boy he was slender, inclined to be tall, with a roundish face, a dip in the nose just above the nostrils,

a cleft chin, a smile that made him good-looking, lively eyes that could be exceedingly disdainful Watch him running from his father's dark house to his companions and beginning one of the rambles that made Florence his city and the Arno his river

They go up to the site of the new cathedral where blocks of stone lie with grass and weeds growing about the bases, and the builder's gear is heaped idly, scaffolding bleaching and rotting in sun and rain The troubled times since Master Arnolfo di Cambio began with design and foundation stone in 1296 have not favoured the continuous building of the church which, as a document declared, the Florentines hoped would be "a more beautiful temple than any in Tuscany" Piety and grandiose ideas inspired the citizens, and political turmoil prevented them from carrying on the work except in fits and starts Meanwhile, the site is a paradise for the games and gambols of boys Hot with the sun and their exertions, Giovanni and his companions turn round by the Baptistery, its octagonal walls of stone from Fiesole set with slabs of black and white marble Most Florentines were baptised there, as Dante was, in this, *il mio bel San Giovanni*, of which he wrote "With changed voice then, and with changed fleece shall I return, a poet, and at the font of my baptism shall I assume the chaplet, because into the Faith which maketh souls known to God, 'twas there I entered" (*Paradiso* xxv 7–12)

This is all Dante district, the country of the Poet, and not really of merchants and money-grubbers ! Within the church, it is twilit and cool On the inlaid floor are the signs of the Zodiac, and in the centre, the ancient font To the left of the glimmering high altar looms the statue of San Giovanni, namesake, patron of the city Spread overhead in mosaics are Christ and His angels, the Creation, the Flood and the Last Judgment, the eternal sky of the soul Out in the street again, one blinks in the light, dazzled by an infinity of reflections The boys go past the head of the Via Calzaioli—out of sunshine into shadow and back again—and then, with a right turn, they saunter and cavort, slipping out of the way of carts and porters, loitering under the awnings of shops, down to the Mercato Vecchio.

It is the heart of Florence, this Old Market, and around it the streets bear commercial names and here the guilds have their

headquarters Around the sides rise the grey, austere stone houses and towers of old families who made fortresses of their dwelling places Many Florentines thought the Mercato one of the finest sights in the whole world At least, so thought Antonio Pucci, contemporary of Giovanni Boccaccio, "a pleasant Florentine, a speaker of many things in verse" as his friend Franco Sacchetti, the storyteller, called him Antonio was of a family of bell-founders, and he had his *bottega*, that is, his workshop, and his house and garden in the Via Ghibellina where the foundries were His garden was his pleasance and there he gathered of an evening with his friends, to talk, sip wine, sing and speak his verse A peaceful man he was who hated war, though not when it led to greater honour and wealth for his city, and he was pious, too, but not above having a rap at a Pope or a Cardinal who meddled officiously in the affairs of the Republic In all, a sound man and he wrote in verse of his Mercato Vecchio, than which there never was a nobler garden *Non fu giammai così nobil giardino*

Over the market a hum of sound swarms, with the cries and shrieks of the more energetic sellers breaking away discordantly The streets, the country-side, pour in with cart and bundle and basket In the streets roundabout are the physicians and apothecaries, taverns, draperies, the butchers' stalls, money-changers' offices and pawnbrokers' shops Here are the poulterers with things in season, hares, boars, pheasants, partridges and pigeons, and the costermongers, with baskets and panniers of fruit and vegetables who would execrate each other all day just for the sake of a couple of dried old chestnuts and call one another trollops into the bargain, and there are stalls with eggs and cheese, and the makings of *erbolati* and *torte* and *raviuoli*, nearby are the dealers in condiments, mustard, and every kind of herb, sweet and pungent

In the mornings, the country men and girls troop into the market with their carts and baskets, with greens and flowers still damp with the dews, olives, pears and peaches Everywhere, plucking at the sleeve, sitting in the dust against the warm walls, scratching in the ribands of rags, snapping for scraps from the stalls, are the ubiquitous beggars—they number thousands—whining for alms in the name of Our Lady and the saints The dust drifts and swirls across the sunbeams and settles on fish and flesh and fruit, the

fragrance of roses and pears, the rank scent of festering figs, mingle with the smells of sweaty clothes, ox-dung, rotting greens, and perhaps, if the wind is blowing the wrong way, with an ineffable whiff of La Contessa di Civillari, who was not a lady it must be confessed but an alley where the offal and ordure of the neighbourhood was stored thriftily in trenches for manure The flies are everywhere, and the lean dogs

There are cooler and quieter places than this noble garden of Pucci's, and young Messer Giovanni and his companions jostle and pick and bump their way, in the Florentine manner, out of the din and go down past all that was left after a fire of the loggia of Or San Michele On a pilaster is a painted image of Our Lady where men, the *laudesi*, gather every evening to sing her praises, and all about hang waxen images as testimony to her miracles Opposite stands the squat tower of the Arte della Lana, the Torrione of the Wool Guild that claimed to be mistress of all the others, adorned with reliefs of the guild arms—the Lamb bearing the Baptist's cross The boys halt and then continue through the Mercato Nuovo, down through the Via di Por Santa Maria to the Ponte Vecchio and the river Here they can get a clear view of the hills, and, here despite the houses that rise from the water itself and hold the interplay of reflections on their yellow walls, here is air, open light and fluidity They idle on Lung' Arno, watching the sliding river that can rise rust-coloured in winter to flood the lower city with a mucky deluge and that deposits sand in its shallows for the endless building, but usually, in the evenings, it robes itself in translucent green, in jade and apple, celadon, eau-de-nil and chrysolite magic water in which yellow-tinted houses with warmly red roofs hang upside down

It is a superb possession, this Arno, begetter of the city, and here men linger to fish and to stare at the play of the current, corded out by the piers of the bridges, and to draw, in the words of Norman Douglas, "a kind of philosophic contentment out of its cool aquatic humours" The boys linger in the gathering evening, and as the dusk silences the hum of the markets and closes the shops, they turn and run homeward, Giovanni to the dark house of his father and the stepmother, and the solitude in which he is being fashioned more obstinately proud than he knew.

II

Quivi l'acre di vari stromenti, e quasi d'angeliche voci ripercosso, risonava tutto

—Il Filocolo

Here all the air echoed, resonant with various instruments and, as it were, with angelic voices

THERE WAS IN FLORENCE AMONG THE GREAT BANKING FAMILIES like the Frescobaldi and the Peruzzi the house of the Bardi The Bardis had agents in the chief cities of Europe where, in return for trade privileges, they had greased the palms of needy princes, kings, bishops and popes with the sovereign grease of Saint John Goldenbeard—*grazia di San Giovanni Barbadoro*—a slick bit of slang based on the design of the Florentine florin which bore the city lily on one side and the head of the Baptist on the other A twelve-day journey away, at Naples, they had one of their more important agencies

Naples under the rule of the French House of Anjou had become one of the glittering capitals of Europe It stood at a favourable junction of roads from north to south, and it had communication with the east through the passes of the Apennines The Angevines brought with them Provençal song and dance, Gothic, the cult of *amour courtois* and Courts of Love, as well as an extravagant splendour of costume and habit They built palaces, castles and churches, created new market-places, paved the streets, flung out a mole for a new port, and established cloth industries They enlarged the university They brought artists from Tuscany, among them Giotto, to paint frescoes and pictures In their public and private lives, even in their wars for the recovery of Sicily, they spent money as though florins were farthings Their magnificence and the luxury of the palaces and great houses that rose on the hill-slopes contrasted, of course, with the old town below, that the same hills embraced

It was the embrace of beauty and the beast, a giant gesture of grotesquerie which was no more distinctively mediaeval than the slums of many a modern European city Down there, like filth

that had silted down, was the old city and the port a warren of narrow over-arching lanes, alleys and stepped passageways, swarming with mongrel peoples, noisy as a parrot-house, sickeningly stinking with stagnant wells and pools, piles of garbage and excrement, odorous to the edge of the water that was black and viscous about the stained hulls of ships But for all that, the capital of the Regno was a gay city, with song, animal abandon, the clear light iridescent with the floating dust of Vesuvius and foreshortening distance, and the incomparable sea At least, one could hold one's nose, or sniff a spray of herbs, or besprinkle a scent distilled by a cunning apothecary

Though there could be squalls and sudden showers, and winds that blew grey and depressing like the *sirocco*, or deadly like the *libecchio* which transported a blast of Africa, or whippingly cold and dusty from the Apennines like the *tramontano*, the city seldom suffered weather as biting as the Florentine winters or as hot as the Florentine summers It was a pleasant place for a Florentine money-lender who could advance florins for the extravagant spending,—at a comfortable rate of interest and in return for privileges So the Florentine bankers, shrewd and ingratiating, financed the wars against Aragon for Sicily, and handled the corn and produce of the Regno to some advantage Hence the Bardi agency Hence the presence of Boccaccio senior as their representative in 1327 In that or in the following year he brought his son, Giovanni, with him

It was the end of Giovanni's boyhood and the beginning of an influence that would touch him into full creativeness, the self-confidence of manhood, and bitter disillusionment, even peril of soul For him, this Naples, Parthenope, would be all his life both an apt reality and the symbol of an apt reality that responded to the hunger of his flesh and the need of his imagination for colour and vivacity The sunlight falls across his words as he writes of the city Even the shadows of regret and disappointment dissolve in the incandescence of his memories of Naples under Robert the Wise, to whom the Florentines had granted the overlordship of their own city by the Arno. Villani called King Robert of Anjou, Provence and Naples, the wisest and most learned prince in Christendom for five centuries The king was eager for learning,

studying in books at all hours of the day and night, even when hunting, and he surrounded himself with learned men But he also made his court gay While he built churches, he also made love occasionally with a disregard of the laws of the Church In him and in his court there was much of the superabundant gorgeousness that other cities would not experience for hundreds of years

Giovanni Boccaccio came there as to a place for which he had longed What it meant to him is described explicitly in his prose and verse It seemed to him that here, in a world so lovely where wanton women strayed across smooth lawns and in gardens shaded by trees and full of the music of voices and instruments, or gathered to the elaborate festivals and tourneys, the picnics in the woods, he attained the ultimate horizon of beatitude He was, of course, romancing, for the city stink was there, the flea-bitten, bug-ridden poverty, and the noises, Neapolitan, thick and strident Those things he avoided Afterwards, when he came to write the *Ameto*, he saw himself arriving at the city as in a dream and he was filled with sweet thoughts, and a beautiful girl, gracious, amiable and clothed in green, took his hand, kissed him, and bade him welcome

It was at *l'età pubescente* that he arrived, but not, according to his father's designs, for love He was put, as he would tell in *De genealogia deorum gentilium*, under apprenticeship to "a merchant of great consequence", whose name is now unknown He lived it is probable in the part of the city near the sea and around the Porto Nuovo where the Florentine business men had their quarters The father, as representative of one of the great banking houses, was an important man with appearances to keep up, so, too, with the son The house in which they lived, and their table, were not disdained by noble young men from whom, we may be sure, Giovanni learned more than a little of the art of the gay life It was not the weighing of gold and silver coins on the approved scales, or the dreary trudges through the streets on errands, or the keeping of accounts and the writing of business letters and reports that appealed to the son, but that other side of banking in which personal contacts were momentous. Personal contacts brought son and father in touch with King Robert himself—Boccaccio

senior had access to the royal household—and with men of affairs, men of letters, nobles and adventurers

Among the adventurers was the young Florentine, Niccolo Acciaiuoli, some three years older than Giovanni and likewise of plebeian origin, who was advancing at a rate that must have aroused envy in many, including Giovanni's father But it was not given to every Florentine to use the bedroom of the king's sister, Catherine of Courtnay, as a means of advancement Niccolò, a mixture of piety, bravery, cynicism, lavishness and meanness, would become an exceedingly rich man, an ambassador, and a prime minister We cannot help meeting him again Not among the adventurers was an old man, over eighty years, who was mental father to Giovanni He has been identified as Andolo de' Negri, court astronomer, or rather astrologer, and court physician He taught a knowledge of the stars to the banker's boy, and something, we may guess, of the world, especially the world of the Mediterranean which he had travelled thoroughly To Giovanni's Idalagos, he was Calmeta, *pastor solennissimo, a cui quasi la maggior parte delle cose era manifesta* a most grave shepherd, to whom almost all things were known Under Calmeta, he turned his desires towards intellectual horizons Here are a few sentences about his life with Calmeta, from the seventh book of the *Filocolo* in prose as grave as the *pastor*

> "He, one day, as we rested with our flocks, began to tell on his sounding pipe about the new movements and the wonderful courses of the silvered Moon, and what was the cause of the waxing and waning of brightness, and why sometimes she showed herself tardy, sometimes fast, sometimes equal in her epicycle Next, with sweet note he described the gilded house of the Sun, not omitting his eclipses, or the causes of those of the Moon, and showing how from him every other star borrows light To these things I listened with the greatest attention, and so much did they delight my rude mind that I resolved to know them, not as an Arabian, but by following the demonstrator studiously, for which reason I deserved to be expert, and already having abandoned the pastoral life, I set myself to follow Pallas Athene wholly"

In this passage there is the suggestion that Boccaccio gave up commerce which he romantically equates with the pastoral life for the pursuit of Pallas Athene but that giving up was yet to come Meanwhile, he was attracted into the gaieties, the disportings and the love-making that were Neapolitan high life Diversions were many and insistent Even for the sedatest of Florentines, they must have been ultimately irresistible temptations, that is, humanly speaking Sky, sunlight, sand and crystal sea, wood and mellowed wall were the setting for women expert with the blandishments of the flesh and wanton in its usage This was testing for a saint, and Giovanni was no saint

He was young He had an ardent nature that took rapturously to the gorgeous, the sensual and the sensuous He had, as the *Ameto* would show, an eye that undressed women where they stood like an experienced gallant He was in a place that, since antiquity, had been an established playground, and if ghosts walked the majority of them would be the sad ghosts of playboys Romans had built their villas, laid out gardens, sunk fishponds, erected amphitheatres, levelled and terraced cliffs, projected rock-houses into the tideless water, not just for dignified living but for pleasure and the surplus satisfaction of the senses

Baia was a resort where no woman's reputation lasted a week, as Propertius said, and it is doubtful if the women who went to Baia wanted even a week's respite *Nullus in orbe sinus Baiis praelucet amoenis*, wrote Horace, giving a tag to the guide-books No bay in the world outglories Baia, but he was thinking only of the scenery, not of fungoid, parasitical humanity Here, at Posilipo, Pollio indulged new forms of gluttony and Lucullus made his name synonymous with epicure The Roman desertion of Baia for Herculaneum and Pompeii—"No, my dear! Not the Riviera this year! Too too dreadful!"—was hastened by Nero's murder of his mother, Agrippina, for a bit of murder was done on the side, both in ancient and in Angevine Naples, in the midst of the junketing Giovanni Boccaccio was the kind of youth who, in simplicity, could get intoxicated with the memories of antiquity, but he had no need to rely on anything so tenuous as memories The real thing was there, in a modified form, under Robert the Wise.

There are glimpses and full views of the fun in that first novel, the *Filocolo*, in the allegorical *Ameto*, and in the psychological novel about a jilted woman, the *Fiammetta* Brother Ass, the body, was treated lavishly Tables were loaded with silver dishes bearing *le copiose vivande*, that is, with fish, fowl and fruit fetched from the Regno and distant parts of Italy pheasant, partridge, kids of Surriento, hens, ducks, capons, pigeons, lamb, wild boar, peaches, olives, figs, oranges, grapes, apples, melons, walnuts, chestnuts, almonds and honey, wines from Tuscany and Provence and the Neapolitan hills filled the gold cups, and on the walls and furniture were hangings and coverings of damask, silk and scarlet cloth-of-Ghent, and jewels sparkled, diamonds, sapphires, rubies from Samarcand, and pearls, and for fragrance, there were scents of musk, rose, jessamine, orange and citron-flowers And there is a glimpse of the king standing *con occhio vago* to watch the women who were assumed to be part of the entertainment The " wanton eye " of King Robert was to affect Giovanni's destiny, but before that happened, he would have his share of the florescent sensuality

In the novel, the *Fiammetta*, the lady's husband urges her, because she appears ill—but for love as he does not know—to take a holiday and recuperate in Baia His entreaties may seem naïve when compared with the publicity of a modern tourist agency, but nevertheless they are worth quoting as an illustration of what Naples meant to Boccaccio

> " Lady, as you know, just beyond pleasant Mount Falerno, in the midst of ancient Cuma and Pozzuolo, is delightful Baia on the seashore The sky covers no lovelier nor more agreeable situation It is surrounded by hills all covered with various trees and vines, and in the valleys there is no beast suitable for hunting that may not be found, nor far from this lies the great plain, suitable for many kinds of chase with preying birds, and amusements Near there is the island of Pitacusa, Nisida abounding in rabbits, and the tomb of the great Misenus which opens on the kingdom of Pluto. There, are the Oracles of the Cumaean Sybill, Lake Avernus, the Theatre which was the place common to the ancient games, the baths, Mount Barbarus, the vain works of wicked Nero, which things, both ancient and new to modern minds, are no small reason for going thither and admiring

Besides all these, there are baths most healthy for all ailments, and the most gentle sky gives good cause for a visit at this time There one may sojourn, never without festivity and the greatest fun, among noble ladies and knights"

The lady Fiammetta took her husband's advice but her verdict on Baia was that it seemed a peculiar cure for love She protested that while much failing bodily health was recovered there, rarely if ever did one go and return with a whole mind, for either the place, *luogo natal di Venere*,—Venery's own home-town—or the season which was the Spring when the place was mostly frequented, had a remarkable effect the most virtuous women forgot something of their womanly modesty "Nor," said the lady, "am I alone of this opinion but almost all those as well who have already sojourned there" The time was passed indolently, in eating, drinking, amorous conversation among the women, or among the women in company with the men Cupid was worshipped, but Cupid was a euphemism "Here only delicate viands are used, and wines most noble by their age, potent in exciting not only dormant, but in resuscitating dead Venus in any man, and how much more is the effect of the many baths used in this regard, those know who have experienced it Here the seashore, the beautiful gardens, and every other place, always resound with many festivities, new games, pleasing dances, innumerable instruments, and amorous songs, sung, played and performed by young ladies as by young men Let who can, then, resist Cupid among so many attractions,—Cupid who, in this the chief place of his domain, uses his powers with so much help and little effort"

Sometimes, before the dawn was clear, they would rise, mount horses, and with hounds, birds, nets and bows, go hunting the abundant game. Sometimes they picnicked in the shade of high reefs, with the dishes spread on the sands, and afterwards, they would dance to music Sometimes in the hot weather, their boats would glide into the sea-caverns where shade and breeze refreshed Sometimes, after the open-air dances and the frolicking, they would wade in the serene waters, and a thing dear to the eyes of young men was made manifest—*cosa carissima agli occhi de' giovanni n'appariva* which was "pretty young women undressed

to their underjackets of white silk, barefoot and barearmed, walking in the waters, lifting seashells from the hard rocks, who, forgetting themselves in this amusement, often showed the hidden delights of the swelling breast"—*le nascose delizie dell'uberifero petto* Boccaccio's hungering, and the light of the wanton eye, are in those words

There were also the tournaments and the public games These were held often It was the ancient custom—Giovanni still speaks through the *Fiammetta*—when the dreary days of winter were passed and the spring with flowers and fresh grass had brought back to the world her lost beauty for the young gentlewomen, adorned with precious jewels and ornaments to forgather in the *logge* and the streets on solemn feast days The young gentlemen would take the girls by the hands, and singing, they would dance away the warmer hours of the day And when the heat had abated, the princes of the Regno would arrive, dressed with the magnificence that their rank required, and after some dancing and some admiring, they would depart, taking all the young men with them, but only to return presently, in different dress and riding horses, " clad in purple and in cloths woven by Indian hands, with designs in various colours intermingled with gold, embroidered with pearls and precious stones Their blond locks, flowing down to white shoulders, are bound about the head with slender circlets of gold or with garlands of fresh leaves The left arm carries a light shield, and the right a lance , and at the sound of the Tuscan trumpet, one after the other and followed by many all so clad, they begin their games before the ladies . " It is very pretty but the blood flows and sometimes men die there on the public place where the people shout and the trumpets blare

These views of old Naples show that Giovanni enjoyed the pageantry as well as the playboys But all that gaiety, the seaside frolics, the picnics, the feasts and festivals, the Courts of Love that were practised there, had the sexual relationship of men and women as the recurrent motive There was nothing idyllically innocent in the relationship, which, to be kept human, needs a code. The code which the subtilizers of Provence had provided was something more than human *L'amour courtois* was a cult, almost a religion of the perfect lover. The relationship of men

and women who professed this love was regulated from beginning to end by rules and laws which, in a codified form like, say, *De Arte Amandi* by Andreas Capellanus, seem grotesquely elaborate and silly

Let us glance at three or four of the ordinances *Omnis consuevit amans in amantis conspectu pallescere* Every lover goes pale in sight of the beloved a feat that was easier to suggest than to perform *Minus dormit et edit quem amoris cogitatio vexat* He sleeps and eats less who is tormented by thoughts of love, which is occasionally true as a statement of fact, but rather exacting as an ordinance Then, no man could be bound by a double love *Nemo duplici potest amore ligare*, but then *Novus amor veterum compellit abire* new love drives out the old And so forth There were four degrees of love first, the condition of the sigher, second, the condition of the suppliant, third, the condition of the amorous, and last, the condition of the lover, which was to mean nothing more than the reward of a first and last kiss The lover, love's vassal, was the liege-man of his lady, and her name—she was always married to make it still safer—was disguised by a *senhal*, a signal, from vulgar ears Such, in principle, were the charming, pretty and childish games of the troubadours

The rules were strict, they were observed more often than not, one may suppose, but they made love an obsession, an end in itself Now, it was as difficult for love to remain chaste as to remain artificial in the midst of a society such as Angevin Naples cultivated in which possession was nine points of the law and the first kiss was by no means the last. The rules were excellent for the pastime of lords and ladies on a summery lawn or in a winter-bound hall, but they provided a ready-made sanctioned machinery for sexual ambition It was not so much that the spirit was weak as that the flesh was procreative And so in Naples, celebrated from antiquity for its metamorphoses of maids into mistresses, the outcome of *amor cortese* was a most cynical use of women's and men's bodies in seduction, adultery, and even in rape, against which the king was obliged to legislate for the peace of the realm

They called it love, but human love it was not in the sense of being controlled by fidelity and chastity, or in the Dantean sense

of being mystic, a symbol of the love that moved the sun and other stars "Out of five hundred who speak glibly of love," said the Knight Graelent in the mediaeval tale, "not one can spell the first letter of his name With such it is idleness, or fulness of bread, or fancy, masking in the guise of love Love requires of his servants chastity in thought, in word and in deed"

In all that love of the gay folk of Naples there was much of the moral and metaphysical instability which had produced the flesh-hating, marriage-abominating sects of Provence and northern Italy as well as the cult of troubadour love which was directed chiefly towards married women It was sex unhealthy, not because it was sex, not because men lavished praise on physical beauty and contemplated it rapturously, but because it had become an end in itself It was disordered The disorder would exacerbate that duality in Boccaccio whereby his physical life would be at variance unto war with his spiritual, not only by the primal discordance of nature but through what passed for civilised living It could not be expected that he would escape the scented, decorated, disguised and troublesome passions of the flesh

He did not escape, nor did he try very hard to escape He was in a different world, very different to the staid, sedate life of business Florence where a man's worth was calculated by the number of his florins and not by the success of his love-affairs In the *Ameto* and also in the *Filocolo*, Boccaccio hints at three or four love affairs He, perhaps, fancied himself as a squire of dames He was much older when, in the Fourth Day of his *Decameron*, he defended himself against censors who had, it seems, accused him of studying overmuch to please the ladies, and his reply was to confess that himself and the ladies got on very well together

"Now that I am fond of you," he wrote, "and am at pains to pleasure you, I do most frankly and fully confess, and I ask them whether, considering only all that it means to have had, and to have continually, before one's eyes your debonair demeanour, your bewitching beauty and exquisite grace, and therewithal your modest womanliness, not to speak of having known the amorous kisses, the caressing embraces, the voluptuous commingings, whereof our intercourse with you, ladies most sweet, not seldom is productive, they do verily marvel that I am fond of you, seeing that

one who was nurtured, reared, and brought up on a savage and solitary mountain, within the narrow circuit of a cell, without other companion than his father, had no sooner seen you than 'twas you alone that he desired, that he demanded, that he sought with ardour? Will they tear, will they lacerate me with their censures, if I, whose body Heaven fashioned all apt for love, whose soul from very boyhood was dedicated to you, am not insensible to the power of the light of your eyes, to the sweetness of your honeyed words, to the flame that is kindled by your gentle sighs, but am fond of you and sedulous to pleasure you, you, again I bid them remember, in whom a hermit, a rude, witless lad, liker to an animal than to a human being, found more to delight him than in aught else that he saw?" (Rigg's translation)

He would, then, have us believe that he was a gallant His early Neapolitan love affairs may have been more than three or four, but it is doubtful if they were First, as he tells mysteriously in the *Filocolo* in the guise of Idalagos, he pursued *una bianca colomba*, a white dove, through bushes, because he was desirous of her feathers, and though he did not catch her, his heart was not filled with melancholy since it had been more for her worth than for anything else that he pursued This may have been a boyish, platonic enrapturement Next, there was *una nera merla*, a blackbird that sang pleasant modes of song with her red beak, and her he desired in another way Then there was *un pappagallo*, a parrot, that fled from his sight, fluttering green feathers among leaves of her own colour Lastly, more beautiful than the rest, was the *fagiana*, the hen-pheasant, a metamorphosed lady of surpassing loveliness and of high lineage Under her rule he learned how "ornate words might have power to move human hearts", and he snared her and clasped her to his breast where often she reposed

It is certain that all this is not ornithology, but the details are not very helpful Nor are they helpful where, in *L'Ameto*, he as Caleone confessed to Fiammetta how going about during his early days in the city like other young men, he delighted in the clear loveliness of the women among whom a young nymph named Pampinea took him as worthy of her love in which he was held for no small time, but he was taken from her sight by another, Abrotonia, who made him hers

"She, indeed, surpassed Pampinea in loveliness and nobility, and by her pleasing acts gave me cause to love her But when I was made content by her embraces, she conceded me those for no long season For, moved by I know not what spirit, disturbed against me, denying me all, she was a cause to me of a wretched life Many times I resought the lost grace, but I could never regain it"

The simple youth from Florence, as he liked to think himself, was finding feminine caprice unaccountable and inexplicable But was it so inexplicable? He suggests in the *Ameto* that Pampinea deserted him because of his wickedness When he asked her why he could not regain the lost favour, she replied "Young man, your comeliness makes you worthy of it, but your wickedness makes you unworthy, and therefore, without hope of ever regaining it, live henceforth as you please"

There is not enough to fill in any kind of a picture of Boccaccio the gallant Were the young ladies the same beings as the birds? It is probable they were What was his wickedness? Was it promiscuity? If it was, it hardly seems just for Pampinea to twit him after she has become his mistress Nor are the details for a picture made more numerous by the sonnets which he wrote at this time They hardly provide us with more information than that he was composing fairish verse, and that he had succumbed, as he would have us believe, to the siren city Sonneteers are notoriously parsimonious when it comes to details. An eyebrow or a smile provides them with sufficient particular inspiration for fourteen lines Boccaccio's love-sonnets are not an exception Of the five or six score of his sonnets that remain, the biggest number are devoted to expressions of love in a conventional manner to ladies who, except for one, cannot be identified, and to the customary melancholy musings about the unrequited state of the lover.

He had an ear for the copious music of the Italian which he helped to discipline, in prose at least He handled *ottava rima* best of all the forms. In his sonnets he had not the sure, clarifying control of Petrarch who could shape lines till they seemed the quintessence of the language However, he had something which grave Petrarch was largely denied, and that was gaiety. It is

worth noting It is a gaiety of colour and sunlight, a delight in sensuous details and in particular scenes for their own sake This gave body to much of his verse which otherwise might have run as fluently and as clear as water which is unsatisfactory when one requires wine For all the gaiety, his touch was not light It was firm, even grossly firm, when it might have been as feathery and playful as air Compare, for example, the following sonnet—in Rossetti's deft translation—a humorous little picture, an inset, one might say, for a larger pastoral scene, with a miraculous trifle of song by Sacchetti who lived, a storyteller also, to mourn his peer

Intorno ad una fonte, in un pratello
Di verde erbette pieno e di bei fiori,
Sedeano tre angiolette, i loro amori
Forse narrando, ed a ciascuna il bello
Viso adombrava un verde ramoscello
Che i capei d'or cingea, al qual di fuori
E dentro insieme i due vaghi colori
Avvolgeva un soave venticello
E dopo alquanto l'una alle due disse
(Com' io udii) Deh ! se per avventura
Di ciascuna l'amante or qui venisse,
Fuggiremo noi quinci per paura ?
A cui le due risposer Chi fuggisse
Poco savia saria con tal ventura

By a clear well, within a little field
Full of green grass and flowers of every hue,
Sat three young girls, relating (as I knew)
Their loves And each had twined a bough to shield
Her lovely face, and the green leaves did yield
The golden hair their shadow, while the two
Sweet colours mingled, both blown lightly through
With a soft wind for ever stirred and still'd
After a little while one of them said,
(I heard her) " Think ! If, ere, the next hour struck,
Each of our lovers should come here to-day,
Think you that we should fly or feel afraid ? "
To whom the others answered, " From such luck
A girl would be a fool to run away "

Now for Franco Sacchetti's airy fancy

Innamorato pruno
Già mai non vidi, come l'altr' ier uno
Su la verde erba e sotto spine e fronde
Giovenetta sedea
Lucente più che stella
Quando pigliava il prun le chiome bionde,
Ella da sè il pignea
Con bianca mano e bella
Spesso ei tornava a quella,
Ardito piu che mai fosse altro pruno
Amorosa battaglia mai non vidi
Qual vidi, essendo sciolte
Le trecce e punto il viso
Oh ! quanti in me allor nascosi stridi
Il cor mosse piu volte,
Mostrando di fuor riso,
Dicendo sul mio avviso
" Volesse Dio ch'io diventassi pruno ! "

Which might be rendered

A love-struck hawthorn
I never saw till the other morn
On the green sward under his leafy boughs
A lassy lay
More radiant than the sun
Whenever he teased the hair from her brows
She slapped him away,
Her lovely white arm outflung
But that buck just wouldn't be done,
For he was dafter than any thorn
Such a lovers' battle never was fought,
With her tousled tresses
And her prickled skin.
O every cry I hid in me brought
My heart as many distresses,
And I pretended to laugh when
Really I prayed within.
I wish to God I could become a thorn.

It was not among amorous young ladies that Boccaccio found his grand passion The great love-affair was yet to come, the affair by which, with Dante, Petrarch and dozens of the singers of his time, he would link his name with a woman's But she would be no Beatrice, or even a vague Laura, but a young married woman who recognised the end of masculine pursuit for what it was, in Naples under King Robert Nevertheless, he would worship her, first with the body and for the body, and when that, through mortality of the senses and through fear of his soul's damnation began to fail, he would then idealise her, partly in the high Dantean way, partly because he truly loved, and partly, one suspects, because such an idealised relationship was a fructive literary convention He met her when he was twenty-three, some sixteen months after the obscure affair with Abrotonia—when the moon had shown herself sixteen times round and as many times two-horned Spring was renewing the earth The time was Easter Saturday, March 30, 1336

ıen thou hast told these honours done to
en tell, O tell, how thou didst murder me

—

I

Ah! light, lovely lady with delicate lips aglow!
With breast more white than a branch heavy-laden with snow!
When my head was lifted at Mass to salute the Host,
I looked at you once and the half of my soul was lost

—Translated by Robin Flower from the Irish

THE LITURGY OF HOLY SATURDAY IS FILLED WITH THE PASCHAL poetry of rebirth and exultation In the porch of the Franciscan Church of San Lorenzo which stood in the midst of old teeming malodorous Naples, the Paschal Candle had been lit and the *Exultet* sung for the gathering of heaven and earth into a chorus of jubilation over the scattering of darkness, and the Prophecies had been read as a rehearsal of the teaching whereby men would arise spiritually, and the font of Baptism had been sanctified with an appeal that the Holy Ghost might descend on the waters with regenerative power all this had been done with bright vestments, song, the exultation of superb words, and with fire and incense

As San Lorenzo was favoured by the Angevin Kings and was therefore fashionable, there were present besides the devout folk many young men with curled and frizzed hair and many young women more luring than lenten in their dark dresses, who loitered beneath the Gothic arches and, perhaps, lipped a prayer or two between glances and signals and ogles, for even sinners do sometimes pray as God knows, to the great scandal of the pharisaic Among them was young Messer Giovanni Boccaccio

He then purported to be a student of canon law That, at least, was the new career pressed upon him by his importunate and anxious father who had at last despaired of making a business man out of him Naples, in any case, was not quite the surroundings for persuading a wilful youth who had already determined to become a man of letters To the six years wasted in apprenticeship to money-lending and commerce, Messer Giovanni would add another six of study to a subject for which he had no liking

On Holy Saturday, 1336, he was, as he tells us, listening attentively in church to what he had come to attend This, and other autobiographical fragments about his religious devotion are taken by some commentators with incredulous smiles and reproving winks and knowing nods, for it is odd that while they can frisk vicariously with Messer Giovanni and see more in his sallies at crapulous clerics than he ever desired them to see, they can become very sanctimonious in the presence of the Faith in which he was baptised, which he professed all his life, and in which he died Solicitude for the Catholic Church drives some men to extraordinary lengths ! Messer Giovanni, attentive to his prayers, looked up and saw what ever afterwards he described as a most marvellous vision of beauty His heart beat fiercely He could feel the beating in the smallest pulses of his body He had seen his lady

He did not know her name and he observed that she was robed in dark lenten clothes, but the observation must have recurred to him later when in a calmer mood he meditated, his body smouldering, on her image All that he knew then was that he was shaken by the sudden enamourment, and that she was lovelier than any woman he had ever seen, and that she did not refuse the ardent desire in his staring eyes She was, as he would repeat, as indeed he would tell her, the summation of the visions and dreams he had had of what Naples would mean to him long before he set foot there Visions and dreams are common to youth, but it is only the rare youth who is brought to manhood by seeing them incarnate, full and splendid, and by attaining them Messer Giovanni came to manhood in San Lorenzo

It was an experience that he never hoped to communicate so fully that there would be nothing left to say It issues as a recurring theme in his writings, but vaguely, disguised as though all words should be a *senhal* It recurs even when the major theme of a writing, a novel or an allegory, does not really demand personal confession, like a volcanic fissure breathing fire suddenly in the midst of a green countryside We can note the theme in five works. in the *Filocolo*, in the long poem the *Filostrato*, in the *Fiammetta*, again in the *Ameto*, and in another long poem, the *Amorosa Visione*. It were best to let himself speak, but without

the abracadabra of the old astronomy by which he fixed the time of his fate

First, there is the *Filocolo*, a novel and his first book It was written for her who had enraptured him, as were many other books, for he gave the little baggage more worship than, it seems, she was worth He would call her Fiammetta, the Little Flame, and repeat it in vassalage, in verse and prose He wrote, after telling something about her

> "It happened that on the day on which the glorious departure of Jove's son from the despoiled kingdom of Pluto is celebrated, I, maker of the present work, found myself in a graceful and beautiful temple in Parthenope, named after him who, to become a god, suffered that he should be sacrificed on a gridiron There, in song full of sweet melody, I heard the office which on that day is sung being celebrated by the priest—successors of him who first took the cord humbly, exalting Poverty by following her Standing there, and, as my mind estimated, the fourth hour of the day having passed over the eastern horizon, there appeared before my eyes the wonderful loveliness of the aforesaid lady, who had come to that place to hear what I attentively heard, as soon as I saw her, my heart began to throb so violently that the throbbing was, as it were, acknowledged immoderately in the smallest pulses"

The prose is mannered stiff, more than a little pompous with latinity and, we may be sure, only a distant though knightly relation of the words Giovanni himself would have spoken, with Tuscan poise and point, across the table of the Bardi counting-house or, for that matter, to some not unconquerable trollop in the shade of a Baian rock It has its solemn music, though, it has a grave gait Music and tempo were qualities that Boccaccio could vary artfully when a mood compelled him, but it would need to be a compelling mood, not an idea, for he was not moved by ideas as was Dante, but by a passion, a hunger for the flesh, or deep laughter, or, above all, wrath Love was not enough Love had to be taken gravely Love required the grand manner Thus, he looks at the lady in San Lorenzo, he trembles, for a moment he fears it is the beginning of just another adventure, and then, staring once

more, he sees love pleading from her eyes, and he desires to become her subject

To Love with the capital initial, the *valoroso signore*, he prays thankfully and begs that the divinity enter into him His awe is religious, his fervour mystic as though he were addressing God and not a myth that poets found convenient It might have been Dante himself speaking in a passage of the *Vita Nuova* The similarity cannot have been accidental There is too close a likeness with Dante's first vision of Beatrice or Petrarch's of Laura for Boccaccio's description of his enamourment not to have been imitative But to follow a precedent in description does not make the facts described untrue, and besides there is difference Boccaccio cannot see this woman, this sophisticated hussy of San Lorenzo, with the mystical, decarnalised fervour of the Poet he worshipped, or with the subtilising melancholy of the other poet who would be his dearest friend He does his best, though, to elevate the tone of the occasion with the conventional figures of speech, and after his address to the god of Love, he adds

> "I had hardly spoken these words when the shining eyes of the lovely lady looked sparkling into mine with piercing light along which, it seemed to me, I saw coming a fiery arrow of gold"

The light and the arrow like other properties were symbols common to the poets of the time, but they were no less valid for one man by being common to many In the mind of a man like Dante the symbols became sacramental of a higher, or rather of a fuller order of love For Boccaccio by reason of his nature, perhaps his upbringing and certainly the environment in which he spent the impressionable years of his youth, the symbols were the ornaments of sexual relationship Where for Dante Beatrice was a means of ascending to the fire of heavenly love, Fiammetta was for Boccaccio the goal of passionate enjoyment and the brief ecstasy of the body

So much for one of the accounts in the *Filocolo* But there is another in the same book, in a digression already referred to, in which Idalagos narrates his love-affairs in obscure allegory, his

pursuit of the birds and his final ensnaring of the *fagiana* Boccaccio repeated himself Like the sprightly old lady who, in her nineties, still confessed to a love-affair of her late 'teens, Boccaccio liked talking about his adventure The story in the *Ameto* is substantially the same In this book he is Caleone who has surprised the lady in her bedroom and like a gentleman explained his presence, and, unlike a gentleman, recounted his previous love-affairs But the time is the next day, Easter Sunday, when the ladies wore their bright dresses, their jewellery and gold Caleone has returned to confirm the significance of the mutual exchange of looks that took place on Holy Saturday, and he is not disappointed

> "I saw you there, glittering with much gold, bedecked with gems, dressed in the finest green, lovely by art and by nature No sooner did the green dress meet my gaze than my active mind recognised your face In affirmation I said, 'This lady is she who, in my youth and not long ago, appeared to me in my dreams This is she who, with gay demeanour, graciously promised me entry to this city This is she who must rule my mind and who in dreams was promised me as lady', and from that hour onwards, as you should remember, I ever regarded you as the sole lady of my mind, and to your loveliness my heart which I had locked opened itself"

Boccaccio hints here that up to the day of the meeting in the church, that is, during the previous sixteen months since his affairs with the mysterious Pampinea and Abrotonia, he had lived a loveless life with his heart closed It is only a hint, we have nothing else to go on for details

Again, there is an account of the enamourment in the psychological novel, the *Fiammetta* Once more we are in the church, it is the feast day, Easter Sunday, and the golden ornaments shine over the green clothes, and the ladies wear garlands of flowers on their heads The *Primavera* has not yet moved out into unconsecrated ground On this occasion the story is told by the lady who sees a young man for her fancy He has a comely figure, pleasant manners and decent clothes, as well as a curly downy beard which declares his youth The same hot looks are exchanged and the blood runs fast and desire almost suffocates

In that way, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, 1336, were spent by the son of a Florentine business man in San Lorenzo in Naples

Who was the lady? She is not as ghostly as Beatrice or Laura but nevertheless we cannot see her plain Boccaccio himself tells us something about her but not enough to make her story satisfactory or to enable us to envisage her face In the great fresco of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant on the east side of the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, there is a group of portraits in the foreground which are said to represent, among others, Petrarch and Laura, Boccaccio and Fiammetta He in full-face has a smallish mouth and level narrow dark eyes, she, in profile and crowned, has a soft, pretty and self-assured face Her hair, as we gather from Boccaccio, was wavy and like fine gold, and her eyebrows were black, her complexion of white blended with vermeil roses

Those are the details of the blind worshipper After all, a man in love is not the best portrait-painter of his beloved She was born, it is probable, the year after Giovanni's own birth in Paris At the Court of Naples she was reputed to be a daughter of that noble blood which ran in the veins of Saint Thomas Aquinas Boccaccio emphasises her nobility, for association with her must have flattered him, plebeian son of plebeian from rustic Certaldo, but he also emphasises her illegitimacy because her blood was royal as well as noble Her father was King Robert, whose wandering eye was not a mere helpless physical disability though, perhaps, a moral embarrassment He repented later, certainly, when he lived his last days in prayer, and died habited in Franciscan brown Her mother was a Provençal lady, Sibilla Sabran, Countess of Aquino by her marriage to Tommaso IV of Aquino.

In the *Ameto*, her story is told by a nymph, Fiammetta, who absolves her mother of blame by suggesting that the royal seducer was not above using force This nymph is dutifully described, and the description will do as well as any other for the real Fiammetta Her golden hair was bound up with gold ornaments set with pearls, covered with a veil and garlanded with white roses and red, her skin is milk-white mingled with pink; her mouth is red, and she wears, of course, a green dress She tells that the

king called Midas ordained a big festival in the spring to which he invited guests from all parts "Here were the dryads, the wood-nymphs and the naiads from every country subject to the new king," and, we might add, goatish Pan and not a few satyrs and Bacchus "But among the other lovely women, decked with jewels and much gold that appeared before the Neapolitans," continued the nymph, Fiammetta, in the *Ameto*, "was my mother, not the least lovely of all"

Since the festival was held before the coronation of Midas—Robert himself was crowned at Avignon on September 4, 1310,—it has been deduced that Fiammetta was born before 1311, and so she was two years older than Giovanni During the banquet, the high prince mingled with the guests, and seeing Fiammetta's mother, he fell silent, and pondered how he could make her his own After the festival, when almost everybody had returned home, Fiammetta's mother frequented the Court where her husband had no small position, and the King was only the more inflamed by her presence His goatish patience was rewarded Being obliged to seek a royal favour for her husband, she went, was heard, was promised, and ensnared hence Fiammetta The nymph was placed, while a child, in a temple of the Vestals, which is a polite way of saying that nuns were given the charge of the illegitimate little girl

The account in the *Filocolo* is more explicit and briefer Ruberto, who is thus named, reared her tenderly under the appropriate name of the seduced lady's husband since he wished "to preserve the honour of the young woman and of himself", and had her christened "with the name of her who contained in herself the redemption of the wretched fall" of mankind The name was Maria, and it was as Maria d'Aquino that Fiammetta was known This is confirmed in the *Filocolo* when Galeone *alias* Giovanni replies to an inquiry about her "Her name among us is called Fiammetta, although by most people she is called by the name of her through whom that wound which the prevarication of the first mother opened was healed She is the daughter of the most high prince under whose sceptre these peaceful lands are ruled, and to all of us she is Lady, and in brief there is no virtue that a worthy heart can contain which is not hers"

Maria d'Aquino was, then, the dealer of fiery arrows in San Lorenzo She was a married woman at this time While she was yet being educated in a convent—the temple of the Vestals—and while she professed to be toying with the idea of taking the veil herself, she was in the marriage-market Her inclination towards the religious life was probably a mixture of coyness and shrewdness, while she bided her time for the arrival of an attractive suitor The less attractive suitors were continually refused until one young man, wealthy and of very noble blood, went to King Robert and obtained his consent,—and, therefore, hers The union was arranged We are safe in conjecturing that it was not based on deep, mutual love

There is nothing, however, in all that Boccaccio himself tells us that makes her a married trollop She was, as depicted in the *Fiammetta*, not without some knowledge of the arts whereby women tempt men, and she lived, it is true, in a Court where polite gestures and symbols of illicit mating were part of the daily round, but she also persisted in returning frequently to the convent, whether from devotion or from disgust with her husband we do not know One can only guess that she hardly escaped the corruption in which she had been conceived, and that as she grew older, she became cynical and worldly But to Boccaccio, she was not one of the courtesans whose ardent or politic favours held for brief periods the unstable hearts of the well-fed, scented, bragging and predatory debauchers of Naples She was far other to him She was, as has been noted, a repository of virtue, her face was angelic, to her, as to an abundant fount, he owed the inspiration of what he wrote, her name would follow him to his last days, and he would still sing of her when she was dust, seeing her in heaven where he would wish he were among the blessed All this can be dismissed as an accessory part of the conventional idealisation of woman—trull or no trull—common to poets and writers of the time, but against that there is the probability, or rather the certainty, that Messer Giovanni would have used some of the scourging vituperative words that he could command if the woman he worshipped had turned out to be a complete illusion and a hurt to his vanity.

His relationship with her did not end, as it might have ended

for Dante or Petrarch, with an exchange of looks in San Lorenzo He met her one day, by chance, as he would have us believe, in what appears to have been the Benedictine convent of San Michele at Baia Her image had not left his mind, and he was never the man, Florentine plebeian as he was, to be content with images He tells us in the *Filocolo*

> " Still thinking of the worthy lady, it happened one day that fortune, I know not how, cast me into a holy temple named after the chief of the heavenly birds, in which priestesses of Diana under white veils, clothed in black robes, tend the warm fires devotedly On my arrival I saw with some of them there the gracious lady of my heart in gay and happy conversation into which I and a companion were familiarly drawn And having passed from one topic to another, we came after many things to speak of the worthy youth, Florio, son of Felice, the great King of Spain, reciting his adventures with tender words which, on hearing, pleased the gentle lady beyond compare With an amiable gesture she turned glad to me and began to speak thus
>
> " ' Certainly, the memory of the young lovers is done great harm by not having their fame exalted with adequate memorial in the verses of some poet, but left utterly to the folk-tales of the ignorant, considering the great constancy of their souls which, by the force of love, were always steadfast in one desire, preserving firm faith So, not less desirous of being able to say that I was the cause of revealing their fame than piteous of their fate, I beg you by the power that was in my eyes the first day you saw me and that bound you to me by the force of love, to exert yourself to compose a little book in the vulgar speech in which the birth, enamourment and adventures of these two are related down to the very end '
>
> " And this said, she fell silent "

This, according to Messer Giovanni, was the genesis of his first book, the lengthy novel *Il Filocolo*, not by any means *un piccolo libretto*, though it may have been begun as such It was not the first time nor the last that a writer would try his strength on one of the many tales that were even more widely current in Europe than the gold florins of Florence,—tales of Aucassin and Nicolette,

Tristram and Iseult, Lancelot and Guinevere, and all the lovers whose conduct and fate were the entertainment and exemplars of lords and commons It was not the first nor the last time that a writer wrote to please a lady, but it is doubtful if any writer ever succeeded into the bargain in writing so lengthy, so protracted and digressive a novel, and at the same time, in not pleasing the lady for long

II

In making of a glorious Legende
Of Gode Women, maidenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in lovinge all hir lyves
—Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*

THE YOUNG BOCCACCIO FLUNG INTO THE *FILOCOLO* ALMOST everything he knew He had already written some verse, sonnets chiefly, which are slender preparation for the composition of prolonged narrative He used the current story of the two lovers, Florio and Biancofiore, as an infinitely elastic sack into which he stuffed all sorts of ornaments, decorations, descriptions, confessions, and pretty gew-gaws He had no model, it must be remembered, when he was writing what was, as Chubb says, "perhaps the first novel of modern Europe" It is to his credit that if he stuffed anything into the sack, he did not completely forget it but drew it out at the end of the tale to remind the reader of its existence, and, to be sure, even readers with prodigious memories would need the thoughtful reminder In other words, the big book appears at first sight, and few readers can stand even a first sight, like the bewildering sprawling map of a watershed in which monster tributaries and the main stream seem confused, but there is some design there, and somewhere at some time all the waters are confluent in their descent to the sea He knew what to do, but he was unable to do it expertly and with artistic economy

Not that the writing is in itself loose and shapeless On the contrary, it is full of the rich promise that he richly fulfilled His *ornate parole* float with the pomp of massive summer clouds and sink with the slow dying wind of a repeated cadence, but the clouds are the stiff clouds of a fresco Those who love the grave music of *trecento* prose will find words here in plenty In between digressions and speeches—the dialogue is oratorical—he manages the pace of the narrative at an interesting tempo that varies between tardiness and speed according to the mood

A summary of the story, with a few extracts, should help to

give an idea both of the contents of the writer's mind and of his incidental skill

Quinto Lelio Affricano, a noble and wealthy Roman and a decendent of Scipio is married for five years without desired issue to Giulia Topazia, a descendent of Julius Caesar Hearing about a god who resides far above the Hesperian coast, he goes to a holy temple and before an image of a glorious saint (James of Compostella) he vows a pilgrimage if his wife becomes pregnant The saint manifests himself in a vision and commands Lelio to go on the pilgrimage There are long, exceedingly courteous but boring speeches, for every speaker in the book avoids brevity as thoroughly as possible Giulia begs to be taken on the journey and her husband unfortunately consents

The plot begins to thicken when the Lord of Hell disguises himself as the governor of the city of Marmorina (Verona) and rides on a lean shanky nag to pagan King Felice of Spain in whose empire Marmorina lies He informs the king, after the manner of war-mongers both ancient and modern, that the city has been sacked and burned by the Romans when, in truth, nothing has happened Immediately, Felice orders reprisals and galloping off on a punitive expedition, he meets Lelio and the pilgrim train in a valley and attacks There are orations, of course, before the fighting Then, Felice with his army and his Arabs, begins the slaughter After the battle in which Lelio has fallen, the women with Giulia at their head search among the dead for their men The search is described vividly, the grief is majestic Her cries, as she beats her face with her bloodied hands, prevent Felice and his company from enjoying their night's rest Tormented, he sends his loyal knight, Ascalione, to silence her

> "Ascalione with some followers stirred himself and through the dark night with small light, and footing it on the blood and the faces of the dead on the bloody field, he went to that place where he heard the sorrowful voices and came to Giulia, for whom, when he had seen her and imagining the loveliness hidden beneath the dead blood on her face, Ascalione was moved within to pity, almost weeping, he said
>
> "'O young lady whose grief invites my eyes on seeing you to weep, I beg you by that nobility which your aspect mani-

fests to me that you console yourself and put an end to your tears In faith I do not know what is the cause of your sorrow but I believe that it is great' "

She is brought before King Felice who discovers that he has erred in his attack on the innocent pilgrims and then, in dubious taste, he immediately offers her any of his knights she may care for as a replacement for her husband

At this stage Boccaccio gives a picture of a battlefield that must have been a commonplace in the Middle Ages Did he see one? Did he at some time skirt a field of bones and fly in terror from the dogs and the wild creatures that battened on the flesh of poor mortals,—nature becoming so perverted by man's vicious violence as to desecrate what human bodies were, even to Boccaccio, temples of the Holy Ghost? He in his own way desecrated the temples while they yet housed something immortal and of divine origin, but he knew it was desecration, and there was terror in store His description of the battlefield is a foretaste of the realism that he would master

" The drear field being deserted by the living, the vapours of corruption attracted in a few days a multitude of wild things that filled it Not only did the wolves of Spain occupy the luckless valley but those of the outlands also came to feed on the dead flesh And the African lions ran towards the awful vapour, thrusting their sharp teeth into the insensible corpses And the bears that scented the breath of the bloody shambles, left the ancient woods and the secret recesses of their caves The faithful dogs forsook the houses of their masters and hastened sniffing the unwholesome air with shrewd noses Here gathered the birds that before this had preferred the food of the skies. And the air was never so filled with vultures, and never were so many birds seen together Every wood sent birds there, and the miserable bodies to which fortune had granted neither cremation nor burial were torn by them wretchedly, and flesh fed the famished beaks Every nearby tree seemed to drop tears of blood from the blood-stained claws that burdened the bare boughs. The past autumn had stripped off the leaves but the cruel birds had reinvested the trees in a russet colour with the blood of the dead borne on their feet The limbs carried to them fell for a

second time to the drear field from the exhausted claws Yet, for all this, the great host of the dead was not devoured down to the bone because, though all was lacerated, a large share was rejected by the wild creatures as spoiled, and this the sun, the rain and the wind strewed repulsively on the stained earth, mingling the Roman ashes with the ashes of the unknown Arabians"

To return to the story Giulia is carried off to Felice's palace and there, befriended by the Queen, she is delivered of a daughter while the Queen gives birth to a son These children are Biancofiore and Florio, the heroine and hero of the tale that pleased Maria d'Aquino in the convent parlour Inevitably the boy and girl fall in love as they read in a work of Ovid's—this is a variant of Dante's account of Paolo and Francesca—and inevitably, the king is informed The king is displeased Florio is sent away and Biancofiore is by plot falsely accused of attempting to poison the king She is condemned to death by burning From this death she is rescued by Florio who thunders up as a valorous knight, but the reward is separation once more Much must happen before they can become united She must be sold as a slave and shipped to Alexandria, to the Admiral of the Sultan of Babylon She must be locked away in an impregnable tower to languish there while Florio is tempted by hussies in the pay of his father in a sort of oriental garden The temptation and the garden give Messer Giovanni an opportunity of detailing the attractions of lovely female bodies in suitable surroundings—and of Florio's fidelity

Florio goes in search of his vanished love under a vow that he will ransack every clime and nation, and he takes the name Filocolo, the Love-weary His journeys take him through the whole Mediterranean to Naples where he meets Galeone, that is Boccaccio, who brings the story up-to-date Florio also meets Fiammetta He is entertained in Neapolitan style, and he attends one of the Courts of Love, to which we shall return At last, need it be said, he reaches Alexandria and by many devices discovers where Biancofiore is entowered.

The tower delighted Boccaccio He filled it with what he considered the luxuries of the East, including one of those Saracenic

toys, the Musical Tree, of which there were samples in Constantinople, Bagdad and Cordova The East pressed with violence and blandishment on his world, it fashioned his idea of love more than he knew The East had impressed Provence deeply, and the Provençal troubadours had sung of love with much of the fervid and mystical preoccupation of the Orient with physical love The echoes of their songs were still in the air of Naples where Boccaccio grew to manhood The East is in his account of the room in the tower where Biancofiore languished as a morsel for a harem

> "It is of a decent size and has this quality, that no man can pass within so melancholy but that in wondering at the vault of the room where the masterly designs of gold, of sapphires, of emeralds, of rubies and other stones are seen, he becomes joyful and gay Opposite the door on a column which every man at first sight would take to be fire, so ruddy and shining is it, stands the naked son of Venus with two great golden wings, most pleasing to behold In his left hand he holds a bow and in his right arrows which, as it seems to everyone from that position, he desires to shoot But he has not the blindfold eyes as many imagine him, rather are they fine and pleasant, and for each pupil there is a carbuncle which does not allow darkness at all in that room but keeps it bright and clear as if by the sun Around him on the smooth walls are painted all the deeds he ever did In the four corners of the room are four great trees of gold which possess fruit of emeralds, pearls and other stones so artfully designed that if a man strike the stalk of any of them with a little rod, the song of every sweet song-bird may be heard, and re-echoing they fall silent In the middle of this room stands a bedstead of the ivory of Indian elephants on four lions of gold, furnished with bedding as befits such a bedstead, closed around by curtains There is no pleasant or stimulating fragrance that a man may not perceive here, odorously soft In this room, on this noble bed, Biancofiore sleeps alone "

Florio by stratagem enters the tower in a basket of roses and he and Biancofiore are married before Cupid This is the climax of the novel, though not by any means an approach to the end The pages are drunk with love, the jewels glitter and scents float

in the heavy air, and passion murmurs and sighs One can imagine Messer Giovanni's own ardent face as he writes and writes his pretty "little book" to please Maria d'Aquino and to stimulate her curiosity in his feverish virility God help him, he worked hard

The lovers are discovered, need it be said, by the Admiral of the Sultan of Babylon who condemns them in fury to death They are rescued from the fire, first through the intervention of Venus herself who preserves them miraculously from the flames, and secondly by Florio's own followers who nearly wreck the city The Admiral yields The long arm of coincidence reaches out to strangle credibility still further, for Florio is discovered to be the Admiral's nephew After that, one would think, nothing remained except the triumphant return of the hero and heroine, but Boccaccio has not finished

Florio and Biancofiore revisit Naples and its countryside, and Galeone is met once more, but Fiammetta no longer loves him Florio deals out comforting words before journeying to Rome It is at this point that the cloven flame of Boccaccio's spiritual life is revealed He has brought the lovers through more perils than the most exacting reader can decently demand, he has united them in a figurative and real blaze of passion, he has built up picture after picture of sensual delight in which he lingeringly, but not smuttily, describes feminine loveliness and charm, and then, as happened in half the folk-tales of the West when Christianity moved out to perfect nature with grace, he turns his tale to the christening of the lovers To many commentators only one half of his life's flame seems to matter, and in that they are unjust There was also that other half of the cloven flame which, unlike Dante perhaps, he never managed to unite with the first half in one clear light,—at any rate, as far as we know, though his last days may have been blessed with the peace of integrity, though again it may be added that men nearing their dotage are not usually overburdened with the lusty troubles of the flesh But the other half was there, often untended perhaps, and through it he worshipped God and called on Our Lady, and, incidentally, brought pagan lovers to the baptismal font, for they had been faithful

Florio becomes a Christian at Rome after meeting a holy man, Ilario, in St John Lateran. The catechising is given. Boccaccio

knew what he was talking about The synopsis of the Old Testament is good, and the story of Our Lord's life, told with Franciscan tenderness, is full of those little mediaeval touches that came from legends and, certainly, from the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* by Fra Giovanni da Gimignano, which was one of the most popular of devotional books and the inspiration of piety, pictures, mystery-plays and verse There is, for example, the account of the first Christmas when Joseph brought Mary to Bethlehem with an ox and an ass, the ass for carriage and the ox for sale to pay the expenses of the journey, and finding every house full, they went to the cave

> " Here in lowliness they rested the night which had already passed the mid-hour The Virgin, just as she had conceived without carnal delight, so, without any pain, delivered her Holy Burden That she might shield Him from the cold which was very great, she, being poor of clothing, wrapped Him in the hay that was in front of the ox and the ass And what should men not do since those beasts recognising the Saviour of the world knelt down, doing Him the reverence that their small intelligence counselled ? At that hour the angelic voices of the angels were heard from the sky, singing *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* "

Christened Florio goes back to his country where, after his father's death, he sets about bringing the Faith to his people, but not before he and Biancofiore have found the drear battlefield, the waste of bones, and there Biancofiore in a dream hears her father, Lelio, speaking from the dead On his word, she and her husband walk out into the night to distinguish the bones of the Christian Romans from the bones of the barbarians by the ruddy light that glows from them, illuminating the darkness So, with burial, ends the *Filocolo*, Boccaccio's first book

The summary omits such digressions as the love-story of Fileno, one of Biancofiore's suitors, the account of the Courts of Love at Naples which goes on for page after page, the tales told by some scandalous Neapolitan nymphs, and the misfortunes of Idalagos The whole story is a tribute to the fidelity of separated lovers. It was an odd kind of novel to offer a young married woman as an incitement to infidelity But this is to anticipate, because Boccaccio

did not complete his novel in Naples where he was supposed to be a student of Canon Law He broke off the narrative at about the third book of the seven, sometime early in the year 1337, perhaps in the spring, and he would not take it up again for completion until after the lady, the hen-pheasant, had fluttered to other arms There was, then, point for her in the moral of fidelity, but it was fidelity that Maria's husband, if he cared, would not see in the same romantic light

III

Prayers move the heavens but find no grace with you
—Thomas Campion

MESSER GIOVANNI CAST HIMSELF INTO THE ARDOURS OF PURSUIT He used, as appears from his own writings, two stratagems one literary which was intended to be persuasive, and the other Neapolitan, or should one say Angevin gallantry, and this was crafty violence Propaganda was to be followed by war The second literary stratagem which he attempted, apparently with more success than the first in moving a human heart with ornate words, was the long poem, the *Filostrato* which meant for him the man-beaten-by-love There were also some sonnets, the rattle of mere small arms that, one never knew, might hit the bull's-eye Although the dating has not been determined precisely, it has been supposed that he began the long poem early in 1337

He himself tells its origin It was a year after the vision in San Lorenzo, a year spent in doting, idling, disgusting himself with Canon Law and writing The lady had come no nearer Her coyness was a torture In fact, she had gone farther away, to some place in the centre of Italy, to Samnium as he says, either of her own accord or, which is more likely, in the enforced company of her husband While she was absent he began to know the anguish of not looking on her angelic face He cannot follow her, however, for he has no honourable excuse for that, and he thinks more of her good name than of his own pleasure He must remain in Naples where there are so many reminders of his love for her, like the church of San Lorenzo itself, the public places where he saw her taking the air, the loggias where they walked and talked, and his eyes fill with tears and he is grieved to the heart He is, in a word, appealing for pity He will relate his sufferings—*i miei martiri*—in verse

The *Filocolo* must have become heavy on his hands, or perhaps Maria's interest which had been brave and bright in the beginning, in the Benedictine convent, flagged Who can blame her? Therefore Boccaccio laid aside the creeping tale, and for the siege of this

woman took up the story of Troilus and Cressida to turn it into some four thousand lines of *ottava rima*, to be entitled the *Filostrato* That, at least, is one explanation of his decision to write this long narrative poem, but it is somewhat naive His desire of this woman, Maria d'Aquino, was not the same as his desire to write four thousand lines of verse She, to use the scholastic terms which he himself used on occasion, may have been the final cause of the work, but she was not the material cause, nor the formal, and it goes without saying that she was not the efficient The baggage must have been attractive, and his love for her was genuine and creative, but she was not the Nine Muses or any one of them

It was Messer Giovanni who prepared the material, chose the metre and verse form, and hammered out line after line in the creative joy that is an end in itself, to tell the story of Cressida who yielded to Pandarus, friend and go-between of Troilus, the man who loved her His principal source for the story was the twelfth century *Roman de Troie* by the trouvère Benoit de Saint-Maure, of which the story is an episode, and the *Historia Troiana* of the Latin translator, the Sicilian Guido delle Colonne, but he followed neither source very closely It has been calculated by industrious scholars that his total indebtedness is about one verse in every thirty-eight Besides, there were echoes and imitations of Dante in the lines, of Cino da Pistoia and Guido Guinizelli

But his redaction of the story, in four thousand lines of narrative, was all his own, especially in the descriptions of the lovers' meetings Chaucer who relied on Boccaccio without acknowledgement, has taught us to regard Pandarus with reproach, and Shakespeare to despise him, but in the *Filostrato* he is not so disreputable. While the *Filocolo* lauded fidelity—outside the conjugal limit, of course—the *Filostrato* worked hard to invest faithlessness with glamour And that may possibly have been on account of the final cause ! Moreover, the *ottava rima* which can be neat and pointed, seems to melt and swoon, as though the words themselves could not associate without langour The love is never platonic, distantly worshipful, it broods on possession The verses, then, read like an incantation as well as an appeal

There is that stanza, one of many, in which Troilus and Cressida are described as in one another's arms That there are many such

stanzas reveals Boccaccio's eagerness as well as his inability to express the fullness of what he felt He groped forwards, and suddenly he hit on a device that is very old, and ineffectual only when it is mechanical It is not mechanical in the *Filostrato* It is the device of repetition Note, then, how in the following stanza he repeats rather than rhymes certain words, and these words, placed in key-positions, communicate by sense and sound the urgency of his feeling They are like a pulse And at the end, the variation and the rhyme come abruptly, like the quick realisation of the lovers themselves who find that they do not dream

E' non uscir di braccio l'uno all'altro
Tutta la notte, e tenendosi in braccio,
Si credeano esser tolti l'uno all'altro,
O che non fosse ver che insieme in braccio,
Siccome elli eran, fosse l'uno all'altro,
Ma sognar si credean d'essere in braccio,
E l'uno all'altro domandava spesso,
O t'ho io in braccio, o sogno, o se' tu desso? [1]

The prose translation is from Griffin and Myrick's sumptuous edition of the *Filostrato* to which Griffin's introduction is a brief, thoroughly informed and documented life of Boccaccio

In the stanza quoted, the lovers' desires may be read as Boccaccio's own, that is, if one assume he was also doting on Fiammetta while he was imagining Cressida It may have been so, but it is improbable that his mind could have thus diverted itself, at the moment of artistic creation, from the image of the whispering lovers The feeling of the passage, and indeed of the context, is total, not partial or divided He was artist enough to forget self in the giving of self that art demands Besides, it may be repeated once more that it does not do to take everything he wrote as confessional, not even the following stanza from the same poem, in which he summarises the mental distress of a jealous suitor

[1] They did not leave one another's arms all night While they held one another embraced, they thought they were separated, the one from the other, and that it was not true that they were locked together, one with another, as they were, but they believed they were dreaming of being in one another s arms And the one often asked the other Have I thee in my arms? Do I dream or art thou thyself?"

In lui ogni disio istato antico
Ritorno nuovo, e sopra esso l'inganno
Che li parea ricevere, e 'l nemico
Spirto di gelosia, gravoso affanno
Piu ch'alcun altro è di posa mendico,
Come son quei che già provato l'hanno,
Ond'el piangeva giorno e notte tanto,
Quanto bastavan gli occhi ed egli a'l pianto [1]

Boccaccio was not left weeping for the lady's absence for long Maria returned to Naples to meet, perhaps, the first assaults of the new literary siege Her vassal in love was improving, for he was showing himself a good rhymer as well as a writer of prose, and as such, Giovanni would be a worthy exhibit in the society she cultivated, if he did not become too tiresome

Then, the summer being in, she removed to Baia's blue waters, the sands, the boating, the picnics and the ceaseless flirtations Giovanni went there too, as if he were no more than the wake of her boat He was happy enough with her presence to sing, and in truth song is the sound that comes over the waters from the ancient resort after all the centuries, his song, his sonnets for her, that preserve pictures of her singing there in the sunlight

Su la poppa sedea d'un barchetta,
Ch'l mar segando presta era tirata,
La donna mia con altre accompagnata,
Cantando or una or altra canzonetta [2]

And one noonday he came over the waters and heard her singing in the shade of a myrtle grove where she for coolness sat with other ladies, and something in the song and the play of light and shadow moved him to one of his best sonnets,—which Rossetti translated well

[1] In him every desire which had been ancient, returned afresh, and beside it the deceit which it seemed to him that he had suffered, and the hostile spirit of jealousy, a burden more than any other grievous and unrelieved by respite, as know those who have experienced it Wherefore he wept day and night as his eyes and he were capable of weeping

[2] On the poop of a little boat that was swiftly driven to cleave the sea, my lady sat accompanied by other ladies, singing now one song and now another

Guidommi Amor, ardendo ancora il sole,
Sopra l'aque di Scilio, in un mirteto,
Ed era il mar tranquillo e il ciel quieto,
Quantunque alquanto zeffir, come suole,
Movesse agli arboscei le cime sole,
Quando mi parve udire un canto lieto
Tanto, che simil non fu consueto
D'udir giammai nelle mortali scuole
Perch'io Angiola forse, o Ninfa, o Dea
Canta con seco in questo loco eletto,
Meco diceva, degli antichi amori
Quivi Madonna in assai bel ricetto
Del bosco ombroso, in sull'erbe e'n su' fiore
Vidi cantando, e con altre sedea

Love steered my course, while yet the sun rode high,
On Scylla's waters to a myrtle grove
The heaven was still and the sea did not move,
Yet now and then a little breeze went by
Stirring the tops of trees against the sky
And then I heard a song as glad as love,
So sweet that never yet the like thereof
Was heard in any mortal company
" A nymph, a goddess, or an angel sings
Unto herself, within this chosen place,
Of ancient loves ", so said I at that sound
And there my lady, 'mid the shadowings
Of myrtle trees 'mid flowers and grassy space,
Singing I saw with others who sat around

He was thoroughly enamoured among people for whom love was a pastime, a game that one played cleverly without becoming too seriously entangled In that he was in comparison with them the simple Florentine Every sight of her was a joy, and he could content himself, for a while at least, just with looking at her face In the *Filocolo* he describes, for instance, a Court of Love at which he, as Galeone, and Fiammetta are present It is a game in which love may be discussed in mixed company under the arbitration of an elected Queen, and through the mouths of sophisticates, bawdiness may be uttered elegantly, and amorous hints and invitations be given

The company moves to a lawn, thick with fine grass and flowers, full of suave odours, and shaded by young green trees In the centre of the grass, a clear fountain plays, and around this they sit, talking, watching the endless jewel-flash of the falling waters, and plucking flowers for garlands Questions are put, and the questions are really tales They are told leisurely and ironically, as though the tellers were idly picking the petals from a flower and letting them drift to the grass With the same leisure and irony, the Queen, who is Fiammetta, delivers judgment ingeniously on the problems, and as she sums up, one almost hears the chuckles and the giggles from the reclining figures that droop heavy eyelids against the sun

One of the few respectable questions put is the problem of the girl and the garlands Two youths, one garlanded and one bare-headed, almost fall to blows over a girl to whom they have never spoken but who has not rejected their admiring gazes She is asked to choose between them She chooses, but in this fashion she removes from her head her own garland and places it on the young man who is bareheaded, and then she takes the garland from the other youth and puts it on her own head She has given the sign of her preference Which does she prefer?

The argumentation that follows does not consist of assertion and contradiction It is reasoned and subtle, as though what is a mere game were a dispute between doctors at the university The Queen delivers judgment after she has balanced the evidence, examined principles, and quoted precedents from the tales of old loves It is a delightful game, but not for fools Even when the stories were long gone beyond the borders of what is now considered decent, statement still remained precise as well as frank, and the ingenious reasoning was maintained Morals may have become loose but the intellect retained its strict office There was reason even in the feast of folly

Which of the youths does the girl prefer? The young man who got a garland, of course, for love gives Love tries to bind by giving. Love is the giving of self It is a conclusion that can have an ambiguous meaning for the young cynics that loll about while the afternoon sun dapples the beflowered lawn under the young swaying trees with glints and flashes of running gold. The

voices are quiet, lazy, attuned to the drone of insects that burdens the fragrant air, but the light on the dancing fountain is lively as joy

As Galeone, like the others, awaits his turn to put a question he watches and listens, but chiefly watches, and is entranced What is it that he watches? Beauty that makes him forget the body and mean crafty plans for possession A sunbeam, slipping cleanly through the green leaves overhead, strikes the fountain which reflects it back to the lovely face of the crowned Queen She is dressed in the soft colour the sky shows when, the sun gone down and the moon not yet risen, only the stars cast light The reflection from the fountain, it seems to Galeone, makes the face already shining with splendour so luminous that a wonderful lustre pervades the people in the shadows Galeone is fascinated The reflected sunbeam touches the blonde head, crowned with the twined bay-leaves, and so mingles with the thread-like golden tresses, that, it seems, a clear little flame of bright fire flashes out And the young Galeone whose turn to add to the entertainment of the company has come, is lost in contemplation It is not lust holds him now or the promise of possession, but the figure of beauty The cloven flame of his soul burned close together, and for a moment, but unfortunately only for a moment, he had such a vision as sustained the ascent of Dante, his master, to the heights of heaven

He was not equal to the asceticism of the ascent He relapsed All that summer while the university was on holiday, he gambolled and played and idled around Baia She was there Her company was poetry, song, wine He saw her, perhaps, for more than she was, and she, in her turn, saw him for less than he intended, and that was her surprise She was the crown and summation of the calm lapis-lazuli sea and of the airs that blew in from the purple islands, faint in the midday haze, and of the desires that had troubled him since youth began The half of his soul that did not worship but needs must because it was soul, worshipped her, and such worship must find an end in possession or in a great want that only time could cool or another greater love satisfy He had begun a book for her, cast it aside as ineffectual, and begun another in verse He had offered her sonnets He had pleaded by word and look, and appealed to her sense of pity. Was the little baggage

really being the chaste wife? Or was she blowing hot and cold on her lover in the manner required by convention,—and coquetry? We do not know. We cannot even be sure that the accounts given by Galeone himself of the capture of the lady are a statement of fact or a representation of desire.

He had been, as he tells in the *Amorosa Visione*, her suitor for one hundred and thirty-five days. Her husband went off to Capua to attend some business on his estate there, and she was left alone to sleep in what she called, according to Boccaccio of course, her cold bed, her *freddo letto*. One night as she slept, she dreamt of the young man who was paying her such ardent attention, and then, she awoke to find that he, by coaxing her maidservant, had already secreted himself in her room, in her curtained bed. He brandished a knife and threatened to kill himself there and then, and after some argument and some consideration, she took the knife from his hands and said "Young man, the gods, your ardour and comeliness have conquered my soul" *Giovane, gli Idii, l'ardire, e la bellezza di te hanno l'animo mio piegato*.

It was the kind of piquant bedroom scene that George Moore who never kissed and always told was an adept at staging, but it was somewhat too violent and melodramatic for a nature like Giovanni's, who was called by contemporaries Giovanni of the tranquillity. It sounds more like a dream of what desperation would make him do—a youthful dream, like riding as a knight to the rescue of a lady whose reward will be the fulfilment of desire, or like taking the laurel crown for poetry before the assembled King and Court and stealing out to find true coronation in the beloved's arms.

And in any case, the nocturnal surprise was a device of mediaeval romances. Did Messer Giovanni *alias* Florio *alias* Galeone *alias* Caleone *alias* Troilo *alias* Idalagos really despair of persuading the lady with a few books and turn to the unfair and violent method of the brandished knife? We cannot be sure that he did. Neither can we say that he did not. At least, it was unlike him to be violent who hated violence and always adapted himself to persuasive subtlety, unless his vanity were hurt. We can say for sure, however, that he worshipped the lady, Maria d'Aquino as Fiammetta all his life, not with the complacent adoration of a possessor but,

like Petrarch for Laura, with longing We can also add that however intimate the relationship may have become, it did not last Six months, maybe, a year and then he was a cast-off man whose bright worship of women would change to pleasurable cynicism, and later to stormy vituperation But the vituperation would not be for her She would be transformed into a symbol, untouchable, and he would not die nor would worms eat him for love

IV

And wilt thou leave me thus,
And have no more pitye
Of him that loveth thee?
Alas, thy cruelty!
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay! say nay!
—Anonymous

BALZAC THE NOVELIST KNEW, BOTH FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE and observation, how money maketh men, how it qualifies and perverts and energizes love, ambition, politics, religion and the elbow-rubbing of neighbours His novels, therefore, did not neglect the influence of finance It is to be regretted that Messer Giovanni Boccaccio, son of Boccaccio fu Chellino da Certaldo, sometime financier in Paris, Florence and Naples, did not include in his novels and stories some account of the effect upon him and other people of one of the great financial crashes of the Middle Ages

For the crash did affect him It is an account that he could have given with some expertness, for he could not have done business without getting some knowledge of the financial world into his intelligent mind He, like his father, must have attended to the books and weighed on the scales the shining Florentine gold florins, the florins of Piedmont, Aragon and Sicily, the old gold crowns and gold regalia, the angels, francs, paviglioni and ducats, the gold Papal florins and the silver soldi He, like his father, and all the agents of the Bardi, must have been aware of how precious gold had become in a long lifetime

As Giovanni Villani recounts in his proud chronicles, it was ordained by the people and commonwealth of Florence in 1252 that gold coins should be struck, for trade was thriving "And then," says Villani, "began the good coins of gold, twenty-four carats fine, the which are called golden florins, and each was worth twenty soldi The which florins weighed eight to the ounce, and on one side was the stamp of the lily and on the other of Saint John." This florin became by reason of its purity and, of course, the commercial standing of the city, a measure of value all over

Europe It made Florence a financial centre One could travel far with it and buy to advantage, it opened the doors of royal audience chambers and Papal ante-rooms, and the itch of many a palm was soothed with the bland ointment of Saint John Goldenbeard

The Florentine signor with his florins was the forerunner of the British gentleman of the nineteenth century with his sovereigns, indeed, the similarity between typical affluent citizens of the two mercantile states so widely separated in time is deep they shared the same strong patriotism, the same insular self-confidence, or rather cockiness, the same family pride, and they larded their public dealings with pious unction It is a similarity that would have shocked Ruskin, not for the sake of nineteenth century Manchester which he abhorred but for the sake of thirteenth century Florence which he glorified Yet, the thing he glorified was an embryonic Manchester, and the Florentine masters exploited labour as much as they dared until checked by rebellions and riots in the streets, and Giotto himself, Ruskin's Giotto, was a usurer as well as a painter, and a renter of looms at exorbitant prices The gold florin was a true symbol of the city

Now, the quantity of gold in mediaeval Europe did not vary very much over short periods There was no lavish source of supply, and Europe would have to wait at least two centuries before the metal would come pouring in plentifully from the Americas to the great upset of kings, kingdoms and their economies While Florentine trade increased two-fold, five-fold, even ten-fold, the quantity of gold in circulation did not The quantity of silver probably did. Consequently, there were big variations in the ratio between the florins and other coins, the silver ones especially In the beginning, the Florentine Saint John had been worth twenty silver soldi Five years later it was worth thirty, nine years later again, thirty-five, and in the year Giovanni Boccaccio was writing his *Filostrato*, it exchanged for sixty-two Gold, then, became more and more precious It was the stuff for misers to hoard A man could grow rich in a lifetime simply by hatching it. The churchmen of Avignon plumped for it, and for kings and princes, it was almost as dear as their royal blood The money-lenders were sure of favour and almost any percentage they might like to demand.

One of the needy kings was Edward III of England, and his needs were met Italian bankers had been getting on famously in England, especially since the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 The Italians were in effect the royal bankers They had arrived in England originally as collectors of Papal taxes, but being shrewd and sharp-eyed, they extended their mission by purchasing the wool produced by the religious orders, especially the Cistercians Next, they were given the handling of the customs in return for loans, and on occasions they were given contracts to look after parliamentary grants and to purvey royal wool To Edward III, the houses of the Bardi and the Peruzzi loaned some million and a half florins which he needed for his wars for the recovery of Scotland, and for his planned conquest of the Kingdom of France, in return for privileges—mere trifles, gentlemen !—in the trade of English wool so necessary to the Florentine factories that had, among other European competitors, the Flemish manufacturers who were also favoured by the king The loan was to be recouped, for the time being, partly in trade revenues and partly by the rate of usury But it was a big drain on the Florentine money-bags, and moreover, it was not the only one

There was also the war of the Florentines for Lucca This city, set in good oil country, had been granted to Florence by a treaty of alliance made with the Lombardy Ghibellines against John, King of Bohemia, son of that Henry of Luxembourg whom Dante described as the second Moses He, too, had threatened the liberties of the free cities But Lucca was held by German mercenaries who used the place as headquarters of a thriving business in despoliation They were interested in florins, a very portable and divisible form of wealth

Mastino della Scala, nephew and successor of Can Grande who had been patron to wandering Dante, offered to treat for Florence with the captains in command at Lucca He treated, won, but kept the town Moreover, he intrigued with the Pisans and the independent nobles in the Apennine castles and strongholds against the Florentines who were now forced to defend themselves against their ally They signed a treaty, therefore, with Venice, who also had some scores to pay off against Mastino, and the war was carried on in Lombardy Into this war, the Florentines poured

nearly half a million florins They imagined that it was good business and that Lucca could be used to repay the heavy expenditure, but they did not reckon on being cheated by their second ally as they had been by the first In 1338, the Venetians made peace with Mastino and, to quote Machiavelli's comment, "like all those who ally themselves with lesser powers", they forgot about Florence and did not bother their heads about Lucca

The florins were a dead loss Moreover, the English loans to Edward III did not turn out as the financiers had expected Those florins were gone too, with little to show for them Altogether, nearly two million florins had been wafted away to that bourne from which money never returns and the tribulation in the city whose revenues, to make a comparison, were some three hundred thousand a year, must have been great and prolonged The houses of the Bardi and the Peruzzi failed, and their fall dragged down and weakened hundreds of investors and tributary usurers The Venetian default was, perhaps, totally unexpected, although one must say that the Florentines who were shrewd and not without knowledge of men must have known there was a gamble somewhere The English loss, however, must have begun to be foreseen some years before the crash and this would explain why Boccaccio senior who had left Naples in 1332 and had again visited Paris and made other journeys, resigned from the house of Bardi in 1338 Expenses were probably being cut down by the house, and all the spiders were being recalled in along the strands of the intricate European web A year later he was selling some property, a villa at Corbignano, where young Giovanni must have spent some of his childhood within sound of the streams, the Mensola and the Affrico It is guesswork, but reasonable guesswork to say that he sold because he needed the money and that Giovanni, leading a gay life at Naples, must have suffered a considerable diminution of pocket-money, enough to make a life of pleasure, the study of Canon Law, and a literary career a very difficult combination

The study of Canon Law was never of great interest to him He took to his "Decretals" in boredom But writing was of great moment, and to continue writing in Naples, he required some success and a patron or two Success had not yet come,

though, to be sure, he was regarded by a circle of friends and acquaintances as a charming storyteller and a promising poet The patron of whom he had high hopes was Niccolò Acciaiuoli, the favourite of fortune and of King Robert's sister, a man whose wealth would soon enable him to build and live only as opulent kings live and build for the glory of his name The hopes were depressed when, in October, 1338, Niccolò departed from Naples on the mission of recovering a lost princedom in Greece for the House of Anjou The departure drew from Giovanni a letter to Niccolò which, even allowing for the fact that the young writer must have had his tongue well clamped in his cheek, was disgustingly fulsome It was at variance with his independent character to fawn, though not to reverence This was fawning He bleated and moaned

"Niccolò," he wrote, "if it is meet to credit the troubles of others, I swear to you by my sorrowing soul that your departure meant no less to me than did the departure of Trojan Aeneas from Carthaginian Dido Nor, likewise, was the return of Ulysses expected with as much desire by Penelope as your return is by me" He was a man grasping at straws to keep him afloat on the glittering waters of Neapolitan society, but it must be admitted that he grasped with the ludicrous folly of a man who in a nightmare fancies he drowns in his own bed Anything, anything at all would do that he might remain in Naples, near Fiammetta

He was losing or had lost the favour he had won and he hoped desperately to regain it Had he become tiresomely importunate, much too serious in the game that was essentially frivolous? It could become embarrassing for a young married woman, with her eye on one or two likely gallants, to be shadowed by a doting young man with smouldering eyes. She might as well move about in the company of her husband who flits across the background of the story like an indifferent ghost Giovanni, therefore, was not wanted. As he tells in a sonnet, he was forbidden from going to Baia for the bathing with her, and he obeyed, for was he not the vassal? His days were miserable, because security in love, in Naples, and in letters was gone.

We know very little about her transition from real or imagined amorousness to frigidity, and the most we can do is to fit together

the pieces of the puzzle provided by Giovanni's covertly communicative writings Again, let us turn to the *Filocolo*, to young Galeone at Naples, and as well to the talking pine-tree Idalagos, and let us hear them Idalagos, it will be recalled, pursued his ornithological studies up to the pheasant stage, and for a while he was happy with the bird that, if he understood her notes aright, loved no one but himself *Ella niuna cosa amava, se non me, di che io vissi per alcuno spazio di tempo contento* (She loved nothing but me, so that I lived content for some space of time) It was a pity for the sake of his own peace of mind that he sought for perpetuity Contentment was presently broken The bird fled from "my miserable bosom"—*mio misero grembo*—to rest in another's and he did not spare tears, prayers or energy in his efforts to repossess, but he was left only with hope That was the story of Idalagos Galeone's account is substantially the same It will also be recalled that when Florio was on his travels in search of Biancofiore, he arrived in Naples and met Galeone and Fiammeta between whom, he was given to understand, there was much love On his return with his lady, Florio found a different story As he walks with Galeone, who is silent and melancholy, he inquires for Fiammetta who was once their queen

> "To which question Galeone did not immediately reply, bowed his face and regarded the earth with grief
>
> "Filocolo said to him 'O dear friend, how are you disturbed by this which, as I recall, once delighted you? What's the reason? Is Fiammetta not alive?'
>
> "Then Galeone after a sigh said 'She lives But fickle fortune has turned about on me, and thinks fit to use me so, that death would be dearer to me'
>
> "'How?' said Filocolo
>
> "To which Galeone replied 'That star whose clear light had directed the prow of my little ship that it might reach safe harbour has disappeared in a new storm, and I, wretched pilot, caught in the midst of the sea, am beaten from every side by the tempestuous waves, and the furious winds against which no nautical skill gives me ease have stripped away the sails that were once glad, and the steering-gear, and no plan is left for my safety.

It is a similitude, this of the storm-tossed ship in Galeone's florid speech, in which mediaeval poets rejoiced The sestet of one of Petrarch's finest sonnets, *La vita fugge e non s'arresta un'ora*, contains the same image, framed and made precise, and the similarity of words makes one wonder whether Petrarch had read Boccaccio, or Boccaccio Petrarch And, of course, the comparison of a lady-love with a guiding star is as old as the hills and none the worse for that We gather, then, that Galeone was adrift, and that he was liable to orate in Italian style on the fickleness of fortune and the misery of his condition His love-wreck is corroborated by the account attached to his next work which he wrote to regain the lost star

This work, in some nine thousand lines of verse and twelve standard epical books, is the *Teseide* It has been dismissed as the dullest of all the works written in Italian by Boccaccio, though it could be praised as fine sprightly Tuscan wine when compared with the ditchwater of the Latin books He went wrong from the beginning by planning the work as an epic The same story that provided Chaucer's Knight with a respectable Canterbury tale of moderate length was far too slender to be invested with the robust body and limbs of an epic We can guess why Boccaccio planned ambitiously on small resources The tale gave him an opportunity of writing with passion about love, fidelity and rivalry and so, by romanticising his own relationship with Fiammetta, of making another attempt to move her heart with ornate words Again, by producing a successful epic, the ambition and the downfall of dozens of verbose rhymers, he would establish his fame and the lady would be glad to be his servitor

He launched out on the story of Emilia, sister of the Amazon queen whom Duke Theseus of Athens brought home as spoil of war, and of the two young noblemen, Palamone and Arcita, prisoners of a war against the Thebans, and of their passion for Emilia, whom they see in a garden from their prison Gardens were a prime solace of mediaeval minds, and especially of Boccaccio's, who itemised them in almost every book he wrote, shrub by shrub and flower by flower, with fountains tossing jewels to the sun and ladies and their lovers sauntering along smooth lawns It is not a Greek world that surrounds the two young men, Palamone and

Arcita, and Emilia Amazona, and Teseo It is the mediaeval world, mediaeval Italy The minds of mediaeval men—and their lack of exact scholarship in material history does not explain it—were not concerned with being dully and meticulously archaeological after the manner of some realist novel of the nineteenth century

Thus, in Boccaccio's distended epic, the scene is the Italian mediaeval scene, and the garden is an Italian garden, and Palamone and Arcita fight for Emilia as two champions in a tourney with warriors and gods and myths of ancient Greece, Castor and Pollux and Agamemnon and Lycurgus riding to their help across the ruins of two civilisations The ruins were not tombstones, illegible and inscrutable barriers to an epoch like some giant monuments in a Central American jungle The life that had been lived before ruination, was passed on, transformed, through legends, and Virgil bloomed as a magician who could fashion wonder-working flies and horses as well as a prophet with a prayer of his own in the Mass, although as Petrarch explained to inquiring King Robert who was curious about the stonework in a certain Neapolitan grotto, he did not know that he was a stonemason, and Sant' Oviddio was reputed to have a few sovereign remedies, and the nymphs and shepherds still danced In the *Teseide*, Greek hymenals were changed into a Neapolitan wedding, with ten special stanzas to describe the bride

Antiquity was not dead to the Middle Ages, and the resurrectionists of the Renaissance had yet to come Its life, however, as displayed in twelve epic books, did not serve Boccaccio's purpose He made his attempt plain in the dedication to Fiammetta, but it is an attempt into which he did not put his whole mind and heart as he might have were the woman there, near him, in the city Her body was not present to correct, qualify, temper and carnalise from day to day the romantic, deifying impulse of his mind He did not see her as he last saw her, whenever that was and wherever she was seated on a lawn with a garland on her head, or initiating some new love-affair with a glance of her eyes He saw her, instead, as he had first seen her at Easter in San Lorenzo He was beginning the apotheosis, as Petrarch had begun his out of a vision, and by omitting experience He was losing a lover and finding an idol, for idols do not change and they can be shaped to the image of the heart.

He wrote "Although to turn my memory to vanished happiness is a certain cause of heavy sorrow in the misery in which I find myself now, it is not disagreeable to me, O cruel woman, to reproduce in my weary mind the pleasing image of your full loveliness, which, more potent than my resolve, by love and by itself made me subject when I was young in years and sense Whenever I can manage to contemplate it with all my soul, I instantly think it more heavenly than any human form" The image is a quick fount of wonder It heals his heart miraculously and he forgets bitterness "This is that Fiammetta, the light of whose lovely eyes first inflamed mine, and who once made a great part of my desires content with her deeds" Were it not for the prompt importunities with which enemy fortune surrounds him and goads him with pricks and stabs never before experienced, not once but a thousand times, "in every little moment of time", he believes that thus contemplating her image and embracing the ultimate end of his beatitude, he can die He is still her subject though she is now disdainful

The proof of his love is this book, the *Teseide* He recalls that in the days which were more happy than long, she was always desirous of hearing and sometimes of reading some story or other, especially love-stories in which men and women burned with ardency as he burned, and these she heard and read perhaps to prevent leisure from becoming a cause of more harmful thoughts, and now, as a willing servant, he has found a very ancient tale, not known to many people, and it is good because it is about love In this story one of the two young men will be himself, Boccaccio, and the young woman will be Fiammetta "Which of the two, I will not disclose, because I know you will recognise him" For she, he asserts, is more intelligent than the rest of womankind But as she may not wish to read the whole work which "seems somewhat long"—*alquanto par lunga*—he will give her a summary in the hope that she may change his misery to desired happiness It will be some relief to his pain to know that his book will be in the delicate hands into which he himself does not dare to go.

It is pathetically maudlin As a *cri de coeur*, the *Teseide* must be one of the world's most protracted. Its failure was yet another

of the pricks with which enemy fortune spurred him at every little moment But surely he was doubting its success, except as a soporific, when he proffered the summary to the lady who would surely be bored to shrieks by the original ? His entire small world was failing The father was no longer prosperous, and the step-mother had died The son had lost a patron as well as the lady In his insecure state, he turned to study of Canon Law and the classics, and he made journeys, one perhaps to Florence, perhaps more than one, and did not stay The restlessness that would afflict his life like a recurring fever, had begun Finally, he removed himself from Naples, but he did not stray very far He was tethered by ropes he had woven out of the substance of his own soul

In those days the countryside was like a green sea outside the walls of mediaeval cities, a sea that sometimes tided up the very streets Beyond battlemented moated walls were the green fields, the olive-groves and the vineyards, the villas, and the huts and cabins of the labourers There stood outside Naples, the distance of a short walk, a shrine and a church dedicated to Our Lady among a few houses, all on the high land that had been raised by volcanic fires This was Piedigrotta It stood above the grotto of Posilipo in countryside that is tunnelled with caves Looking south-west, one saw the long green hill of Posilipo, spined with trees, shouldering its way down to the sea where the islet of Nisida, " abounding in conies ", rose from the waters, and beyond that, the sea and its islands Piedigrotta was very different to the humming streets of Naples One could rest quietly there, near the tomb of Virgil, and dedicate one's days to study and writing in that tranquillity which Giovanni Boccaccio regarded as essential to the business of the mind

But he could not find repose He was querulous, complaining, grumbling In a way he had been spoiled by his ten or twelve years in the city among the women, at the tournaments and the festivals, at the games and the Courts of Love, the banquets and the picnics He could not quickly attune himself to the slow oxen-like tread of the hours in the hills when for years he had found his life filled, almost without his knowing He could walk, full of unease, along the hill-slopes among the trees and arrive at a summit to see, far below him, the level blue sea shining across the

Gulf of Pozzuoli up to the sands of that hilly coast where Baia sheltered But Baia! it was now fit for the curses of the prophets and a few blasting sonnets Here is one

Perir possa il tuo nome, Baia, e il loco,
Boschi selvaggi le tue piagge sieno,
E le tue fonti diventin veneno,
Nè vi si bagni alcun molto nè poco
In pianto si converta ogni tuo gioco,
E suspetto diventi il tuo bel seno
A' naviganti, il nuvolo e'l sereno
In te riversin fumo solfo e fuoco,
Che hai corrotto la piu casta mente
Che fosse in donna colla tua licenza,
Se il ver mi disser gli occhi, non e guari
Là onde io sempre viverò dolente,
Come ingannato da folle credenza,
Or foss' io stato cieco non ha guari![1]

Malediction eased his soul momentarily but not completely, and there was always the return to the country house, to the room where he would sit and read and scribble for hours and far into the night, or crouch to contemplate the image he enshrined in his memory, or rather in his imagination, allowing it to take body and sustenance from all that he desired in womanly beauty and in the beauty that was not of his world, until the reality itself seemed unworthy He worked, but he worked, as he said in a letter, just to keep himself busy It was his escape—that and the resilience of the Florentine humour that could tickle a man to smile wryly at himself The letter itself is a curiosity It was written in the Neapolitan dialect to one of the Bardi, Francesco di Messer Alessandro, a merchant residing at Gaeta, as though by rendering the sounds of the Neapolitan words he could get his friend to feel something of the crude world in which he now

[1] May your name perish, Baia, and the place, may your beaches become savage woods, may your fountains become poison, and may there be no bathing there great or small, may every game of yours turn to weeping, and may your fair bay become suspect to sailors, may foul and fine weather pour smoke, sulphur and fire on you, who have corrupted the most chaste mind that ever was in woman with your licence, if my eyes uttered the truth not long ago There where sorrowing I shall now live ever, as deceived by foolish faith, Oh that I had been blind not long ago

lived He was being rusticated, therefore he would gabble rustically, he the cit from the banks of the Arno

> "Here Abbot Jay Boccace is beached, as you know, and he lets neither the day or night slip by for nothing but scribbling I've told him that often enough and I've wished to cheer up the good man At this he laughs and says to me 'My son, be off, and run away to school and play with the youngsters, for I do this for the wish to learn' And Judge Barillo tells me about him that he knows the devil of a lot more than Scaccinopole of Sorrento I don't know why he does it but by the Madonna of the Grotta it depresses me"

In other letters he complained about the house in which he lived, the country food, his clothes, the country folk and their gabble which was quite unlike the badinage of young ladies and gentlemen at Baia But he was not an unsociable man or a snob And one must see him rubbing elbows with the workers in the olive-groves and the vineyards, hearing their stories and their improvised songs and taking part in, say, the harvest festival when Piedigrotta was filled, in honour of Our Lady, with folk from Naples and from the hills round about who shouted and sang uproariously, their heads wreathed with flowers and fruit and ribbons, and played all kinds of noisy instruments in the Grotto of Posilipo He must have liked that festival It abounded in vitality, fantastic colour, strange faces and voices, moreover, it was in honour of the Mother of God to whom that half-flame of his soul paid fervent devotion He could have found a haven in Piedigrotta, perhaps, after a time, but he did not get time His father, widowed, lonely in the house in Florence, called him home

PART THREE

SUMMER

Courtesy ! Courtesy ! Courtesy ! I call
But from no quarter comes there a reply
They who should show her, hide her, wherefore I
And whoso needs her, ill must us befall
Greed with his hook hath ta'en men one and all,
And murdered every grace that dumb doth lie
Whence, if I grieve, I know the reason why,
From you, great men, to God I make my call
For you my mother Courtesy have cast
So low beneath your feet she there must bleed,
Your gold remains, but you're not made to last
Of Eve and Adam we are all the seed
Able to give and spend, you hold wealth fast
Ill is the nature that rears such a breed !

Translated by JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS *from the Italian of* FOLGORE DA SAN GEMIGNANO

I

Là non si ride mai, se non di rado,
La casa oscura, e muta, e molto trista
Me ritiene e riceve mal mio grado
—*L'Ameto*

Here one never laughs, or only seldom, the dark, quiet,
woebegone house holds me and takes my loathing step

FLORENCE WAS UNDERGOING ONE OF THOSE BOUTS OF INTENSE political excitement which are as much a part of her history as her creativeness in painting and letters, and her shrewdness in commerce The causes of it cannot have been unknown to Giovanni Boccaccio, while he did desire the tranquillity he considered necessary to the student and the man of letters, he never regarded the ivory tower as a suitable habitation He would have heard, while he was in the south, of the famine that had come to his town, and of the great flood of the Arno in 1333, that rose in some districts to twelve cubits on the walls, destroyed dwellings and bridges, and brought about an increase of building The work on Santa Reparata was resumed, and Giotto had begun his campanile that would in time be one of the city's chief glories He would have heard, too, of the trouble about Lucca which was to help in making the first years of his return as tranquil as bedlam

The causes of the political excitement were mainly money, Lucca and class-warfare After the Venetian default which had cost so much, Mastino della Scala offered to sell Lucca to the Florentines simply because he could not do anything else with it The Florentines proceeded to throw good money after good, but with much more caution and cunning They paid Mastino partly with florins which might never be recovered, and partly with pledges, those acts of trust by the trustless, which could be torn up They had a competitor for the bargain, however, in the Pisans between whose city and Lombardy lay Lucca on the line of communications The Pisans were shrewd and they were fighters as well Knowing that as far as finance went, they would not get the better of the richer Florentines, they took to force, and so the Florentine

deputies who were despatched to take possession of the purchase found that they had a war on their hands The war ended in defeat after a bloody battle on October 2, 1341

All through Florence, the citizens murmured and spoke against their governors, accusing them of bad counsel and avarice Lucca was only one cause of their excited discontent The failure of the banking houses and the loss to merchants who had deposited their florins with the Bardi and the Peruzzi raised enough blind wrath for riots Taxes had increased Moreover, the big men jockeyed to get control of government, while the artisans and the other workers shouted against such government as there was In between them, the middle-class rich folk who held most of the power were squeezed and intimidated It is at such times that democracies often mistakenly think of the strong man as the sovereign solver of problems The Florentine magnates thought of one,—and regretted the thought with blood and tears

He was Walter of Brienne, Duke of Athens, a choice specimen of mediaeval adventurer, whose blood was French though he was born in Greece His title was only a sound, for the duchy had been taken from his father, and all he possessed was Lecce, in the Kingdom of Naples, with whose rulers he was connected by marriage He had been in Florence previously, as lieutenant of the Duke of Calabria, in 1326, when he had behaved himself sufficiently well to be recalled sixteen years later as a likely saviour of a troubled commonwealth The magnates thought of him thus, as a saviour They must have been very desperate, because the dark little man with the long scraggy beard was as hard as nails, unscrupulous, greedy, difficult to talk to, high-and-mighty in his replies when he gave any, and a bully It would have been a problem for the Florentines to choose worse Desperate, they conferred on him the title of Captain of Justice and command of the militia, and at once he began to manifest the traits of the lone strong man. He aimed to become ruler of Tuscany as the Angevins were of Naples.

The magnates helped him. They conspired in association with debt-stricken citizens, among them the Peruzzi, to offer him the very thing he wanted: absolute rule, and thereby they hoped, with his expected aid, to "free themselves from debt by enslaving

their country", as Machiavelli acidly puts it Walter accepted their help and acted according to his own plans He had the unfortunate men beheaded who had made a mess of the Lucca business, he exiled many citizens and mulcted many more His Burgundian and Neapolitan cavalry were really fifth-column propagandists, and they swarmed through the taverns where the Duke's health was drunk lavishly at the expense of the city revenues and his praise broadcast

The Florentines, and especially the womenfolk, found the French habits and fashions very fascinating, and they adopted them, much to the disgust of men like Villani Walter's coat of arms was painted over many a door as a sign of collaboration And to show his deep sense of religion, he elected to live at the convent of the Friars Minor of Santa Croce, who had no choice in the matter In a little more than a month of activities, the Florentine fruit was ripe for falling into the squeezing hand, and it fell neatly on September 8, 1342 On that day, in the Piazza della Signoria, amid popular clamour led by agents, the Duke was made lord of Florence for life

The strong man had commenced his absolute rule, and he set about putting friends and foes in order His rule lasted till the following summer In those ten months he gave the thirsting Florentines a draught of such real strong government as drove them to forget their differences for a brief time He deprived of their reimbursements the merchants who had advanced money for the war for Lucca, he increased the old gate-tolls on provisions and created extra ones, and naturally, the cost of living went up, and he taxed more heavily This was his light work He also had magnates and citizens imprisoned, tortured and executed That his external government might be as strong as his internal, his troops ranged the countryside to beat and despoil the farmers and labourers But inside the city, the numerous plebeians needed to be pacified, and this he did with festivals and gifts of money. Nevertheless, he reaped a portion of the reward that falls almost inevitably to strong men

Four or five separate conspiracies were started against him, and when, in alarm, he increased the imprisonments and intensified the torturings, the conspiracies merged. The Feast of Saint Anne, July 26, 1343, was marked for a general uprising. Florence came

out on that day to fight in the barricaded streets with stones and tiles against the Duke's cavalry which, in the narrow ways, was overwhelmed and disarmed A mob raced to the Palazzo Vecchio where the Duke was besieged and men cried for his blood Something had to satisfy the anger of Florence and so a few of his creatures were pushed out to be torn in pieces by hands and teeth Therefore, he surrendered on terms and was taken quietly out of the city for escape, but he managed to get away with four hundred thousand florins and much booty It had been a very costly ten months

This was the quiet Florence in which Giovanni Boccaccio lived the first few years of his return It was not to be any quieter for a while Two months later, in September again, the struggle between the magnates and the citizens for governmental power became open war The magnates were attacked in their fortified palaces and towers, and position after position was taken till the Bardi alone, in the street of their name and on the Ponte Vecchio and the Ponte Rubaconte, were left in the fight Their houses were burned and their towers rammed down The city was filled with smoke and the thunder of toppling walls and the cries of the people who had fought the Duke for liberty and would not now lose it to their fellows

And this was not yet the tranquillity so necessary to the man of letters He had left the city as a boy and he had returned as a man, a stranger almost, who had to settle into a new way of life Adaptation meant innumerable subtle changes of mind and of habit, and changes meant uneasiness and lack of serenity He was transplanted, back to the mother soil, with a displacement and stirring of the roots of him who had blossomed exotically in Naples Now there was to be fruiting, rich, varied, juicy, and not so oversweet and cloying His years in Florence were to be the most fruitful of his life. But how did he adapt himself? We can be curious only in vain Did he fight in the streets? Did he go shouting with the people behind the standards and heave stones and trip the hampered cavalry? Or did he hide himself in his father's house or fly down to Certaldo till the troubles passed? We have no answer

But he was busy, writing and studying This was the continual activity that gave his life unity through all the changes. There was, in fact, nothing better to be done in his new circumstances,

in that Florentine house with his old widowed father whom he depicted as a miser scraping off slivers of gold with his nails There was loneliness There was gloom There was incompatibility He had had the laughter, inane though it must often have been, and the gaiety of the south, and the braggart colouring of landscape and people, but here in Florence were the grey and brown houses, the squabbles, and the intolerable chaffering of business

Even the sunlight was different, for it was untouched by the sea and the floating dust of the volcanic fires, while the winter could be cruel with the winds shooting icy arrows from the Apennines One cowered in a cloak in the draughty house over a handful of charcoal A sonnet of his sketches in swift black and white, the expanse of the winter landscape that oppressed his soul which burned, uncooled, with the old fire of love he cherished morbidly he prays for water but there is nothing except ice, deadness and cold The picture is unusually precise Not many of his sonnets and not much of his shorter verse can be read for pictures drawn with particular, vivid touches He generalised where we would prefer particularities The sonnet runs

Vetro son fatti i fiumi ed i ruscelli,
Gli serra di fuor ora la freddura,
Vestiti sono i monti e la pianura
Di bianca neve, e nudi gli arbuscelli,
L'erbette morte, e non cantan gli uccelli
Per la stagion contraria a lor natura,
Borea soffia, ed ogni creatura
Sta chiusa per lo freddo ne' suoi ostelli
Ed io, dolente solo, ardo ed incendo
In tanto fuoco, che quel di Vulcano
A rispetto non è ch'una favilla
E giorno e notte chiero a giunta mano,
Alquanto d'acqua al mio signor piangendo,
Nè ne posso impetrar sola una stilla [1]

[1] The rivers and streams are made glass, the freezing weather locks them away, the mountains and the plain are clothed in white snow, and the trees are bare, the grass is dead, and the birds do not sing because the season is against their nature, the north wind blows, and every creature remains shut in their byres against the cold And I, sorrowing alone, burn and blaze in such fire that Vulcan's in comparison is but a spark And night and day with joined hands I implore [*chiero* from *cherere*, probably of Provencal derivation] a little water for my lord [love], weeping, nor can I obtain even one drop

The season was against his nature, but he had his way of escape This was into the world of the woods, the fantastical indestructible woods of Arcady, where, in sunlight of his own lordly creation, he could set the nymphs and the dryads running in laughter beneath the trees, and let lovers sigh and mourn and Naples be remembered He completed the *Filocolo*, with its story of metamorphosed Idalagos, and of Galeone who had been forsaken by Fiammetta

Then with the ghost of the Poet dead in Ravenna spreading over him, he turned his hand to *L'Ameto*, also known as *La Commedia delle Ninfe Fiorentine* which, with its mixture of prose and verse and its allegory, was modelled on the *Vita Nuova* By taking the model, he testified to the power of the Poet over him, and he also showed, by contrast, how different he was He was utterly unable to follow his master in moral and intellectual asceticism He could not lift his gaze from the figures and the trees in the attractive foreground or middle distance to contemplate the far horizon, and above it, the sun That would have implied a certain denial of self, and a denial of the desires whose satisfaction ministers to self Loving was giving to be sure, but he could not give without reserve Although *L'Ameto* is a pagan allegory, a pastoral romance, he does try to resolve it into a glorification of the Christian virtues, but the appearance belies the principle, the moral comes lamely after a glorification of the flesh It is all sensuous, a record of lovely women in serene Italian landscapes, and desire prowls like a wild animal wandering from his fastness into the pastures and the vineyards Boccaccio's own life comes through, his birth, his love and his desolation

It is Arcady, and to Arcady one must return to get some of the flavour of the book, this comedy of the Florentine nymphs In a study of Torquato Tasso's *Aminta*, Carducci sketches and evokes in a paragraph the type of landscape and of feeling with which the writers of pastoral romances worked

"We are on the outskirts of a wood. The tall and scattered trees let the rays of the sun through, which, by its light, discovers range beyond range of distant mountains. The green shaded land is free for the grazing beasts and for the meetings and colloquies of the shepherds. Here indeed is open countryside with glimpses of cots and of herds. Nearby, the waters of a fountain pour gurgling

from a brimming basin, or here is the bank of a river that finds its origin in the urn of a god to flow from afar and spread marshily among the canes and poplars Are we in Arcady, either on the banks of the Po where Phaeton once fell and where the Heliadae weep or in some other part of this antique land of Saturn and Janus? It does not matter

"Upon the scene enter two women or two men of a different epoch Their names, their clothes, their manners are Greek, and Greek are the gods they invoke, Greek the religion whereby they celebrate the sacrifices and make vows Although these first characters and the others we shall see, appear to be shepherds, hunters, husbandmen, ploughmen, and sometimes sailors, they are not of the common sort, for the firstcomers in the story are children or relations of Pan or of the gods proper to the district or native to the river, and with them in the story are mingled beings of a higher order half-gods, satyrs and nymphs"

This, although Messer Giovanni chose the Florentine countryside, *ove il Mugnone muore con le sue onde*—"where the Mugnone river dies with its waters", as he said in a glorious Dantean line, Milton caught the cadence, too

"*Smooth-sliding Mincius, crown'd with vocal reeds*"—

this is the classic land for Ameto, who is a rough hunter He is the barbarian in Arcady, uncouth nature that needs to be civilised In his hunting, he finds himself among seven nymphs, falls in love with one, and is adopted into their company for regeneration By a fountain in a field they sit among the flowers the nymphs in their coloured dresses, *rosato*, *sanguigno*, *purpurea*, *bianco*, *verde*, and *oro*, which tint the field with its enamelled petallings into a piece of manuscript illumination The colours were intended to have mystical significance, but Boccaccio is lost in the disparate ecstasies of the senses Ameto regards, scrutinizes, distinguishes and confirms in his mind the wonderful physical loveliness of each nymph He is like an old rake at a mannequin parade And there is the inevitable story-telling with uncouth Ameto as arbiter

It is an odd scene and it has an odd conclusion, and one cannot help glimpsing the round face of Giovanni through the coloured

mist of words It is deadly still afternoon, with shepherds drowsy and their pipes gone to a lazy cadence and a silence The cigal chirps monotonously The nymphs, figures of allegory, remote from us in their mythical origins and lives, close in their sunlit flesh, recount with detachment the stories of their scabrous loves, seductions and infidelities, while Ameto, like the old Adam, sits among them and itemises amorously each separate delight of their anatomies It is an image of Boccaccio himself, with hairy-footed Pan nudging his Christian elbow These frank, loose-living young ladies are ultimately revealed as the four cardinal and the three theological virtues Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance, with Faith, Hope and Charity The revelation is not made until, towards the close when Lia, Ameto's beloved and the symbol of Faith, has told a boring inflated tale, seven swans and seven storks appear and battle in the air, with victory for the swans Next, there is thunder, a pillar of fire, and a voice, the voice of Venus, chaste and christened

> "Not that Venus whom the stupid in their inordinate concupiscence call goddess, but she from whom true, just and holy loves descend among mortals"

It is God in *tre persone* speaking with Dantean cadences and in Dantean phrase

> Io son luce del cielo unica, e trina,
> Principio, e fine di ciascuna cosa
>
> I am the light of heaven, one and threefold,
> The beginning and the end of everything

Ameto's hour of regeneration has come, and he is bathed in a fountain, which is baptism, and the allegory is completed with his hymn which again echoes Dante

> O Diva luce, quale in tre persone,
> Ed una essenza il ciel governi, e'l mondo
> Con giusto amore, ed eterna ragione,
> Dando legge alle stelle, ed al ritondo

Moto del Sole, principe di quelle,
Siccome discerniamo in questo fondo,
Con quello ardor, che piu caldo si svelle
Dell petto mio, insurgo a ringraziarti,
E teco insieme queste donne belle [1]

The ladies are thanked one by one for their services, and among them, Fiammetta, " the most pleasing of all ", who is a priestess of Vesta and represents Hope Her contribution to the story-telling was the tale of her nocturnal surprise by Galeone ! There never was such catechising

The entire *Ameto* seems an exceedingly curious device for impersonating the Christian virtues who are, by their own confessions, ladies of easy virtue One young nymph, Agapes, who symbolises Charity, tells the story of her marriage to an old, fond, foolish and inefficient bag-of-bones with a realist and robust mass of detail, of the kind that was common, it may be added, in much mediaeval literature A parallel to her shocking tale,—shocking, that is, to us who prefer the infinitely more potent euphemisms—may be read in the late eighteenth century Irish poem, *Cúrt an Mheadhon-oidhche*, the Midnight Court of the schoolmaster, Brian Merriman, from which I borrow just a few lines in Ussher's translation

Was there ever a fine girl fresh and fair
Who would not grow grey with grief and care
To bed with a bundle of skin and bone
As cold and stiff as a stick or stone,
Who would scarcely lift the lid from the dish
To know was it flesh or fowl or fish ?

Such was the fate of Agapes who, of course, tricked and cuckolded the old man who had " eyes more raw than white, hidden under cavernous brows thick with long hairs," and " forever oozing," and " ears pendulous " like a donkey's, and gapped teeth, rotten and rust-coloured A pretty picture ! No wonder, then, that the development of the allegory by the nymphs is obscure, and the

[1] O Holy Light which in three persons and one essence rules the world with just love and eternal reason, giving laws to the stars and to the round orbit of the sun, their chief, as we perceive from this centre-point, with that ardour which so hotly is drawn from my breast, I rise to thank you, and with you as well these lovely ladies

final revelation almost gratuitous Moreover, Boccaccio's inventories of the nymphs' physical attractions " succeed in being more refined and more provocative", as Carducci said, " than are similar descriptions in the larger works"

Certainly, as a disciple of the master who wrote the *Vita Nuova*, Boccaccio succeeded in being very different He was different because he did not possess the spiritual eagle-eye that perceived the summit and the eyrie before a wing was stirred for flight Dante's *Vita Nuova*, and especially the *Divine Comedy*, ascend towards the final illumination by and through details that are, every one of them, both things and symbols in preordained place They are works of asceticism in method as well as in mind Boccaccio, with a writer's eye as desirous of details as King Robert's for pretty women, could not accomplish such asceticism He was beguiled by the appearance and forgot the deeper realities, until the last moment He was unable to see the things themselves, and through them, at the same time Hence his lingering and often charming pictures of the nymphs Hence his joy in the colours of the dresses which lost their liturgical significance almost as soon as he looked at them

Why did the whole scene, artificial in setting and speech, and allegorical in its character, appeal to the realist Boccaccio ? This was not the countryside he knew, at least, he did not know it in this guise, and the mythical folk were not the people he met on his walks around Florence, or in Certaldo, or on his journeys up and down the peninsula He should have known the people He did know them The *Decameron* is alive with their robustness, their earthly speech, their rather cruel wit, and, in a word, with their daylight reality But he turned from them, as, say, Chaucer did not turn in England One must suppose that apart from his desire to work in the mediaeval convention of allegory, he sought Arcady for escape, and carried with him on his back his own load of mundane troubles His life was in transition, but this antique life, the fields where speech was stately and divine presences flickered through the green light of the groves, was perpetual and held beauty beyond change But he could not contemplate it without feeling more deeply the contrast of his own days

All the time the nymphs were entertaining Ameto, the figure of Boccaccio was stretched somewhere in the picture as in an old engraving, partly hidden by a tree-trunk on thick grass and flowers to hear in dreams the gay and doubtful love-tales That was the afternoon, when a man drowsed like a lizard on a sunny wall The sun goes down the sky Now, as the twilight thickens and the shepherds drive their flocks homewards and the birds, falling silent, leave the cooling air to the hither-and-thithering bats, and the grasshoppers are mute as the crickets begin, and the evening star shines, now the lone watcher observes the departure of the goodly company and he too rises stiffly to go He yawns, shrugs and knuckles his eye-sockets, and then loathly follows a path that leads him through hedges to a lane that still seems warm like a closed room

Workers are going home and he treads on the grassy marges to avoid the slow white oxen, their mouths dripping after the evening draught of water from a well or a stream Good night Good night A bat sidles crazily overhead He trudges on to Florence under the falling dew by fields and hedges where the fire-flies are like crushed handfuls of stars, slips through a city-gate with an abrupt salutation to the watch, and enters among the houses He has been abroad with magic all the afternoon, he returns to gloom, to a surly eating of supper,—and then out come the candles, the paper and the ink, and he pens bitter lines like those that close the *Ameto*

Quivi beltà, gentilezza, e valore,
Leggiadri motti, esemplo di virtute,
Somma piacevolezza con amore
Quivi disio movente huomo a salute,
Quivi tanto di bene e d'allegrezza,
Quanto uom ci puote aver, quivi compiute
Le delizie mondane, e lor dolcezza
Si vedeva e sentiva, ed ov'io vado
Malinconia ed eterna gramezza
Lì non si ride mai se non di rado,
La casa oscura e muta, e molto trista
Me ritiene, e riceve mal mio grado,

Dove la cruda ed orribile vista
D'un vecchio freddo, ruvido, ed avaro
Ogn'ora con affanno piu m'attrista
Sì che l'aver veduto il giorno caro,
E ritornare a così fatto ostello,
Rivolge ben quel dolce in tristo amaro
Oh quanto si può dir felice quello,
Che se in libertà tutto possiede !
Oh lieto vivere, e piu ch'altro bello ! [1]

Boccaccio was unhappy Adaptation to his new environment was an emotional strain He was a transplant from Naples where he had been more or less free in a hot-house society, to Florence where his activities were more or less restricted as well as encouraged to hardiness by paternal watchfulness, by a stricter code of development and by an atmosphere in which business came before pleasure He had been pruned of friends who, for so companionable a man, were almost a necessary part of his being

But we should be wrong to accept his statement of his unhappiness just in the terms in which he stated it The terms must be qualified It was his duty by convention to cultivate the melancholy of the forlorn lover, and he performed his duty manfully, though tediously, and somewhat at the expense of his father's reputation Was old Boccaccio the complete, cold, grasping and uncouth miser that the son depicted ? If he were uncouth, how did he manage to travel so extensively as a banker's agent, and move among the great who were not uncouth ? If he were completely avaricious, how did he pay for his son's gay days in Naples, first at business which was a failure, and then at Canon Law, which was not a success ? He married again, this cold man, sometime early during Giovanni's new sojourn in Florence The lady was Bice di Ubaldino de' Bostichi who brought a fat dowry which enabled the father to buy a portion of a house in the Sant' Ambrogio quarter for the son

[1] There, there was beauty, nobility and worth, gay words, virtuous example, and the greatest pleasure, with love There, was desire moving man to salvation There, such goodness and delight as man can possess, there, in perfection were worldly joys, and their sweetness one saw and felt. And here where I go,—melancholy and eternal misery Here one never laughs, or only seldom The dark, quiet, woebegone house holds me and takes my loathing step Here the harsh and horrible sight of an old man, cold, uncouth and avaricious, grieves me every hour the more with distress. So that, to have seen the precious day and to return to such a hostel, thoroughly transforms that delight to sorrow O how happy can one call him who possesses all in liberty O delightful life, better than any other !

Giovanni was master of himself again, but it is safe to assume that the liberty he glorified did not really diminish his unhappiness There was, we may infer, a profounder cause than domestic gloom for his unhappiness, though he himself, as he sat to cultivate melancholy and to survey his fortune, could not have defined the cause It is doubtful if it can be defined at all The cause lay in the ancient tension between the claims of the soul and the claims of the body, and the area of activity where he most perceived and felt, felt rather than perceived the tension, was sex It was a conflict that raised problems of conscience for him There would have been little or no conflict had he not been living in a Christian form of civilisation, had he not been in tacit as well as in formal acceptance of a philosophy which insisted on a full view of man's nature and destiny He could have eased or resolved the conflict by rejection of the philosophy, or by choice of one of the two elements of the duality, or by personal affirmation

But he did not reject Rejection would have demanded total denial of the world in which he lived unreason, insanity, and perhaps persecution would have been his lot, had he preached, and he was not a man to keep silent Choice of either the way of the body exclusively or the way of the soul exclusively would have implied an inhuman view of humanity, bringing him to sad bestiality, or to the grim self-torturings of the northern Manichean sects But he did affirm He affirmed formally but not with all the energies of his being He knew there was a just order of man's powers, appetites and qualities which required some asceticism, or at least control, as well as the help which is not of this world There was conflict because of disorder, not because there was any essential enmity such as the Albigensians and other sects had postulated He knew that the very power, sexuality,—not necessarily love though he confused it with love—which could interweave itself in its own pattern into all the relations of men and women, destructively as well as creatively, openly as well as in charming subtle disguise, was guarded by the grace of a sacrament instituted by Christ himself But he never married He had not even that possible form of control which might have steadied his inclinations oscillating between the extreme of rakishness and the extreme of wild self-mortification

He was, then, an unsettled man. He probably could not have told exactly what he wanted—except Fiammetta of course—and what he loathed—except the world of commerce that surrounded him But he was writing and writing, with the shadow of the Poet over him as exemplar, and over the city with the taunt of greatness unhonoured and scorned He felt something like winter, but the blossoming summer was in truth on his mind, and the next work, after the *Ameto*, to which he turned, consisted of four thousand lines of verse in *terza rima*

II

These are the arcs, the trophies I erect,
That fortify thy name against old age,
And these thy sacred virtues must protect
Against the Dark, and Time's consuming rage
—Samuel Daniel

IF WE THINK OF MESSER GIOVANNI SITTING AT NIGHT IN A ROOM in his half-house in the Sant' Ambrogio quarter at the east end of Florence, away from the noises of the crammed old city, his candles lighted, his books spread on the table before him, and his head bent as he writes, we get something like the materials for a similitude of his own mind in operation He is conscious, brightly conscious, of what he writes on the paper which, for the moment, is his centre of the universe, while the books, his own shadow like a fresco faded to outline on the wall behind him, the window, the darkness stirring in the corners of the room as the candle-flames waver, are suggestions of the world in which his body is set But around his mind as it hesitates in the choice of words or beams steadily over the phrases that must be manipulated into the interlocked scheme of the *terza rima*, there are also shadows, dim stirrings, suggestions of the world in which his spirit moves

There, enshrined, hangs the image of Maria, an idol that is fresher and lovelier than was the face of the lady in San Lorenzo It is a self-creating thing, this idol, that draws on his desires to embody them and give them a unifying symbol as their end and sanction But because it is the image of a woman once real to him, with a body that could be possessed, the idol still has power to stir and to make him ache with discontent The worship and the aching pass over into the verse which is deft and pleasant And the verse itself is qualified at every moment and pause by the insistent echoes of the great work that lies, copied in his own hand, among the books on the table, and even the echoes bear with them the clarity, the music, the magic and the movement like the circling of a constellation the shadow of Dante Alighieri is more real than the paper or the walls, and it is the light of the *Divine Comedy* that illuminates the creating mind of Messer Giovanni Boccaccio

He, too, is writing a vision, also in *terza rima*, with a design, symbols, and even with phrases like those in the vision of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven He, too, will have a Beatrice, guiding the poet to salvation through snares and diversions

He addresses his lady

> Muove nuovo disio la nostra mente,
> Donna gentile, a volervi narrare
> Quel che Cupido graziosamente
> In vision li piacque di mostrare
> All'alma mia per voi, bella, ferita
> Con quel piacer che ne' vostri occhi appare [1]

The *Amorosa Visione* begins It consists of fifty sections, each one containing twenty-nine *terzine* with a verse as a *chiusa*, that is, four thousand four hundred lines in all To make the task more difficult, and to make the entire poem a *senhal* for the name of the lady to whom it was dedicated, Boccaccio constricted his mind with a plaything like an acrostic It was a secret and thorough dedication of his efforts and it probably amused the lady The acrostic is solved by reading the first letters of the first verse of every terzina The result is a mere bagatelle just two sonnets addressed to Madonna Maria, and one *ballata* addressed to the dear readers ! It is to be noted that even in his paroxysms of ingenuity he did not forget his readers Moreover, the name "Madonna Maria" is found from the initials of the twelfth to the twenty-second *terzine* of the tenth *capitolo* and "Fiamma" from the twenty-fifth to the thirty-first of the thirteenth *capitolo* And heavens only knows what numerical significance was in his choice !

The first sonnet which calls Maria the poet's lady concludes thus

> Cara Fiamma, per cui il cor è caldo,
> Que' chi vi manda questa visione,
> Giovanni è di Boccaccio da Certaldo [2]

[1] A new desire moves our mind, O noble lady, to tell you that which Cupid was graciously pleased to show in a vision to my soul, wounded by you, lovely lady, with that delight which appears in your eyes

[2] Dear Fiamma, for whom the heart is warm,
He who sends you this vision
Is Giovanni di Boccaccio of Certaldo

The story of the vision is simple The poet, thinking of his love, falls asleep and dreams that a lady appears who guides him to a castle There are two entrances one, the way of Good, to the left up a narrow stairway which leads to eternal happiness, and the other, to the right, which opens on to a garden and a *festa* While she is debating with him which entrance he should take, he inclining to the garden with the plea that it is harm only to follow evil and forsake good, though it be worldly good, she to the stairway, two girls, one in white, and the other in red, come and lead him by the hand to wherever he desires to go They bring him to a large hall where painted scenes show the triumphs of Wisdom, Fame, Love and Fortune He has chosen the world All right ! This is the world He will enjoy it In the triumphs he sees Homer, Virgil, Horace, Sallust, Galen, Apuleius, Martial, and Dante who " wrote with superb style of the sovereign good, pain and mighty death ", and who is now crowned among the poets

> Gloria fu delle muse mentre visse,
> Nè qui rifiutan d'esser sue consorte [1]

And Boccaccio sees also Electra, Baal, Paris, Absalom, Brutus, Jason, Hannibal, Cleopatra, Lancelot, Guinivere, Tristram, Iseult, and Fiammetta, with Solomon, Charlemagne, and King Robert of Naples and old Boccaccio as examples of the gold-grubbers who pare down mountains of the metal with their fingernails Antiquity and the Middle Ages pass as if there were no real ruins, no slow disintegration or crash of kingdoms and empires to lie in dividing hills between the times of old Boccaccio and Homer The continuity of western civilisation was affirmed

But—and here we digress to the miser's topic—it was all very well for the son to flaunt his father as an exemplar of avarice ! How did the son live, who sat there in a room in candlelight to write and study and lead the life of a man of letters ? What was the source of the golden grease which even scornful poets must use to make the days slide by ? These are questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily for lack of evidence We do know something of Giovanni's tastes, however, and we know a little, too, of

[1] He was the Muses' glory while he lived,
Nor do they here refuse to be his peers.

his sources of income He did not care for rough living, of which he had got a taste while rusticating at Piedigrotta, and he did like sumptuous surroundings—who does not?—of which he had had a share during his youth in Naples

These are extremes Like every man who contemplates the world and its goods occasionally without devoting his soul to them, he had his golden mean In a letter which he was to write some ten years later to the secretary of that chosen patron, Niccolò Acciaiuoli, he protested that all he required was a clean room, a decent bed, quietness, a table set with good linen and plain food, and respectable wine Now, while he was in Naples before the great bank-crash, he was assured of at least that much by his avaricious father's liberality After the bank-crash, things were different, but were they so different as between affluence and grievous poverty? For instance, during the two years from November, 1339, Giovanni Boccaccio had a lease, got by his father for him, of the produce of the *podere* of the church of San Lorenzo in Capua, and this, bought for twenty-six florins, and therefore worth considerably more, had to be collected by Giovanni himself who was thus obliged to account for grain, the vintage, the olives, swine, figs and what-not Next, when the lease had ended, he came to Florence, and met Niccolò Acciaiuoli, then present in the city as an ambassador from King Robert to assist in the war against Pisa for Lucca

It is not too far a flight of fancy to imagine Niccolò, the patron, putting his hand in his purse for Giovanni, the poet Niccolò was in the mood of giving He employed Giovanni as one of the lawyers who helped to draw up the deeds whereby Florence was endowed with the great Certosa near the village of Galuzzo, some three miles from the city gate, Porta Romana This Carthusian monastery would stand, huge and battlemented among the olives and the cypresses on the hill of Montaguto between the junction of the two streams, the Greve and the Ema, it would be adorned in paint, stone and wood, by Tuscan artists, and its crypts would contain the elaborate tombs of Niccolò himself and of his family Giovanni's contribution to the deeds was probably linguistic, and we may be sure that he received a fee. Finally, he lived in a house in the Sant' Ambrogio quarter, that had been bought for

him by the same avaricious father who figured with King Robert in the Triumph of Fortune,—which we left Giovanni contemplating and to which we return

The moral of the triumphs was the transience of worldly things It was a moral beloved of didactic poets and all the preachers, chiefly because it is eternally true, and also because it could be tagged on to almost any bit of verse or sermon. But it does not go home too deeply into the heart of Messer Giovanni Just as he is making up his mind to follow his lady guide up the steep stairway to eternal happiness, he catches sight of a most wonderful garden At once he is undone

Gardens were his joy, just as they were the joy of the civilisation in which he lived. It was in their gardens among the greens, the melons and the flowers, and in the shade of the fruit trees, that tired artisans of the city, men like Pucci, took their evening repose and conversed with their friends, for it was their habit, as it is still the habit in many old towns even in chillier northern countries like Ireland and Britain, to live out in the open air, to sit on benches or stools and sills, rather than in the dark houses In gardens of the grander kind, men and women walked and made love and had some of the adventures that spice hundreds of mediaeval tales There were many gardens in the tale of Florio and Biancofiore From their prison window, Palamone and Arcita spied lovely Emilia sauntering in a garden and so fell to love and enmity and death Scattered through Boccaccio's works there are descriptions of gardens, spacious, ornamented with marble works, well tended, irrigated by streams that soar from fountains and turn mills

He found savour even in listing details, as in *L'Ameto* There was interlaced syringa, healthy sage with abundant heads of pale leaves, sweet rosemary, betony that is full of many virtues, fragrant majoram, cold rue, tall mustard that is enemy to the nose, wild thyme gripping the earth with the slenderest of arms, curly basil that imitates cloves with its scent at certain seasons, chamomile, mallow, dill, savory, fennel, parsley, meadowsweet, traveller's joy, wild rose and pheasant's eye narcissus, hyacinths, and daisies There were palms, too, laurels, cypresses "seeking the sky with their summits", firs, orange trees, figs that the crows watch, chestnuts, oaks, pale olives, walnuts, tall elms festooned with vines,

plums, hazelnuts and pines, and there were beans, peas, chick-peas, cabbages such as Cato worshipped, lettuces, beets, onions covered with many coats, leeks, garlic, long melons, yellow pumpkins and rotund cucumbers The names, as well as the things themselves, enchanted him the scents and odours, the colours and shapes,—and the uses His gardens were places of provisionment as well as repose They were yet remote by the distance of an epoch from those artificial pleasaunces that would be the pride of ingenious Renaissance gardeners who would spend a lifetime of labour and small fortunes in creating a fantasy for a prince like the fantasy that John Evelyn beheld one early summer day at Tivoli when he was on his Italian journey in 1645

"Towards Roma Triumphans leades a long and spacious walk, full of fountaines, under which is historised the whole Ovidian Metamorphosis in rarely sculptur'd *mezzo relievo* At the end of this, next the wall, is the cittie of Rome as it was in its beauty, of small models representing that cittie, with its amphiteaters, naumachia, thermae, temples, arches, acqueducts, streetes, and other magnificences, with a little streame running thro' it for the Tyber, gushing out of an urne next the statue of the river In another garden is a noble aviarie, the birds artificial and singing till an owle appears, on which they suddenly change their notes Below this are divers stews and fish-ponds, in one of which is the Statue of Neptune in his chariot on a sea-horse, in another a Triton, and lastly a garden of simples"

And so when Giovanni in the *Amorosa Visione* saw the beautiful garden, he was tempted and he fell Here there were lawns, flowers, and marble fountains with sculptured figures at the corners He enters, meets and talks with lovely ladies, who possess symbolic or real names, and among them is Madonna Maria Because of her nobility he fears that his love will be in vain She tells him to ignore rank and he becomes her grateful servitor Left with her by the guide, he finds she yields to him in a vision, and presently she commands him to return whence he came, but it is only that the guide may unite them once more The two lovers repose among flowers before ascending to eternal happiness while the poet sings to this celestial being, this Maria, who had come down from heaven for his salvation

Amor mi diede a voi, voi sola siete
Il ben che mi promette le speranza,
Sol la mia vita in gioi' tener potete
Solo mio ben, sola mia disianza,
Solo conforto della vaga mente [1]

Then, the poem ends

It ends by design on that long-desired love-scene in a garden Once more the devout disciple had fallen short of the master's model Dante's ascent is consummated in a vision of heaven, and the vision, though necessarily described through the mundane details, that are, so to speak, the air of mortal lives, was intellectual The point of the contrast with Boccaccio is not that the disciple in folly considered physical love to be eternal beatitude but that he knew no more passionate and poetic way of representing beatitude It may be remarked that in this, and in this only of course, he would find support in the writings of many mystics The "Amorous Vision" with its clear Dantean echoes and its worship of the image of Madonna Maria, was another attempt like the *Ameto* to express something which Boccaccio had not prepared himself to express He had not spent years studying and contemplating eternal truths, disciplining his mind on the scholastics and Aristotle, and his heart on suffering He had not spent years in wandering, eating the bitter bread of exile, and possessing little more than the vision of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven It was a splendid conquest It had been earned by sacrifice so that the *terzine* sang with purified music Giovanni's vision had music too, but it was soft, confused with delight in itself, almost a plaything

Once more he had written a book for and about Fiammetta, and added to that painted desert of mediaeval allegory There had been sonnets and poems there would be more, but in the assault they were mere slings and arrows The large siege pieces now numbered five, and they were the *Filocolo*, the *Filostrato*, the *Teseide*, the *Ameto* and the *Amorosa Visione*, and he had insinuated into them, directly and suggestively, the story of his

[1] To you Love gave me, you alone are the good that Hope promised me, you alone can keep my life in joy My only good, my only beloved, sole comfort of my desirous mind

relationship with Maria He had played Caleone and Galeone to her Fiammetta, Idalagos to her pheasant, Troilo and perhaps Pandaro to her Cressida, Florio to her Biancofiore, Palamone to her Emilia, in a word he had danced fondly to her tune till he was foolish By modern standards he deserved for his display of devotion his pick of all the beautiful women since antiquity, whose names could move through his memory like a litany, as they would move, indeed, through the pages of his book of famous ladies But even the most devoted of unsuccessful lovers will tire, and at some time a man will realise that for many years he has been really talking to himself And the time came when Giovanni Boccaccio perceived and considered that while he was increasing the quantity of his writings, he was wasting pen and ink and paper as far as Maria d'Aquino was concerned

His first book, written for her, was in prose, and except for the *Ameto* which is a mixture of prose and verse, he had not used prose again He chose it now, the medium that was truly his, and used it, despite some elaborations and circumlocutions, with a vigour, incisiveness, rhythm and colour that were surprising The lady had passed him by? She had scorned him? Very well, then! He would teach the minx a lesson He would give her a very vivid picture of the jilted lover and of the bitter misery of being forlorn, but it would be the lady who should howl in the desolation of abandonment To his Aeneas, she would play Dido She would be an Ovidian maiden moaning for her vanished lover And it would not be an old tale, but a new, set in Naples of King Robert This was the novel, *L'Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, a title that does not need to be translated

This novel is one protracted lament in seven short books addressed to all enamoured ladies for their reprovement. Beware of men! Beware of love! She has loved and her faith, as she will recount, has been betrayed most cruelly In her desertion, she is like Dido, Thisbe, Myrrha, Iseult, Phaedra, Jocasta, Hecuba, Sophonisba, Cornelia, Cleopatra, Atalanta, Medea, and any antique myth, maiden, mistress or matron that would enable Boccaccio to display his acquaintance with classical learning Revenge, to put it crudely, was the motive of the novel, yet, Boccaccio the writer forgot about Boccaccio the jilted lover as the attraction

of the material conquered him It was not so much in the story that he found his interest, for the story is slight enough and it was partly autobiographical, as in the tragic plight of the young married woman, and in the twists and turns of her mind when, hunted by a wild adulterous passion, she tries to evade truth Boccaccio the lover was, in a way, healed and made whole by Boccaccio the artist, author of the first psychological novel in a modern European language

One day, the lady Fiammetta sees Panfilo in a church in Naples, and because she is married to a husband who was chosen for her, and because the season is spring, and in any case, because she is inclined that way, she falls in love Falling into this sort of love was a habit of Boccaccio's characters, and to this habit the solemn words of the American Judge Woolsey may be applied with slight alteration from the case of the U S A versus James Joyce's *Ulysses*, that *reductio* of all psychological novels "In respect of the recurrent emergence of the theme of sex in the minds of his characters, it must always be remembered that his locale was Celtic and his season spring" The tickly itching *primavera* undid Fiammetta She sighed and moaned for Panfilo, lost her appetite, lied to her husband, told the truth to her old nurse, was aware that she was about to do wrong and did it

Next, Panfilo must return to his city, and they swear eternal fidelity before his departure He never returns She waits in anguish, watching the face of every young man, seeking for news Her husband, stupidly anxious about her health, brings her to Baia, but the gaiety merely intensifies her grief She hears that Panfilo has married She curses him She repents when she hears that it is his father who has married Next, she learns that he has taken up with another woman, and she becomes a fury calling on the powers of hell "O gods of the immortal Stygian kingdom, be present there, and bring fear with your lamentations to these adulterers O complain, you moaning owl, above the unhappy roof And you, Harpies, bring an omen of future disaster O infernal shades, O eternal chaos, O darkness that is enemy of all light, occupy the adulterous house, so that the wicked eyes may never enjoy sight again"

The lady attempts suicide, and is prevented To her joy she hears that Panfilo is returning She is the lady Fiammetta once more,

preparing herself for his arrival, forgetting about his infidelity The news is false It is not he who comes but another traveller of the same name This is the last twist of the knife, and her howl goes up, and till the book ends, the abandoned ladies of antiquity are her compeers

It is obvious that the plot does not matter much, but it is a pity that Boccaccio did not cling to it, slight though it be. He padded the pages with learning and he extended the dialogue unnecessarily For all that, the book is impressive Fiammetta is a real woman, and in those final pages where she expects the return of Panfilo, she is very much alive, her cursing and her fury put away in her joy Again, there is the early scene between herself and the old nurse, who, reading rightly the meaning of Fiammetta's sighs and langour, reproves her It is all tenderness and consideration, and the old nurse, a favourite and symbolic figure of fiction even to Evelyn Waugh, is very lovable The passage is good for quotation

> " One day, finding me stretched melancholy on my bed and seeing that my brow was bowed with thought, she began to speak to me thus, as I was free of any company ' Dear child, as near and dear to me as myself, what worries are tormenting you lately ? Not an hour you let by without sighs, you that used to be one time gay and without any melancholy '
>
> " Then, after a long sigh, changing colours many times, pretending, as if I had not heard her, to settle myself as for sleep turning this way and that to get time for a reply and hardly able to bring clear words to my tongue, I answered her ' Dear nurse, nothing strange worries me, nor do I feel any different than I used to.'
>
> " ' In troth, child, you deceive me,' the old nurse replied ' Nor do you recognise how hard it is to make seasoned folk believe one thing by words and you showing it another in deed There's no need for you to hide what I, many days ago already, recognised plainly in you '
>
> " Alas, when I heard her thus, I said, as though grieving, hoping and vexing myself, ' If you know then, why ask ? There's nothing for you to do except hide what you know '
>
> " ' In faith,' said she then, ' I'll hide what's not fit or proper for fear others may know, and before I'll ever spread anything

that'll turn to your shame, let the ground open and swallow me It's a long, long time since I learned to keep things hidden, and because of this you can rest assured, and watch carefully that others don't know what I've known, without you or anybody else informing me, from your looks But if this silliness that, as I know, you've fallen into suits you, I'll leave it to yourself to consider in confidence that my advice won't have any place in it But because this cruel tyrant to whom you, a young girl, not being on your guard against him, so foolishly yielded yourself, is used to getting hold of both mind and liberty, it's my part to warn you and to beg you that you drive the infamous things from your chaste breast and quench the dishonourable flames, and not make yourself the slave of the most wicked hopes And now is the time to resist strongly'

"'Alas,' said I then, 'how easier it is to say those things than to bring them about'

"'Even if they were as hard to do,' said she, 'they're still possible and it's proper to do them'

"Then I began 'Dear nurse, well I know to be true what you tell but wildness drives me to follow the bad things'

"Then with disdain, and not without cause, she left me alone, going without answering me from the room, muttering I know not what to herself"

It is a picture of foolish impassioned youth and seasoned old age tenderly stern with experience, Juliet's old nurse murmuring "God mark thee to his grace, thou wast the prettiest babe that e'er I nurs'd" The old nurse, like the old Church, is helpless there for the moment against wilful, obstinate, but deeply loved human nature which, as she knows in dread, will inevitably hurt itself, as Giovanni Boccaccio himself was hurt when, as it seems, and we have only his word for it, he gave over his soul Yet, one must always doubt the totality of his passion How much of it was assumed and how much was he attracted to it with the detachment of the artist simply because he perceived the makings of a good poem or a good story? That implies cynicism And cynical he was, as many and many a story in the *Decameron* demonstrates But his cynicism had not gone down to the roots of his being so that every fruit of his would be blighted, full of dry powdery rottenness If it had gone down, he could not have cherished that

image of the idealised lady whom he would never cease worshipping, nor saluted fidelity in honourable love, nor kept the fountain of his piety running so that it would sustain him at the end when the world appeared to be parched desert full of a mirage, nor honoured Dante Alighieri with selfless, indefatigable offerings The *Fiammetta* itself is evidence of his cynicism as well as of his sound-heartedness It was cynical to transpose the jilting Maria and the jilted Giovanni, but his rancour was unable to exist against the onrush of his interest as a human being and as a writer There is pity in his pages about the finally abandoned Fiammetta It might be observed relevantly that had he wished to take revenge as he occasionally took revenge, he possessed that savage weapon of his his power of invective, for, when offended, especially in his vanity, he was not a moderate even-spoken man His invective was poured molten lead, frantic scourgings, pelted offal, spewings, a frenzy

The *Fiammetta* was the last book he was to devote to Maria d'Aquino and to that momentarily mutual love of theirs which was a compound of troubadour chivalry worked out to its illicit practical conclusion, as well as genuine passion and possibly artistic exploitation Since he had stood in San Lorenzo, the years had been abundantly fruitful The books he wrote in verse and prose represent only a portion of his labours He had been studying canon law, he had been soaking himself in the classics, he had been discovering the greatness of the rejected poet buried these twenty years and more in Ravenna, and he had also found time to take up with some woman, whose name is unknown, and to become the father of a daughter who, dying young, would leave him with memories that could shake him with grief, and sometimes cold with loneliness

III

Here a pretty babe lies
Sung asleep with lullabies
Pray be silent and not stir
Th' easy earth that covers her

—Herrick

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED BY SOME COMMENTATORS THAT THE STRONG paternal affection which was to pervade Boccaccio's next book, the *Ninfale Fiesolano*, was the result of the birth and the early death of this daughter The tenderness is surely there, in that long poem about the Fiesolan nymph, and the daughter, on Boccaccio's own admission, did exist, and died young so that he grieved

The birth and death of the daughter are discovered from letters written later in his life and from one of his Latin eclogues The same eclogue, however, the fourteenth, may be interpreted as Hutton interprets it to mean that Boccaccio also had two sons, and at least two other daughters Now, it must be borne in mind that while writing the eclogues, which are allegorical, he was not on oath, next, since the eclogues are works of imagination, the extra children may have been begotten by imagination for literary effect, and finally, we have corroboration for the existence of one child only, the daughter, Violante And surely he would have mentioned the others as a solace for his grief on her death !

We get corroboration for her existence in a key he provided to some of the allegorical names in the eclogues In reply apparently to a request for decipherment, he wrote the following words about the fourteenth eclogue to his friend, Fra Martino da Signa, of the Order of the Hermits of Saint Augustine and Professor of Sacred Scriptures

> " By ' Olympia ' I mean my little daughter, dead at that age during which, we believe, those who die are made citizens of Heaven, whom alive I called Violante, and dead, Olympia "

And he understood that Olympia signified " splendid, lucent, and emparadised" There is no mistaking his tenderness, his affection Death did not still it, or time choke it with dust

There was the day in Venice when, older and sadder and even loneliei, he was being entertained in Petrarch's house by Petrarch's married daughter The poet was absent, but his kindness remained like the roof-tree The kindness so moved Boccaccio that he wrote in thanks to the poet

"After speaking about various things, we sat in your little garden with some friends There, with very firm and calm words, she (Petrarch's daughter) offered me the house, the books, and all your things and everything that was in it, and all the while she remained the same self-possessed matron As she was thus talking, who should come in with a more measured step than befits her years but your Eletta, my pet, and before she knew who I was, she looked at me laughingly For which I not only joyfully but hungrily took her into my arms, thinking at first sight she was the baby I once had

"What shall I say? If you do not believe me, believe Doctor Guglielmo of Ravenna and our Donato who both knew her, that she had the same appearance as your Eletta the same look, the same gaiety in her eyes, the same gestures, walk and carriage of her dear little body Though, maybe, my girl was a wee bit taller because she was older, being five and a half the last time I saw her Besides, if they had the same dialect, they would have spoken the same words with the same simplicity But why all this? I saw no difference between them save that your girl's hair is gold and my girl's was chestnut

"Dear God! how many times as I hugged your one and rejoiced in her prattle, did the memory of my lost little girl bring the tears to my eyes, when, sighing, I turned away so that no one would remark them How I wept over your Eletta, and how I was sad, you surely know"

The fount of those tears may have contributed something to the warm, parental, solicitous affection of the *Ninfale Fiesolano* verse that moves with the channelled rapidity of a valley stream

The poem is a return to the pastoral romance The setting was the countryside that lay with its hills, snug valleys, watered plain and its woods, just a short walk from the eastern city gates. To the east of high Fiesole and on an extension of the same ridge, stands Monte Ceceri where the Florentines quarried for the grey

sandstone, the *pietra serena*, of which their palaces and more substantial houses were built From the summit of the same hill a man could see Florence beneath him, the trees around the white and yellow-washed farmhouses, the villages, the hills beyond, and behind him, the great shouldering mountains and Vallombrosa with its pines

It was country that Boccaccio knew as well as, perhaps better than, the streets of the city In summer all the lanes and bypaths would be perfumed with honeysuckle and sweetbrier, and the cornfields beyond the hedges, constricted in shape and tilled to the last square foot, would lie like scraps and strips of old parchment on which some sleepy monk had illuminated the bright yellow of tulips and the scarlets of anemones and poppies In those days there were many woods, cool out of the hot sun, and murmuring springs, and little ponds and lakes formed by delaying streams that meandered down southward to the Arno Two of these streams found their origin on the slopes of Monte Ceceri, and these were the Affrico and the Mensola which, through folk-lore, provided Boccaccio with the young man and the nymph of the *Ninfale Fiesolano* The origin of the poem was in accord with that rural spirit which humanised the landscapes of all the old world and bound people by the innumerable pieties of pagan myth and Christian legend to the soil by which the old world lived People banished from their own few acres either by war or by drastic laws left more than fields they had tilled, more than vines tended and walls raised they left something of their spirits and of the spirits of their ancestors The *Ninfale Fiesolano* went back beyond the beginnings of Florence and of Etruscan Fiesole

Knowing this, one sees how right Boccaccio was to have chosen *ottava rima* as his form, for *ottava rima* provided the basis of much popular song, and song came naturally in the fields and around the villas and the farmhouses, on the threshing floors and at the crushing of the grapes, at the love-making and even in the quarrels song improvised out of joy or anger or just fun Verse after verse of the *Ninfale Fiesolano* sings with a lighter, a defter and a surer music than Boccaccio had yet commanded Hutton calls it "the most mature of his poems in the vulgar tongue", and Carducci considered it sufficient for a poet's fame The narrative is rapid,

and gone are the lingering digressions, the irrelevant scenic descriptions, and the gratuitously provocative inventories of feminine charms

It is all pagan, but by that one does not mean perverted or immoral, which is a meaning that priggish preachers attach to the word It is pagan in that the gods are of the old pre-Christian world and that the laws which govern love—and the pagans governed love—are the laws of the old gods For it is love once more, illicit love, that Boccaccio sings

> Amor mi fa parlar, che m'e nel cuore
> Gran tempo stato e fatto n'ha suo albergo
> Amor è quel che mi sforza ch'io dica
> D'un' amorosa storia e molto antica [1]

The story is about Affrico, a shepherd, who falls in love with a nymph, Mensola, dedicated to Diana At first she flees in fright from him, the human being, and later, when he disguises himself as a nymph and insinuates himself among her companions, she is forced to yield Despite the violation, she, too, loves The couple arrange to meet again, but she fails, and Affrico then kills himself on the bank of a brook that reddening with his blood will bear his name Mensola, hidden away, bears a son called Pruneo On being discovered by wrathful, imperious Diana, she is transformed into a stream which would likewise bear her name The son Pruneo grows up and enters the service of Atalanta, founder of Fiesole, and so the poem peters out, as into marshy land, in an account of legendary Fiesolan and Florentine history

The summary omits one of the elements of the poem that pervades it with fateful tragic suspense, and this is the tale of Affrico's own grandfather, who, as a punishment for pursuing a nymph, was changed by Diana into the Mugnone stream Here was the inevitable ineluctable dread of the old world, Fate watching and waiting indifferently for the predestined end Affrico knew the story, his father, harrowed by anxiety, had told it to him as a warning; yet, the son goes on to his love and his ancestral death in the old tragic madness, the nightmare of the bound will It is

[1] Love makes me speak that has been a long time in my heart and made his lodging there Love it is that compels me to tell a very old and amorous story

in the relationship between the fearful father and the stubborn son that the note of strong paternal tenderness is struck again and again like a golden bell

Love fixes Affrico in stubbornness, love brings madness that only the beloved can heal

> Sol'una e quella che mi può donare,
> S'ella volesse, aiuto e darmi pace [1]

He cannot praise her loveliness enough, nor tell her as fervently as he wishes what she is to him at every hour of the day and night

> E tu sola fanciulla bionda e bella,
> Morbida, bianca, angelica e vezzosa,
> Con leggiadro atto e benigna favella,
> Fresca e giuliva più che bianca rosa,
> E splendiente piu ch'ogni altra stella
> Sei che mi piaci piu che altra cosa,
> E sola te con desiderio bramo,
> E giorno e notte ad ogn'ora ti chiamo [2]

As a novice of chaste Diana, she is innocent of the ways of the body Such was her simpleness that she had seldom or never heard—and one certain word of Boccaccio's is worth noting—

> per qual dignitade
> L'uom si creasse, e poi come nascesse [3]

It is, of course, that old half-Latin word, *dignitade*, that is worth noting in its association with love and procreation No matter how evasively one construes the word, cozening, shrinking susceptibilities, metagrabolising, shuffling meanings with the ace rigged away, synonymising treacherously, flicking away the substance for the figuratives, heaping up a thesaurus of cognate usage from contemporary literature and the *Vocabolario della Crusca*,

[1] There is one alone who, if she pleases, can award me aid and give me peace.

[2] And you alone, golden-haired lovely girl, soft, white, angelic and coaxing, with graceful gesture and kindly speech, fresher and more joyous than a white rose, brighter than any other star, you alone are she who pleases me more than any thing, and you alone I want with strong desire, and you I call by day and night at every hour

[3] by what dignity man is created
and after how he is born.

there always remains the insoluble unbreakable core of "dignity" It comes there in the poem like a casual but sudden affirmation of faith in the goodness—the tainted goodness to be sure—of mankind, and in the eternal order by which human beings live or from which they go corrupt and become less than human, less even than the animals with their corporal sanity

The word arrives on the stream of the verse unexpectedly, and yet when it has come, inevitably Is it unexpected because we, living at the hindquarters of the epoch initiated by the Renaissance when pullulating philosophies emphasised the elements of man's dual nature more in the breach than in the integral observance, is it unexpected because we have for so long witnessed love removed from its scale of values in the procreation of mankind and elevated to a separate end in itself, an entertainment, a pastime, a problem for birth-controllers, a human relationship only accidentally connected with parenthood? Boccaccio, too, had seen it as a pastime and indulged

The free and easy relationships of Naples were a testing of any man's notion of the dignity of love He had not survived that careless life with the grave informed innocence of a saint Nor had he pitied either, as a prig renouncing cakes and ale, or as a man who contemplated the world fearfully in the light of the Last Judgment Instead, still keeping his hold intellectually on the rules of the Faith, he had managed to laugh, as he would laugh in the *Decameron*, at the one-track follies of men and women, for he knew instinctively that laugher is a relief and a release from suffocating sexuality Laughter snaps the silken binding threads of the passion which is sexuality's rhetoric. It makes a monkey of that totalitarian power which can ordain its own almost exclusive government and set up its own *mystique* Sexuality can demand its own propaganda in art and letters, clothes, customs and habits, even to the ornaments that young girls and matrons may wear, as in old Pompeii. But men laugh, with the deep chuckles and the guffaws and the roars of the *fabliaux* and Chaucer and Rabelais and Shakespeare and Brian Merriman and Giovanni Boccaccio The merriment, and the words that go flying, may be too strong for our time, but that is no proof that our time is any better. Boccaccio laughed, he could become cynical, he could even

snigger in insufferable compromise But under his laughter and his cynicism there was his notion of the dignity of human love, for all the misuse and the abuse

Knowing the burden of meaning that was in the verse, we come, therefore, to Affrico's ecstatic praise of Mensola with something that will weigh down to human level what would have otherwise appeared a flight to the artificial altitudes of the troubadours This praise was based on the *strombotto* form which was probably Sicilian in origin The *strombotti* were popular love-songs into which the lover poured wild adoration—the derivation is said to be *strani motti*, which means "strange words" The lover blessed his lady's birth and life, her parents, house, and the ground she trod, with the fervency of a prayer And Boccaccio, like many other Italian poets, including Petrarch and Giustiniani, to take a pair of very different quality, recognised the literary value of the popular song and of the customary joyful benediction To Mensola, then, Affrico sang

Benedetto sia l'anno e'l mese e'l giorno,
E l'ora e'l punto ed anche la stagione
Che fu creato questo viso adorno,
E l'altre membra con tante ragione,
Che chi cercasse il mondo intorno intorno,
E nel cielo anche tra le regione
Delle Iddee sante, non porria trovarsi
Una ch'a te potesse mai agguagliarsi

Tu se' viva fontana di bellezza,
E d'ogni bel costume chiara luce
Tu se' adatta e piena di franchezza,
Tu se' colei in cui sol si riduce
Ogni virtu e ogni gentilezza,
E quella che la mia vita conduce,
Tu se' vezzosa, e se' morbida e bianca,
E niuna bella cosa non ti manca [1]

[1] Blessed be the year and the month and the day, and the hour and the moment and even the season when this sweet face was made, and the other limbs with such craft that he who might search the world upside down and even the skies in the country of the sacred gods, could never find one to be likened to you

You are a quick well of loveliness and the clear light of good breeding, you are schooled and filled with sincerity, you are she alone in whom every worthiness and courtesy are found, and who guides my life, you are alluring, and you are white and soft, and nothing lovely is wanting in you

Though the *Ninfale Fiesolano* marked a break in the years of literary devotion to a lady, it was a song of love Except for the reference in the proem to the cause of inspiration, the whole piece of verse is something new for Boccaccio It was not directly or indirectly about Fiammetta, and, omitting the conjecture that filial love moved him in some stanzas, it was not about himself Nor again was it about Naples and the Neapolitan paradise Was the old love fading and being subsumed into the image of Maria d'Aquino that he held enshrined and would hold? Something like that was happening But while the poem was begun in Florentine country, it was completed in Naples whither he returned But it was not to the smart, gay and airy Naples of his early youth Rather was it to the stage and the enactment of a melodramatic and bloody tragedy that centred with intrigue, revenge, brutality and assassination around a doubtful and doubted woman

IV

How subtly was that murder closed!
Bear up
Those tragic bodies 'tis a heavy season
—Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO WAS NOT LONG IN NAPLES ON HIS FIRST visit as a boy when, in 1328, Charles, Duke of Calabria, and only son of King Robert the Wise, was killed on a hunting expedition It is very likely that the old king, heavy with fatality, foresaw disaster for his kindgom in that sudden death and, as he himself exclaimed, in the falling of the crown from his head Disaster lurked in a squabble of claimants He had not become king as the eldest but as the third son of his father, Charles II The eldest son had been Charles Martel, King of Hungary, and the Hungarians, despite Papal approval of Robert, never gave up the hereditary claim to Naples

And so after the death of his only son, Robert attempted to forestall clash by compromise He compromised by betrothing the Duke's daughter, Giovanna, to Andreas, youngest son of Carobert who was Charles Martel's successor to the throne of Hungary By this he hoped to satisfy Hungarian demands while keeping the Hungarians out at the same time That was in 1333 when Andreas was just seven and Giovanna was nine years old Ten years later old Robert was dead after he had thrust the worldly vanities of avarice and display from him and taken to prayers and penitence in Franciscan brown, but not before he had seen Giovanna and Andreas married in August, 1342

The match was not idyllic Giovanna was beautiful, vivacious and intelligent, and Angevin in her taste for art and letters Andreas was heavy-jowled, dull-eyed, and indolent, preferring food to anything else His tutor, mentor and familiar was a friar named Robert, a creature whose bullying contemptuous activities made Petrarch mourn for Naples "a horrible animal with bald head and bare feet, short in stature, swollen in person, with worn-out rags designedly torn to display his naked skin with a crouching gait, bent not by age but by hypocrisy"

A knowledge of these facts and figures is necessary for an understanding of what followed The dead king's intention had been to keep the Hungarian house out of Neapolitan affairs, and in this intention he had the full support of his courtiers, but the Hungarians flocked hungrily to Naples where they found that neither Giovanna nor Andreas could rule till the age of twenty-five, government in the meantime being carried on by a Supreme Council This was not what they had expected of the marriage The trouble about compromises is that they can be interpreted ambiguously The Hungarians, with the swollen face of the friar whispering counsel, became insolent, demanding and dangerous Who was to wear the crown ? Giovanna only ? Or Giovanna and Andreas ? A drift to civil war was prevented by an appeal to the Pope, Clement VI, who sent Cardinal Aimeric from Avignon as Papal Legate Civil war was prevented but not murder

King Robert's courtiers and servitors loathed the Hungarians Their hate had issue in a conspiracy for which they found a centre in the old woman, Filippa la Catanese and her husband Filippa was married to Raimondo di Cabani who had been bought as a slave from the Moors by the Duke of Calabria, and they had been both favoured with rank and wealth by King Robert, she being made Countess of Morcone Their children were in high places The group in the conspiracy against the Hungarians was supported, secretly of course, by Catherine of Taranto, to whom Niccolò Acciaiuoli was secretary Now, the Hungarians were swarming around Naples because of Andreas, and when Cardinal Aimeric moved in Consistory at Avignon that Andreas should be crowned, he was unwittingly pronouncing sentence of death The Catanesi worked for murder.

On the night of September 18, 1345, Giovanna, six months gone with child, was with her husband Andreas at Aversa, one of the Angevin resorts about fourteen miles from Naples September was to be the month of the coronation They retired early and presently Andreas was called from his chamber to a gallery that led down to the garden below The message by which he was enticed was that important despatches had arrived from Naples He went almost immediately into the gallery There he died.

Men gagged his cries so tightly with their armoured hands that his fat, heavy face bore the impress of the iron gauntlets beyond death and its rigour, and other men, according to an account sent to the Pope, slipped a rope around his neck and strangled him In frenzy they killed him, fumbling and clawing while he struggled, and they emasculated him with their hands and tore out his hair Then they slung the body on its rope over the gallery into the garden below where Andreas's nurse found it, broken, mutilated, and a cause for great wrath and horrible suspicion and the march of avenging armies

It is a piece of savage violence that hushes suddenly all the memories of panoplied tourneys and the music of rebeck and viol in the mind fat, soft Hungarian Andreas stifled and torn in the gallery while his wife lay in their chamber within Giovanna was suspect The child in her womb was suspect How far was she responsible in assent or connivance ? It is one of the mysteries Legend depicted her as one who even plaited the rope for her young husband's neck, and also as a deeply wronged, slandered, sweet and most beautiful queen Villani believed that she had been adulterous with two unnamed men besides Robert of Taranto and, abetted by their mother, with his brother Louis whom, at any rate, she married hastily before the year's end The funeral baked meats almost served the wedding feast

Although she was to marry two more husbands and to be suspected also of the violent death of one of them, and although she herself was to die either by the cord or by smothering with a bolster, she had her defenders as well as her accusers during her life and afterwards Poets praised her graciousness, her merriment, her goodwill and, of course, her beauty Petrarch believed in her innocence Biographers have been as hot on one side as on the other Her trial, promised by the Pope, came to nothing except a judgment which admitted probable lack of devotion to Andreas due to witchcraft But at any rate, Andreas was murdered, and his brother, Louis of Hungary, was certain of her guilt He had an army that would move in vengeance from Dalmatia, with a black banner bearing a grim picture of the killing

The army would force her to flee in 1348 to Avignon where she would be more or less declared innocent and where she would

sell her city, Avignon, to Pope Clement VI, and the purchase money would be handed over by papal officials to Acciaiuoli The money amounted to 80,000 gold florins, a bargain price, but she was in need of money for an expedition to Naples and she pawned her jewels as well The lawyers made sure in ten quarto pages of qualifying clauses that the bargain would not be broken, and as the gabbling droning voice recited the involved and lengthy instrument, old dead Robert must have turned in his grave

> In nomine Domini, Amen Joanna, Dei gratia, Jerusalem et Siciliae Regina, Provinciae et Forcalqueri Comitissa et Domina Civitatis Avenionensis, salutem &c gratis et sponte et non coacta, non seducta &c sed mera, libera et spontanea vendimus, cedimus, concedimus at perpetuum civitatem nostram Avenionensem, cum suburbis et toto territorio et cum omnibus et singulis castris, burgis, locis adjacentis pertinentibus et singulis universis, hominibus, vassallis, emphiteutis, homagiis, feudis pro pretio, videlicet, octaviginta millium florenorum auri de Florentia boni et legitimi ponderis

> In the name of the Lord, Amen We, Giovanna, by the grace of God Queen of Jerusalem and Sicily, Countess of Provence and Forcalquier, and Lady of the City of Avignon freely and willingly and without being forced or seduced we sell, cede and concede forever our city of Avignon with its suburbs and all its territory and all and every one of its castles, boroughs and pertinent adjacent places, and all its men, vassals, emphyteuses, hommages, feuds for the price, to wit, eighty thousand gold florins of Florence of good and lawful weight . .

Whoever was guilty of murder, Giovanna rather lost on the bargain

Now, Giovanni Boccaccio, from whom we have wandered, was not so sure of the guilt,—or of the innocence He was not very sure of anything if we are to judge by the only evidence we possess . a hint in a letter and a few Latin eclogues which have all the reliability of allegory He had been in Naples Probably he even saw the public torturing of suspects by the public torturer, Ugo del

Balzo, in August, 1346, on the seashore by the Castello dell'Ovo Whatever he heard or saw did not convince him completely, so that he wavered

At this time he had found himself a patron in Francesco degli Ordelaffi, tyrant of some cities in the Romagna, captain of Forli over at the other side of the mountains from Florence, enemy of ecclesiastical dominion, smiter of bishops and legates, excommunicate, and patron of letters In a word, an old-fashioned surviving Ghibelline It was through the favour of his secretary, Cecco da Mileto, that Boccaccio found himself patronised, and perhaps glad of it, for he nearly always had need of money It was Ordelaffi who greeted Louis of Hungary on the march of vengeance in the *contrado* of Bologna, entertained him royally with three days of feasting and dancing, and provisioned the troops, among them the Hungarian horsemen, lean hardy fellows who slept between their horses at night, their light armour on, and their long bows and swords by their sides

This was in 1347 Tranquil Giovanni, who liked his comfortable bed and his decent table, must have moved as in a dream among the pawing hooves and the babble of strange tongues, in this army that moved on his paradise, Naples In a letter he wrote at the time to Zanobi da Strada, he said he had not received a copy of Varro that had been sent, but that he would have received it had he not been on the point of going to the illustrious King of Hungary in the farthest Abruzzi and Campania whither Ordelaffi was riding too He, Boccaccio, he hastened to explain, was not travelling as an *armiger*, a warrior, but as a *rerum occurrentium arbiter*, an observer of events, a man with a notebook

Boccaccio was, then, as it appears, on the Hungarian side, but only, one must add, by the accident of employment He needed a patron He had one, a miniature magnifico But was not his old friend and patron, Niccolò Acciaiuoli, on the side of Giovanna? Here begins some of the tension of feeling that bestows some fascination on the boring eclogues with their allegorical disguise In one eclogue we are treated to the warlike spectacle of a just Louis marching to Italy to avenge the murder of Andreas, to Naples where Giovanna, an enraged and pregnant she-wolf, had assailed him. In another eclogue, the guilt of Giovanna and

of Louis of Taranto is again suggested Yet, in another eclogue, Boccaccio commiserates on the flight of Louis of Taranto and Niccolò Acciaiuoli, and prophesies return to power And in a fourth eclogue, he bids the mountains and the hills rejoice because Alcestus, that is Louis of Taranto, has come into his own again To be brief, Boccaccio changed his mind pretty thoroughly

His feelings had kept pace with the winning side, whichever it was, and with his final rejoicing, Giovanna was back in Naples, secure under a patched-up peace It is not a prepossessing picture of Boccaccio Through the classical mist of the eclogues, one catches glimpses of the needy scholar, out at the elbows, desperate for the handful of florins that will bring him the small comforts he desires, riding the long, saddle-sore journeys over the Apennines to Forlì and back, or up through the Abruzzi in the winter weather, the grinding torrents from the snows, the thick yellow mud and the bad food certainly no soldier, but a *rerum occurrentium arbiter*, whose views were agreeably plastic

Did he genuinely believe in Queen Giovanna's innocence at last? Or did he hope for favour in Naples where he had once been a young man moving among the nobility? It is only a dubious glimpse we get, we cannot be sure that it is really him we see because, as in many other parts of his history, he is like a shadow slipping between crowded narrow streets and lanes out of the hard revealing sunlight into dark protective archways, and just when one imagines that a hail, a greeting, will make him turn that we may see fully the rounded face, growing a bit fat, and the usually tranquil but observant eyes now quick with trouble, and hear what he has to say roundly and richly for himself about matters other than love affairs—about the Queen of Naples, for instance, the joys of being patronised by a wealthy man fond of war, what books are on the stocks all to be discussed over a glass of vernaccia—just then we are fobbed off with a few muttered, mysterious words or we beg pardon in embarrassment for having mistaken somebody else for him, and the shadow is gone Just like that we hear no more of him when all Europe, the entire world, it seemed, began to totter and die, stricken with the plague, bewildered with catastrophe in the streets and the fields.

'In that year when Louis of Hungary was moving with his

horsemen for vengeance on the Kingdom of Naples, the Tartars were besieging Caffa on the Crimea The yellow, slant-eyed riders from the steppes brought with them the germs of a pestilence that had already ravaged China and almost depopulated India, and as they, the besiegers, died outside the walls, their putrifying bodies were catapulted into Caffa among the besieged, till almost all within and without died

It was bestial warfare Three Italian trading vessels got away and towards the end of the year, or at the beginning of 1348, sailed into Genoa Their cargo was nothing less than a universal doom for mediaeval Europe Genoa was infected, next the countryside, other districts were also infected, so that by the end of the year there was no place from Calabria to Scotland, and from Spain to Poland that was not filled with the dead It was too vast for men to measure quickly They only knew the horror that surrounded them in their own streets, their own towns and countryside, till they, too, were struck down The more fortunate were affected with swellings or buboes as large as apples in the groin and the armpit, and many so afflicted recovered, but there was a pulmonary form of the disease, with or without the buboes, that tore the chest with barbed pain, turned the throat and lungs gangrenous, and left men surely to die, spitting and vomiting blood

It was not all despair, men fought, but they fought blindly They shut and barred their doors against what they thought were evil miasms that fumed in through the skin, they burnt juniper to purify the air, took aromatic oils, bled, drank acid concoctions, especially vinegar, carried nosegays of herbs in their hands as they hurried through the streets, and still they died Capacious trenches were opened to receive commonly the bodies until there were no more diggers who would risk their lives, and then the dead lay rotting Houses were silent places for terror In the fields, crops were sown, sprang up and ripened, and then blew to seed and were trampled down by the ownerless animals ranging the countryside from desolate farms City, village, villa, estate, none went free and whole

Men saw only their own local disasters, and heard rumours only from fugitives that trudged from death to death, rumours of the

whole world sickening, scrabbling with weakening fingers for aid, vomiting black blood and dying They could not know that the dead would be numbered in tens of millions, and that life was being changed beyond all accounting Some of those who still lived fell to desperation, and shut themselves away, wildly, with wines and foods that were there for the taking and with good women turned harlot, and gambolled with a macabre gaiety in the unguarded, tenantless houses, they became rich with legacies and loot, and with unrestricted trading, they learned to look on the dead with casual eyes, and thereby their hearts became other than they had been courtesy gone, old pieties killed, the sense of community diseased, the old paganism that is ever in man roused up to be hard, florid, swaggering, and very brutal

It was a catastrophe that transformed the survivors and their lives We can only surmise that one of the survivors, Giovanni Boccaccio, found hastened in him that process which sensitive men undergo as they pass from the last years of youth and quickly through their prime to middle age Men in ordinary health, even in the middle of mortal danger, quite irrationally expect a lease of life that will bring them to old age, and with this vague expectancy, desire wishfully translated into promise, they do not consider the inevitability of death, really, vividly and as part of their human heritage, till the springtime and all the summer of their lives are closed, and they go down the wintry decline Death was present round about Boccaccio during those years of the pestilence It foreshortened, even annihilated expectancy It prompted him to distrust the attractions of the world, and of women who were for him the crowning glory of the world The flesh that could be warm, pulsing, pink and white and golden was, after all, no more than dust, and the wry-mouthed preachers were right

How much he witnessed of the horrors we cannot tell because he was absent from Florence during the plague which he so precisely describes in the opening of the *Decameron* The passage is justly famous He had mastered the prose style at last that had been developing since he first put pen to paper for the *Filocolo*, he had reduced redundancies and digressions, he had exchanged rapidity for languor of rhythm, and exactness for generalised

description, he had, in a word, created a prose that would be the pride of Italian letters Since the passage is much too long to quote in full, it is best to give an extract

> Era il piu da' vicini una medesima maniera servata, mossi non meno da tema che la corruzione de' morti non gli offendesse, che da carità la quale avessero a' trapassati Essi, e per sè medesimi e con lo ajuto d'alcuni portatori, quando aver ne potevano, traevano delle lor case li corpi de' già passati, e quegli davanti agli loro usci ponevano, dove, la mattina spezialmente, n'avrebbe potuti vedere senza numero chi fosse attorno andate e quindi fatto venir bare, e tali furono, che, per difetto di quelle, sopra alcuna tavola ne ponieno Ne fu una bara sola quella che due o tre ne portò insiememente, nè avvenne pure una volta, ma se ne sarieno assai potute annoverare di quelle, che la moglie e'l marito, gli due o tre fratelli, o il padre e il figliuolo, a così fattamente ne contenieno Ed infinite volte avvenne che, andando due preti con una croce per alcuno, si misero tre o quattro bare, da' portatori portate, di dietro a quella, e, dove un morto credevano avere i preti a seppilire, n'aveano sei o otto, e tal fiata più Nè erano per ciò questi da alcuna lagrima o lume o compagnia onorati, anzi era la cosa pervenuta a tanto, che non altramenti si curava degli huomini che morivano che ora si curerebbe di capre per che assai manifestamente apparve che quello che il natural corso delle cose non aveva potuto con piccoli e rari danni a' savi mostrare doversi con pazienza passare, la grandezza de' mali eziando i semplici far di ciò scorti, e non curanti
>
> Alla gran moltitudine de' corpi mostrata, che ad ogni chiesa ogni dì e quasi ogni ora concorreva portata, non bastando la terra sacra alle sepolture, e massimamente volendo dare a ciascun luogo proprio secondo l'antico costume, si facevano per gli cimiteri delle chiese, poichè ogni parte era piena, fosse grandissime, nelle quali a centinaja si mettevano i sopravvegnenti, ed in quelle stivati, come si mettono le mercatanzie nelle navi a suolo a suolo, con poca terra si ricoprieno, infino a tanto che della fossa al somma si pervenia

And here is the extract in Rigg's accurate and well-known translation

> It was the common practice of most of the neighbours, moved no less by fear of contamination by the putrefying bodies than

by charity towards the deceased, to drag the corpses out of the houses with their own hands, aided, perhaps, by a porter, if a porter was to be had, and to lay them in front of the doors, where anyone who made the round might have seen, especially in the morning, more of them than he could count, afterwards they would have biers brought up, or, in default, planks, whereon they laid them Nor was it once or twice only that one and the same bier carried two or three corpses at once, but quite a considerable number of such cases occurred, one bier sufficing for husband and wife, two or three brothers, father and son, and so forth And times without number it happened, that, as two priests, bearing the cross, went on their way to perform the last office for someone, three or four biers were brought up by the porters in rear of them, so that, whereas the priests supposed that they had but one corpse to bury, they discovered that there were six or eight, or sometimes more Nor, for all their number, were their obsequies honoured by either tears or lights or crowds of mourners, rather, it was come to this, that a dead man was then of no more account than a dead goat would be to-day From all which it is abundantly manifest, that that lesson of patient resignation, which the sages were never able to learn from the slight and infrequent mishaps which occur in the natural course of events, was now brought home even to the minds of the simple by the magnitude of their disasters, so that they became indifferent to them

As consecrated ground there was not in extent sufficient to provide tombs for the vast multitude of corpses which day and night, and almost every hour, were brought in eager haste to the churches for interment, least of all, if ancient custom were to be observed and a separate resting-place assigned to each, they dug, for each graveyard, as soon as it was full, a huge trench, in which they laid the corpses as they arrived in hundreds at a time, piling them up as merchandise is stowed in the hold of a ship, tier upon tier, each covered with a little earth, until the trench would hold no more

This, as has been suggested, was not the reporting of an eye-witness, but rather the quintessence of the experiences of eye-witnesses Boccaccio was, we may be sure, saving his skin of which he was not unnaturally fond while the pestilence swept Florence of one hundred thousand citizens His experience, whatever it

was, worked a change in him He who had glorified the body, especially woman's, would henceforth be less inclined to callow, ingenuous fancies there would be a hardness in him, as in plums touched by frost, an acid cynicism, and even a bitter railing of women The summer was over, the leaves were already falling thickly in the intempestive frost, and the songs were rare He would fall, too, into abysmal fear, and the fear would be of death which he had not escaped but only sidestepped His second step-mother had died, his father would be dead before the beginning of 1350, and Fiammetta, she too But she truly had not died Her image was as lasting as his own mind, and even while he set down in a sonnet his last vision of her, she was no mortal flesh but the ikon of a soul he had sainted and worshipped

Sovra li fior vermigli e' capei d'oro
Veder mi parve un foco alla Fiammetta,
E quel mutarsi in una nugoletta
Lucida piu che mai argento od oro,
E qual candida perla in anel d'oro,
Tal si sedeva in quella un' angioletta
Volando al cielo splendida e soletta,
D'oriental zaffir vestita e d'oro
Io m'allegrai, alte cose sperando,
Dov' io dovea conoscere, ch' a Dio
In breve era madonna per salire,
Come poi fu, ond'io qui lagrimando
Rimaso sono in doglia ed in desio
Di morte, per potere a lei salire

Once again we may rely on Rossetti for a verse translation of a sonnet that appears easy but is really difficult by reason of the craft of the writer. The craft which may seem mechanical to any of the millions of modern verse technicians is shown in the use of terminal emphasis in the original,—which Rossetti failed to capture Four times Boccaccio used the word " oro " terminally, but it was not just gold, it was the gold of Fiammetta's hair, the sheen that had become like light itself on that day in the Court of Love in Naples where sun and fountain glorified her And twice he used " salire ", once for her going from the world, and once, as the last word of

the sonnet, for his desire for death Rossetti's English has its virtue but it is not of the Italian

Round her red garland and her golden hair
I saw a fire about Fiammetta's head,
Thence to a little cloud I watched it fade,
Than silver or than gold more brightly fair,
And like a pearl that a gold ring doth bear,
Even so an angel sat therein who sped
Alone and glorious throughout heaven, array'd
In sapphires and in gold that lit the air
Then I rejoiced as hoping happy things,
Who rather should have then discerned how God
Had haste to make my lady all His own,
Even as it came to pass And with these stings
Of sorrow, and with life's most weary load
I dwell, who fain would be where she is gone

PART FOUR

AUTUMN

The giant laughter of Christian men
  That roars through a thousand tales,
Where greed is an ape and pride is an ass,
And Jack's away with his master's lass,
And the miser is banged with all his brass,
  The farmer with all his flails,

Tales that tumble and tales that trick,
  Yet end not all in scorning—
Of kings and clowns in a merry plight,
And the clock gone wrong and the world gone right,
That the mummers sing upon Christmas night
  And Christmas Day in the morning

—*The Ballad of the White Horse* by G K CHESTERTON

I

Fraunceys Petrark, the laureat poete
Highte this clerk

—Chaucer

IT WAS TO A FLORENCE DIMINISHED BY THREE-FIFTHS OF HER population that Giovanni Boccaccio rode home Old friends were gone down into the death-pits and there were empty houses All around, the world in which and by which the Republic existed was changing as a climate changes

Some time between the early summer of 1349 and the late winter of 1350, the old father died, Boccaccio di Chellino, who had been scorned as a miser and who yet had cared for the wilful son begotten in the amorous heat of Paris In January, 1350, Giovanni was named as heir The inheritance does not seem to have amounted to very much The business man who had preached success died something of a failure No lordly wealth fell to Giovanni, who would have spent it liberally Moreover, there was now a half-brother, Jacopo, son of the second stepmother, to be looked after, and on the 26th of January of the same year, Giovanni was appointed guardian The child was little more than five and a half years He had to be fed, housed and clothed, and it says much for Giovanni's tenderness that the child was cared for, and under difficulties

The chief difficulty was money They had to live, but there were no patrons in commercial Florence where there was little time, after the pestilence, for cultivating privately what are called the graces While there were no individual patrons of letters, seeking whom they might devour after the manner of patrons, there was always the government as an employer of lettered men Either because he was qualified for the tasks, or because he was the best man to be found out of those who had survived the plague, Boccaccio was employed by the Republic on several missions and embassies, and 1350 became, even on the small evidence that remains of his activities, one of the busiest years of his life.

Of all Italian cities, Milan had suffered least from the Black Death This was of great moment to the Visconti of Milan who threatened with old Ghibelline alliances the security of all the free commonwealths The Visconti wanted Bologna, which was a Papal fief and an ancient political and commercial ally of Florence, and with Bologna in their possession, they could hold the northern trade-route at their mercy which was not abundant This had been foreseen by the Florentines who, to secure the Apennine passes, bought Prato in February, 1350, from the Queen of Naples and garrisoned the citadel of Pistoia At the sale of Prato, Niccolò Acciaiuoli was the conveyer and Giovanni Boccaccio was a witness in Florence

But the business deal did not quite settle the Bologna affair The Visconti were not intimidated by the jingle of Florentine florins of good and lawful weight, and they continued to intrigue for possession of the city by spinning a web of alliances with the petty lords of the Romagna and the Ghibelline lords of the Apennines Florence was frightened and she appealed to the Pope Between March and October Boccaccio went as ambassador into the Romagna, but while we have no details about the business, we may surmise that his embassy failed for, on November 9, the Florentines wrote to the Pope indicating the perils to the Church and Florentine territories in the Visconti policy

At the same time, Boccaccio was ambassador to the court of his old employer, Ordelaffi, at Forlì, and a special messenger to Ravenna It is likely that the mission to Ravenna, delicate though it was, pleased him most of all The mission was to Beatrice, daughter of Dante Alighieri, and nun in the convent of Santo Stefano dell'Uliva It has been surmised that he had met her there four years previously, and having seen her poverty, and perhaps, the poverty of her community, he had begged in Florence for help, because she was the daughter of the Poet Then the Black Death came and poverty was a small thing when only existence counted, but he had not forgotten the daughter Therefore, from the Company of Or San Michele which had grown rich with legacies left by plague-victims, he got ten gold florins which he carried to Ravenna.

How did they meet? What did they say? We could well spare the *Teseide* and the *Filocolo* and a few more things for a record of

the meeting We are left with conjectures He would introduce himself again and explain his mission with gracious embarrassment and then sit in the convent parlour, or walk in the warm autumnal air in the garden, inquiring eagerly after every memory and description of the exile whose verse ruled his mind, watching the nun's calm face for some sign that would give life to the image of the Poet, and thinking nothing at all of the long journey he had done on the highways and up the mountain tracks, with uncomfortable nights in wretched inns and flea-teased beds where fear of the plague made servants churlish, and with anxious days in country that was pillaged by mercenary soldiers turned gangster and with the desolation of landscapes as a burden for his soul The journey, the florins, and the respect paid to the nun were just another of the offerings he would make to the memory of one of the two great men he held most in reverence one dead and unhonoured at his native font, the other living and famed more than kings

The other was Francesco Petrarca He would meet him in October of the same year, 1350, and a Ciceronian friendship would begin to last for twenty-five years, till death They would meet and commune in the kingdom of letters which the business men had not yet power to touch, they would write innumerable notes, and exchange books and manuscripts, a Cicero, a Varro, a Dante, a Homer, as princes might bestow estates

The friendship is in itself a measure of Boccaccio Petrarch was not the kind of man who suffered fools or rogues gladly The friendship—no ! the word should connote deeper things of the soul—the love between them was a reflex testimony to the goodness of Boccaccio's nature

The pair had much in common They were both devoted to learning with a devotion that was, with Dante as the third of the trinity, to create Italian letters Each had struggled against the parental will which had destined them for other things Each had loved a woman almost idolatrously, and from that had drawn sustenance, one for prose chiefly, the other for superb verse Each demanded by right of profession a high place among the kings, princes and rich men, and there was the difference that one of them, Petrarch, had got his demand above all men in Europe.

Francesco Petrarca, son of a Florentine notary, was born on July 20, 1304, at Arezzo where his father, Petracco, with those other White Guelf exiles who had been banished forever by the same decree as gave Dante to Ravenna, made their unsuccessful effort to regain Florence by force Although Francesco spent seven years with his mother at Incisa, a little Arno village above Florence, and a few other years at Pisa, he was an exile and the son of an exile from Tuscany Thence to Avignon, to his father, to the shifted centre of Christendom that was to draw from him later for its Babylonian luxury and its abandonment of Rome some very fierce denunciation He studied the humanities at Carpentras, and law at Montpellier and Bologna, but his heart was not in law His heart was in the glory of letters, not local but universal glory

When his father died, he took Minor Orders that he might live free from material cares, as indeed he did live, with the many small benefices that were bestowed on him On April 6, 1327, he saw a lady, Madonna Laura, in the church of the Poor Clares at Avignon, and so began the vague personal relationship but definite worship which would produce thousands of lines in silvery Italian of finished, polished, full, musical verse His music never failed His ear was sensitive enough to make him change his name from Petracco to Petrarca His verse is his title to fame, though he crassly affected to believe that it was by his Latin works, like his dreary epic, the *Africa*, that he had secured immortality For antiquity was his fatherland He had travelled Europe in search of remnants of ancient learning, manuscripts, scraps, coins and inscriptions, and the discovery of an old book, a Cicero, was an angelic gift Yet, all Italy knew or had heard of his Italian sonnets

This was fame, but not fame crowned He did not wait for the crown to come upon him, so importunate was his thirst for glory By his own intrigues and by the efforts of powerful friends, one of whom was Robert of Naples, he was crowned with the bay leaves by a Roman senator on the Capitol in April, 1341, in the city that was once and would be again the centre of Christendom and civilisation, and where now cattle grazed around Saint John Lateran Ever afterwards, every great house, court and city was open to him, even Florence that had exiled his father The Pope and great churchmen were his friends He could have taken high

and valued offices, like Papal Secretary, but he preferred in his armour of pride his liberty and his solitary glory

He divided his habitation there was the solitude of Vaucluse, the closed valley, where he lived a contemplative and untiring student's life in a cottage with one servant, dug and tended his garden with his own hands and planted the fruit-trees and flowers of his fancy, fed on figs, olives, nuts and fish from the little Sorgue that rose from the peacock blue pool, his transalpine Helicon, at the foot of a sheer barren cliff, and there was the domestic companionship of the house he had built himself at Parma where he had a benefice

He, too, had his great grief during the Black Death when Laura died, in 1348, on the anniversary of the April day on which he had first seen her Friends died, too Although the desire for glory remained as a vanity that he never discarded—there was too much to feed the desire and make it grow by what it fed on in every street he walked—yet, his mind now nourished itself on philosophy, in meditation on the goodness of solitude and the nature of our mortal life and of eternity, and in rediscovering lost antiquity He had the Roman *gravitas* besides the pomp, as part of his egotism

What kind of man was it, then, that Giovanni Boccaccio hastened out of Florence to meet on the highway and, as it is supposed, to see for the first time in mid-October, 1350?

Certainly not the "feeble whipster" that Thomas Carlyle liquidated so engagingly in 1822 in a letter to Jane Welsh "What a feeble whipster was this Petrarch, with all his talents!" exclaimed vociferous Thomas "To go dangling about, for the space of twenty years, puffing and sighing after a little coquette, whose charms lay chiefly in the fervour of his own imagination, and the art she had to keep him wavering between hope and despondency—at once ridiculous and deplorable—that he might write Sonnets in her praise! Did you ever read his *Rime*? I find it quite impossible to admire them sufficiently to me they seem a very worthless employment for a mind like Petrarch's—he might have built a palace, and he has made some dozen snuff-boxes with invisible hinges—very pretty certainly—but very small and altogether useless" Poor Tom's a-cold! Nevertheless, Boccaccio was

happy to meet the sage of Vaucluse, while it may be doubted if he would have heeded the sage of Chelsea

It was Jubilee Year Petrarch, like thousands of other Christians who had escaped the plague, was making the pilgrimage to Rome As he approached Florence, between the reaped cornfields, the black and heavy shining olives hanging thickly, the farmhouses and the villas comfortable with harvest, he was met by a messenger who handed him a salutatory piece of verse by Boccaccio, and presently, as he rode in the fading autumnal evening towards the city that had cast out his father, he was greeted by Boccaccio himself who welcomed him with the courtesy and the respect due to the acknowledged prince of European letters That act of Boccaccio's—the hastening from the city to give welcome—was an expression of the self-effacing honour he would pay for twenty-five years To him, the handsome, grave, rather solemn and unctuously-spoken visitor, dressed in *capuche* and mantle and booted, was master, father and teacher He had attained heights of fame denied, as yet publicly, to Dante, he was learned in antiquity, he was the poet of such perfect verse as made other men despair of their own inferior words

"Can anyone imagine," inquired Boccaccio in the Fourteenth Book of his *De genealogia deorum gentilium*, with Osgood translating with delicate accuracy, "that Plato would have been mad enough to banish Francis Petrarch?" The answer is an encomium "From his youth Petrarch has lived celibate, and such has been his horror at impure and illicit love, that his friends know him for a perfect model of saintly and honourable living A lie is his mortal enemy, and he abhors all the vices Truth finds in him her sanctuary, and virtue her adornment and delight He is a pattern of Catholic piety—dutiful, gentle, devout, and so modest that he is called a second Parthenias He is, besides, the present glory of the art of poetry, an eloquent and sweet-tongued speaker . What more could one say? For surely he exceeds human limits and far outstrips the powers of man Such praise I utter not of an ancient who died centuries ago, rather of one who, please God, is alive and well, of one whom you, my snarling monsters, if you trust not my words, may see with your own eyes, and seeing, believe."

Boccaccio had believed before he had seen The "snarling monsters" were the enemies of poetry and learning with whom he contended vehemently all his life, and because they were enemy to poetry, they were enemy to Petrarch who must needs be metamorphosed into an angel! Florence, therefore, was being honoured by the visitation, and he, Boccaccio, was being exalted by the mere presence But it would be unjust to think that Boccaccio's reverence was absolutely unrealistic, and that his judgment became smothered in sycophancy Boccaccio would have been incapable emotionally of lamenting the Avignon sojourn of the Papacy in the idealistic terms that made Petrarch's appeals high, mighty, sonorous and useless, he would never have been capable of the error in judgment of men involved He was Tuscan, he was Florentine, he was shrewd He had a real, though shabby knowledge, of mankind And as he stood there in welcome on the Florentine highway, and later as he entertained his revered *Maestro* among friends in his own house for a few days, he must have occasionally remarked the contradictions and tensions of Petrarch's life and character

Petrarch truly loved the solitude of the hermit but he gloried in the life of the courts and in public acclamation Petrarch professed self-sufficiency but he dreaded boredom Petrarch was autocratic in his judgments but his appetite for flattery and agreement was almost ridiculous Petrarch could decry that infirmity, the lust for fame, while he intrigued and caballed for the very thing he decried Petrarch minimised his poems in the vulgar tongue and yet he polished and repolished them as though the trifles were more precious than the vaunted Latin, as in truth they were Petrarch could make himself the domestic celebrity of the Visconti who aimed at the destruction of the free cities, but he inveighed against the tyrants that divided the Garden of the Empire And celibate Petrarch regarded women, thinking none good but some worse than others, with as low a regard as some of the mediaeval satirists, while he comforted himself with a concubine and produced children In a word, an idol not all divinity for the reverent Boccaccio who found the company of sinners congenial!

As with some of Boccaccio's works, the epic *Africa* could be swapped at immense profit for an account, even a very brief account,

of what those two men, creators of a literature, had to say to each other on that October night in the Florentine house Unfortunately, the exchange cannot be made We know that in a few days Petrarch hurried on to Rome, and arrived there in pain from the kick of a philistine horse he received on the hill out of Bolsena, and so made his pilgrimage He was back again in November when the mists were rising and the cold keener, to be welcomed at his birthplace, Arezzo, as if he were an acceptable prince—or a saint—gravely treading the clamorous streets We may be sure that his tread like his speech was grave, measured, solemn, and that he would have agreed with Boccaccio's disciple, Benvenuto da Imola, who wrote the admonishment *Sicut enim gravitas et modestia decet sapientem in actibus et verbis, sic et incessu Velocitas enim est magis negotiatorum et mercatorum, quam philosophorum et poetarum*, which is a rule of conduct I recommend to all writers who suffer duns and the importunities of publishers "Just as gravity and measure are proper to the wise man both in deed and words, so too in gait For hustling belongs rather to business men and merchants than to philosophers and poets"

Back in Florence on the homeward road, Petrarch met Boccaccio again, and conversed with him and his friends, among them Francesco Nelli, Prior of SS Apostoli, later secretary to Niccolò Acciaiuoli, and one Lapo da Castiglionchio who presented a copy of Quintilian's newly found *Institutions* By the New Year, he was in Padua

He and Boccaccio were not long parted Once more Boccaccio set off on a mission that, next to the visit to Dante's daughter, must have been the most gratifying of his career It was a mission that revealed both the obdurate pride of Petrarch and the characteristic blind spot of the mercantile mind

At the end of 1348, the Republic had founded a new university In the next year it had extracted from Clement VI the same privileges as were held by the universities of Paris and Bologna The intention was to rival Pisa and to attract foreign students and new citizens, for the plague had diminished the population by some 100,000 out of about 170,000 souls It was sound, practicable policy but the results were not quick enough for the hustlers What was needed—one could almost write the speeches in which

the proposal was made—what was needed was a scholar of eminence, a man whose worth was guaranteed by the approval of every city in the civilised world, a friend of scholars, a man who would attract to our city by his very distinguished presence hundreds, nay thousands, of the best brains of Europe

And what man possessed the requirements except that recent and exceedingly renowned visitor to our city, Francesco Petrarca, the laureate poet, friend of our esteemed and respected citizen Messer Giovanni Boccaccio Let him be invited Let us give recognition to his sterling qualities by offering him any chair he pleases at our famed university There was, to be sure, the small insignificant matter of the decree of exile and the confiscation of his father's property—it were best to let bygones be bygones, for even the best of us occasionally makes a mistake or two !—and everything can be arranged satisfactorily

The small matter was promptly arranged The decree was repealed It was decided to send Petrarch the value of the confiscated property—as bait, of course—as well as an offer of a chair in the new university Now, it is of the nature of the business-mind to make money the measure of living It is a measure that works very well, God knows, but there are many things which it does not measure at all, as the devil said when he rejected the magdalen's and stuffed the usurer's soul into his sack A very flattering official letter was carried north by Giovanni Boccaccio in the spring of 1351 to Petrarch at Padua Petrarch read, and he dallied with acceptance, for, as the Florentines were aware, flattery was a wine on which he could become intoxicated gladly They had fortified the wine by describing him as the only man capable of making the university illustrious, and by referring to the immortal epic, the *Africa*, which lay unpublished in a drawer

While Petrarch dallied, Boccaccio stayed They talked about books, or Petrarch studied while Boccaccio copied the compositions he regarded as immortal, and in the evenings, they sat or walked in the garden till the pastel-tinted twilight made their placid colloquies drowsy It is probable that Boccaccio spurred home happy with success that was to be made empty when later in the year Petrarch left Padua, not for Florence, but for the congenial

solitude of Vaucluse The Florentines, in their magnanimity, rescinded the repeal of the decree of exile

The tardiness of the chief literary man of Europe was not held against Boccaccio He was useful, it appears, perhaps indispensable, as an ambassador, just as the embassies and official appointments were useful to him But they must have interfered with his studies which were stimulated by Petrarch's bookish conversation, encouragement and example, and with his writing which at this period must have consisted chiefly of the *Decameron* After his apparently victorious homecoming from Padua, and while they still imagined that Petrarch would become an advertisement for their university and city, the Florentines appointed Boccaccio as one of the treasurers of the Commune, at sixteen florins monthly, but this treasury appointment lasted for only two statutory months, January and February, 1351 Then, in December, in the harsh winter weather, he was off again on his travels For the next two or three years it is only as a figure in official documents that we see him

They were, however, important documents, not to be entrusted to a high-ranking fool or an illustrious nonentity First, there was the dispute with the Visconti about Bologna "Ah! Bologna!" exclaimed Boccaccio in the *Decameron* (VII, 7th), "how sweetly mixed are the elements in thy women! Had I but words apt to praise them as they deserve, my eloquence were inexhaustible" He surely had words enough, but not for analysing the special blend of earth, water, air and particularly fire, in the Bolögna beauties, as he laboured up Italy to the Tyrol, chafing his scholarly buttocks saddle-sore, discerning that the moderate pomp of embassy was more than counterbalanced by the weather, shivering in the blasts that thorned his comfort-loving flesh, and nursing from the damp the official letters to Conrad, Duke of Teck, and to Ludwig of Brandenburg, Count of Tyrol, whose aid was begged against the Visconti of Milan Florence was in trouble, but the appeal was fruitless By March of the next year, communications were broken off as ineffectual, and the end of all effort was that Florence came to terms with the Visconti in April, 1353

To Boccaccio's horror, his own dear friend and paragon took service with the arch-enemy, John Visconti Boccaccio could not

keep silent In a valiant letter that recalled the university mission to Padua and the sunset hush of the garden where they had talked, he taunted Petrarch, allegorically as Sylvanus but nonetheless pointedly, as being a traitor to native Florence, and with yielding to Visconti, lesser than Robert of Naples and the Pope himself whom he had rejected He asked him why he, upholder of liberty and honest poverty, had fallen prey to the foreigner and evil gain He told him that the friends he held dear would, in the revulsion of disappointment, condemn him It was not in any way the kind of letter to which Petrarch, soaked in flattery, had been accustomed, but let it be placed to his credit that he never allowed it to sour the wine of friendship of which he and Boccaccio would drink deep and well and long

In the meantime, Clement VI had died at Avignon, to be succeeded by the Frenchman, Stephen Aubert, as Innocent VI, and Charles IV, grandson of the Emperor Henry who had been Dante's second Moses, was about to descend on Italy As what? As a third Moses? As the avenging hero of the Ghibellines and enemy of the Papal power? Or as emperor of the priests with the Pope's blessing? The Florentines did not know One of the ironies of their perplexed condition was that they, head of the Guelf cause which was now more a label than a *politique*, had already appealed to Charles IV for assistance against the Visconti,—and had not got any The mentality of the new Pope interested them, therefore, very deeply It was a channel to be sounded whereby they might glide to safety The sounder was to be Giovanni Boccaccio

As *ambaxiatorus Comunis*, this was his most difficult assignment It led him into the very parlour of high politics where a false move by lesser spiders among the greater might set the radiating web vibrating unduly, even to the farthest rafters of the European house There was no danger he would make such a move unless he exceeded his instructions These defined the limits of his interview with the Pope As he rode that many-leagued, wearisome journey with a prayer or two to Saint Julian, up the Italian roads, where the carts rumbled to the jingling of bells and whipcracks, and the grey disturbed dust powdered the lower green of the cypresses, and as he followed the coast from Pisa by the Ligurian and French Riviera,

through blazing Provence and then up the umbrageous highway through soft Venaissin, by the rushing Rhone river to Avignon, he must have conned the official instructions many, many times and tried to formulate, after the writer's habit and despite the hypnotic regular jogging of the saddle, what the Pope would say and what he himself would reply Mercifully, it was early summer, or rather, April and May, 1354, when a man who was getting somewhat fat and corpulent would not be roasted to a jiggling cinder on the saddle by the cumulative sun He was given forty-five days for the journey—which would be extended by another fifteen on June 30—at four Florentine pounds and ten *soldi* a day and three horses, with one Bernardo Cambi as companion who would be allowed only twenty *soldi* and one mount

He would need the eloquence, the ambassadorial graces, and the shrewdness, of which the Florentines must have believed he was possessed They had instructed him that by way of preliminary he was to assure the Pope of Florentine devotion, *secundo, narrabit Sanctitati Sue quod Illustris Romanorum et Boemiae Rex, per suas licteras, et nuncios Comuni Florentino et eius Regiminibus, advenctum suum ad partes Italicas fiendum in proximo nuntiavit que annuntiatio miranda venit auditui predictorum, pro eo quod, nunquid descendat de Summi Pontificis conscientia vel non, in Comuni Florentie non est clarum Quod Comune, devotum Sancte Romane Ecclesie intendens, ut consuevit, hactenus a Sancta Matre Ecclesia, in nichilo deviare, certiorari cupit die Apostolica conscientia ut in agendis procedat cauctius, et suis possit, favore apostolico, negotiis providere* (Secondly, he will relate to His Holiness that the Illustrious King of the Romans and of Bohemia has announced through his envoys and nuncios to the Florentine Commune and to his realms that he will make his arrival presently in Italian parts, which announcement comes as a surprise to the aforesaid hearers, for the reason that it is not clear in the Florentine Commune whether or not he descends with the knowledge of the Supreme Pontiff Wherefore, the Commune, wishing strongly as has been customary so far to deviate in nothing from Holy Mother Church, desires to be made certain of the Apostolic mind so that she may proceed cautiously in the things to be done, and can provide with Apostolic goodwill for negotiations)

In brief, Messer Giovanni was to find out how the wind was blowing in windy Avignon!

And what was he to say if the Pope declared that the prospective Emperor would come with Papal approval? Why, he was to express devotion to the Pope and to the Church, and to beg that the Pope should preserve the liberty of Florence But "if the aforesaid Supreme Pontiff declared that he knew nothing of the descent and wished to inquire the desires of the Florentine Commune from the ambassador, he was to say he had no instructions except to carry out the Supreme Pontiff's will" And lastly, whatever precise and final answer should be given to the requests by his Apostolic Holiness, the aforesaid ambassador was to return with as swift steps as possible Ah! that was the simple business

It all seemed simple on the face of it, if one neglected the small detail of the Pope's own policy which had to be complex and which might prevent him from giving any answer at all Innocent VI was not a man to be played on he was a reformer who had already begun to bustle luxury out of Avignon and eject the clerical hangers-on and the grafters, and cleanse the stables where dissolute living, simony, lechery, and the more unspeakable Italian vices, were comfortably bedded So said French annalists, and vices are apt to become unspeakable at the other side of a frontier! Besides, Innocent had despatched the Spaniard, Cardinal Giles de Albornoz, more soldier than ecclesiastic, into the papal states and Romagna especially, for those campaigns that quietened the Visconti somewhat and prepared the way for the return of the Papacy from Avignon to Rome Innocent was a man very likely to perceive what was guile and what was sincerity in the Florentines

As we know, Boccaccio's embassy was extended Did he find it difficult to obtain audience immediately? Or was he kept waiting while Papal agents investigated not so much the latest Florentine intentions as the latest Florentine moves? Or did he delay in amusement in the city that Petrarch designated the cess-pool of Europe, observing, eating French food and drinking French wine, chucking a pretty chin or two, visiting Petrarch's friends, strolling the streets where the pigeons flocked down from the roofs to peck in the dust? Whatever delayed him, it was not success He rode back to Florence, not with a precise and final answer but with so

vague a reply from the Pope as made it necessary a few months later for another Florentine ambassador to ride the same road, on the same errand, and with almost the same instructions He had failed Nevertheless, the reason for his failure had nothing to do with his personal reputation, and little with his worth, but with complicated Papal politics that could not then be resolved into definite answer but that later issued in a blessing on the entry of Charles, King of the Romans Besides, it was not Boccaccio's last embassy for Florence, or to a Pope

Anyway, politics were not his *métier* We have no record of his pride in his appointments But we have record of his industry as a writer who, despite the distractions of embassies and missions, had managed to produce during those years between 1348 and 1353, the book by which he would be chiefly and almost solely remembered This was the *Decameron*

II

I intend to recount one hundred Novels or Fables or Parables or Stories, as we may please to call them, which were recounted in ten days by an honourable company of seven ladies and three young men in the time of the late mortal pestilence

—Boccaccio's *Decameron*, translated by J M Rigg

THE FLORENTINE MERCHANTS WHO EDGED THEIR WAY SO PROFITABLY up and down Europe, across to Asia and down to Africa, often carried home with them more enduring and profitable merchandise than precious stones, bales of cloth and wool, contracts and letters of privilege They carried the news They were in the way of observing changes in kingdoms and principalities, and they were shrewd observers whose eyes and ears were sharpened not merely by the chances of usury and trade but by their own native liveliness Their roads ran through quiet luxuriant countrysides where nothing much happened or through troubled lands where cities lay besieged and the stripped pillaged dead festered under the weather, and they traversed desolate regions where common bandits, or the more dangerous wandering troops of mercenary soldiers, the scum of ill-paid European armies, were the stimulators of frenzied appeals to heaven and patron saints

They gathered news of plague, flood, famine, and every manner of disaster with which to entertain and flabbergast their stay-at-home friends and customers by the Arno But more enduring than the news were the stories, the tavern yarns and inn epics that they, like commercial men of every age, collected during the respites of their endless journeyings, as they wryly sipped English ale or quaffed the full wines of Burgundy or cautiously tippled on the tarry heady stuff of Spain,—with boasts about the good wines they had left at home ! What new story have you ? The question was inevitable as the attempt to do business

A map of their travels, if such a map could be drawn, would be a wonderful thing composed of lines radiating from Florence and webbed around the Western World But more wonderful still, more wonderful even than any design made by Virgil the magician, or than a vision wreathing in the multicoloured smoke

of a witch's fire, would be a *mappa mundi* representing the origins and the universal travels and voyages of the stories that were swapped It would cover the world of chivalry, romance, saga, epic, fable, *scéal*, legend, myth, *fabliau*, *conte* and myth, riddle, puzzle, game and joke, it would show the complicated traffic unwittingly carried on between boatmen on the yellow rivers of Marco Polo's Cathay and the princes of bejewelled India and all the hived multitudes of the fabulous East, with the orange growers of Andalusia and the well-fed randy vintners of Touraine and, say, the hard-headed respectable business men of Tuscany

From the vast map of the world of romance and interchanging folk-lores, a man could read by inference of a universal human relationship more abiding than the compulsory and planned associations of kings and emperors The empires and the conquests themselves passed into stories, told and retold till, like coins rubbed by an infinitude of marketings, the inscription of their origin and provenance was utterly gone and they were remade and restamped, and Alexander became a giant, Virgil a necromancer, and Prester John beckoned from legend-echoing Africa That imaginary map, one must say, would now no longer represent an existing reality The folk-lores of the West fade, and the folk-lorists scrabble the fragments together while the descendants of the peoples who once, for thousands of years that is, whiled away the winters with bright story-telling, turn for their entertainment to mechanical inventions and the supreme benefits of universal education But the imaginary map would have represented a living reality to Messer Giovanni Boccaccio, when he was writing and compiling his *Decameron*

Only, as far as we know, he was not always conscious with precision of the remoter origins of the hundred tales which he set down with superb artistry in his resonant, somewhat involved prose, at the beginnings of Italian literature The learned have amused themselves as the learned will, God bless them, with tracing origins and parallels for the stories in the *Decameron* They have surmised India and Persia, smelt out old Greek and Roman authorities, sniffed in old mediaeval histories and chronicles, yelped with joy in the discovery that Boccaccio even repeated some things from the *Filocolo*, whooped over discovered likenesses with collections like the *Cento Novelle Antiche* and the *Gesta Romanorum*,

and even excused much of Boccaccio's bawdiness on the dubious score that he borrowed some one-third of his stories, it has been said, from French *contes* and *fabliaux* French, it appears, was the language of international bawdry even before it became the language of diplomacy! But Boccaccio was not primarily interested in origins or in shifting responsibility His concern was with telling stories in the most effective manner he could command and according to the best plan he could conceive

He was burdened with the riches of mediaeval romance, and mediaeval romance was a treasury that did not distinguish so as to exclude any tales of any land It was universally inclusive, like the desire of the philosophers It took the lead, tin, copper and iron as well as the gold If there be any reader who wishes to roll and tumble orgiastically in the gold like a Roman Emperor enjoying himself in his counting-house, why, there are collections even more inclusive than Giovanni Boccaccio's, and one of the most recent and most worthy of being clutched to the bosom is John Revell Reinhard's *Mediaeval Pageant* Such a collection will give the reader a faint notion of the rich material that packed and stuffed the chambers of Boccaccio's imagination when he came to compile and write the *Decameron*

But whereas the *Mediaeval Pageant* is for us rather like a very interesting and orderly museum, staffed by a witty, informative and thoroughly informed guide, the *Decameron* was for Boccaccio more like a well-behaved vivacious company who recounted tales that were still, many of them, quick on the mouths of living story-tellers merchants, scholars, artists, tavern cronies, pilgrims, sinners and saints His aim was to bring order into the riches by selection and by a carefully designed framework, and the riches would become life, not just life as he saw it, for he was unable to grip his tongue in his cheek like a grave ponderous realist who is really a spoiled preacher, but as he saw it in the form of entertainment, and all around the rich picture, with its studies as sober as daylight and grotesque as dreams, he set multitudinous death And so the light on the figures in the stories is preternaturally intensified like the light on the scalloped veined leaves of an overhanging tree and on the separate ribbed blades of grass seen from the bottom of a pit

In the pit the dead were heaped The pit was the Black Death Boccaccio's description of the plague with which he introduced the *Decameron*, has been rightly praised, as I have said, for its vividness As a setting it may seem mechanical, it may even seem an inordinate excuse for bringing seven young women and three young men together that they might tell the stories Boccaccio wanted told, but there is no questioning its apt power, even after the passing of six hundred years, to make the reader feel the revivifying relief of fleeing from the rotting city out to the summer fields and the clear warm air and the cool fountains

It was on a Tuesday that Pampinea, Fiammetta, Filomena, Emilia, Lauretta, Neifile and Elisa met Panfilo, Filostrato and Dioneo in the church of Santa Maria Novella while the plague was at its height and compacted to slip away to some country villa The next day they set out, " nor had they journeyed more than two short miles ", to use Rigg's translation, " when they arrived at their destination The estate lay upon a little hill some distance from the nearest highway, and, embowered in shrubberies of divers hues, and other greenery, afforded the eye a pleasant prospect On the summit of the hill was a palace with galleries, halls and chambers, disposed around a fair and spacious court, each very fair in itself, and the goodlier to see for the handsome pictures with which it was adorned, the whole set amidst meads and gardens laid out with marvellous art, wells of the coolest water, and vaults of the finest wines, things more suited to dainty drinkers than to sober and honourable women "

There, and in the other villas to which they removed, they sang and danced to the music of viols, with garlands on their heads, feasted from snow-white linen and silver beakers, lazed in the meadows in the shade of trees, bathed in cool lakes, and when the sun was hottest, " and the silence unbroken save by the cicalas among the olive-trees ", they told one hundred tales during ten days of their two weeks' holiday

The identification of the Florentine villas and estates that Boccaccio is assumed to have had in mind is a problem that becomes a passion with critics who believe that imaginative writing is on the same level as police-reports. Poggio Gherardo, Villa Palmieri where Queen Victoria stayed in the year 1888 but not decam-

eronesquely—Villa Rasponi, and the Podere della Fonte have been pushed for a place, disputed and defended like citadels Does it matter ? Does it matter whether any of the places really existed as long as the villas in the *Decameron* exist in all their bright and orgulously detailed beauty in the prose of Giovanni Boccaccio ? He did not describe the palatial houses, the gardens and the paradisal countryside expressly for the disputatious purpose of critics and the development of the tourist-trade but for the purpose of bringing his hundred tales that would be leisurely told into the sunlit air of a tiny kingdom round about which death scouted and crept in siege

Leisure is the air of his kingdom of tales It is the mediaeval leisure that found time for unending storytelling and giant pilgrimages and strict edifices of theological exposition and the minute illumination of books and the host of sculptured figures on the slowly-built cathedrals, and all the glories that have been mouldering, or standing forlorn from their local context in museums and libraries till our time of the triumphant high explosives The leisure seems to belong not only to another epoch but to another race

Listen it is the morning of the third day of the *Decameron* when, under the rule of Neifile who is selected queen of the story-tellers' kingdom, they remove in Sabbath peace to another place " So, to the chant of, perhaps, a score of nightingales and other birds, the queen, her ladies and the three young men trooping beside or after her, paced leisurely westward by a path little frequented and overgrown with herbage and flowers, which, as they caught the sunlight, began one and all to unfold their petals they arrived at a palace most fair and sumptuous Whereupon they hied them to a walled garden adjoining the palace, which, the gate being opened, they entered, and wonder-struck by the beauty of the whole passed on to examine more attentively the several parts It was bordered and traversed in many parts by alleys, each very wide and straight as an arrow and roofed in with trellis of vines, which gave good promise of bearing clusters that year, and, being all in flower, dispersed such fragrance throughout the garden as blended with that exhaled by many another plant that grew therein made the garden seem redolent of all the spices that ever

grew in the East The sides of the alleys were all, as it were, walled in with roses white and red and jasmine In the middle of the lawn was a basin of whitest marble, graven with marvellous art, in the centre thereof—whether the spring were natural or artificial I know not—rose a column supporting a figure which sent forth a jet of water of such volume and to such an altitude that it fell, not without a delicious plash, into the basin in quantity amply sufficient to turn a mill-wheel So, excellently well pleased, they roved about, plucking sprays from the trees, and weaving them into the fairest of garlands For the garden, they now saw, was peopled with a host of living creatures, fair and of, perhaps, a hundred sorts, and they pointed out to one another how here emerged a cony, or there scampered a hare, or couched a goat, or grazed a fawn, or many another harmless, all but domesticated, creature roved carelessly seeking his pleasure at his own sweet will"

It is a lost kingdom, indeed, in which small tame animals are an image of men and women without guile or malice It is the Abbey of Thélème without its conscious hedonising a mundane symbol to represent mankind's perennial desire for paradise

The manner of the storytelling was as leisurely as the airs that drifted in with the turn of the evening, before the dews fell and the fireflies shone There was no haste, though modern readers may often heartily wish there were Boccaccio foresaw boredom but his treatment of beloved readers was cavalier "I doubt not there will be such as will say that some of the stories are too long I answer that whoso has aught else to do would be foolish to read them, albeit they were short" Many readers have since taken his advice

On the first day when the instruments are being tuned and the players tested, so to speak, one story borrows another a rogue by a sham confession of his sins is reputed to be a saint, a Jew becomes a Christian because he is convinced of the credentials of the Church which can exist and flourish despite bad churchmen, a fine lady cures a king of his passion for her with a feast of hens and a few taunting words Then, till the ninth day the stories are ordered around common themes such as the adventures that end in unexpected happiness, the fortunes of those who attain some

desired thing arduously or find what they have lost, the disasters of love, the wiles of women, the tricks they play on men and that men play on them,—this, the portion of the eighth day is the liveliest, gustiest, and most rumbustious

On the ninth day, once more story just borrows story haphazardly, and on the tenth we hear of good deeds of liberality, magnificence, fidelity, fortitude and repentance, all for our edification

This thematic classification simplifies, as every reader knows, the variety achieved within each separate theme The places in which the stories happen are scattered all over the world Boccaccio could never be described as a regional storyteller tilling a small acre to the last handful of soil, but he could be described as an Italian who, with a *patria* as a centre, took the entire peninsula as his garden A gazetteer of his geography would reveal that while he specially favoured Florence and Naples, and did not forget Fiesole, Varlungo, and dear little Certaldo, he ranged up and down his whole country—let the list be alphabetical as he himself would have made it—Arezzo, Bologna, Genoa, Messina, Milan, Palermo, Pavia, Pisa, Pistoia, Prato, Ravenna, Rome, Siena, Treviso, Venice and Verona He also found room for Egypt, Asia Minor, England and Ireland, which two last countries were for him the limits of the West, where civilisation, nevertheless, was coming on And in all these places he set down some of his great and varied rout of kings and clowns, burghers, merchants, tradesmen, doctors (for whom he did not care), poets, painters, a holy man (unnamed), and all his winsome, buxom, seductive, lecherous, ugly, and repulsive lassies

The narrative pace of the tales is serene as the long summer Tuscan days it is a thing compounded of story-structure, the controlled liberal succession of details, and the stately rhythms of the prose, all encompassed in the free, firmamental illumination of an artist's mind like the luminous atmosphere that seems to make whole stretches of the Florentine *contrada*, with the humanised lines of the hills, the villas, the olives and the immemorial corn and vines, like a strictly composed aureate painting The serenity is there the order is perceived from which it comes but the general effect is of a crowd, a mediaeval crowd of figures leaning

out from the tympanum above a cathedral door, with long sad faces, royal countenances, roguish dials, prim beaks, as if they would break their stony hierarchies and the kings come tumbling down the pillars with the churchmen, the rogues monkeying with the respectable burghers, the nuns with the magdalens, in an uproarious hurly-burly, but it must be added that the general colouring of the faces is, with exceptions, quite uniform, as of stone

The exceptions are nearly all rogues, like Ser Ciappelletto, by profession a notary, who took pride in forging documents, or Dom Gianni di Barola who huckstered around the fairs of Apulia with a vast mingling of business and pleasure, or Ciacco, the witty and gluttonous diner-out, and his dead-spit image, Biondello, "a man very short of stature, and not a little debonair, more trim than any fly, with his blonde locks surmounted by a coif, and never a hair out of place", or Fra Cipolla, Friar Onion, who frequented the most famous onion-beds in all Italy which was Certaldo, and "was little of person, jolly-visaged and the very best of good fellows", an unlearned but fluent preacher with a wheedling way, and lastly, that trio of rascals, more engaging than any pallid mewing artists who ever minced out of Bohemia, simple amorous Calandrino whose wife could give him a sound drubbing for the good of his soul, and rowdy cavorting Bruno and Buffalmacco, rare bucks, sparks of the first water, happy as fed mongrels in the sun, capable of stirring the cockles of any heart that has not been hardened by piosity

The large leisure of the tales, of the prose in which they are written, of the storyteller himself and of his time, may be illustrated by a comparative study of the old chestnut of the Jew, the Sultan and the Three Rings, the third story of the first day of the *Decameron* It is probable that Boccaccio took the plot, which is very slight, from the popular collection called *Cento Novelle Antiche* or *Il Novellino*, a work of the previous century In that collection the story is a mere brief anecdote which, as may be observed, has at least the advantage of speedy narration, that is, if the reader requires speed Here is the story from *Il Novellino*

Saladin being in need of money was advised that he should find cause to sue a rich Jew who was in his kingdom and then

take from him all his property which was great beyond count. The Sultan sent for this Jew and inquired of him which was the best faith, thinking, "If he say the Jewish or the Christian, I'll declare that he sins against me, and if he say the Saracen, I'll ask why then do you hold to the Jewish?"

When the Jew heard the lord's inquiry, he answered thus "Sir, once upon a time there was a father who had three sons, and he had a ring, his very own, with a precious stone, the best in the world Each of these sons begged the father to leave him the ring at his death And when the father saw how each wanted it, he sent for a good goldsmith and said 'Master, make me two rings exactly like this, and put in each a stone similar to this' The master made the rings so exactly that no one could tell the good one, except the father He called the sons and one by one he gave each his ring in secret, and each believed he had the good ring, and no man knew the true facts except their father And so it is with faiths, sir The faiths are three, the Father who gave them knows the best, and the sons who are we, each believes that he has the good"

Then the Sultan, on hearing him slip out of it like that, did not know how he could find cause in him, and so let him go

It was a neat story, clever in an unsophisticated sort of way, and the Sultan seems a bit of an ass for not inquiring further whether the father had spilt the secret about the rings to any one of the sons But Boccaccio did not intend the tale to be an expression of religious indifferentism when he came to elaborate it for the *Decameron*, by extending dialogue and inserting the transitions which the anecdote skips The point of the anecdote is not that one religion is as good or as bad as another but that one man's wit can get him out of an apparently inescapable trap, just as the point of the many stories about cuckolds is not that adultery is good but that women are as wily as the devil himself, and even wilier,—a theme dear to mediaeval satirists

Boccaccio was not indifferentist, though he may have often been indifferent He did not make a philosophy out of his lapses He had his fling and sowed his wild oats, though not as thickly as those commentators would have us believe who see him only as a great portent of Renaissance roguery and forget that he was coloured by the strong sunset, darkly barred and flaming, of the

Middle Ages He was not a saint but, also, he certainly was not a non-believer, or a rebel against the Church though a satirist of churchman, or even a quarter-heretic In an eighteenth century book " by one Hager " which I have been unable to get, he was claimed, according to Hutton, as a Protestant before his time—like Dante and Saint Francis of Assisi—and Hutton calls the claim " this amazing nonsense " The sins of the disciples are visited on the imaginary prophet ! There could have been no doubt as to which ring Boccaccio regarded as the best

While, in the *De genealogia deorum gentilium*, he was playing ninepins with the charge that the pagan classical authors were bad for Christians, while he was confessing himself a sinner and declaring that we deceive ourselves if we trust too much in our own strength, he was also writing an exactly articulated credo, a summary of Christian belief, " which is so deeply rooted in my heart that by no effect of pagan antiquity nor any other power can it be uprooted, or be cut off, or fall away " One can only laugh when he adds " Ah, how strong and irresistible are the love assaults of women, especially at night " Laugh, and so return to the merriment that greeted the story of the shrewd Jew and the Three Rings

> Il Saladino, il valore del qual fu tanto che non solamente di piccolo huomo il fe di Babilonia Soldano, ma ancora molte vittorie sopra il Re saracini e cristiani gli fece avere, avendo in diverse guerre, ed in grandissime sue magnificenze, speso tutto il suo tesoro, e per alcuno accidente sopravvenutogli, bisognandogli una buona quantità di danari, nè veggendo donde così prestamente, come gli bisognavano, aver gli potesse, gli venne a memoria un ricco Giudeo, il cui nome era Melchisedech, il quale prestava ad usura in Alessandria, e pensossi costui avere da poterlo servire, quando volesse, ma sì era avaro, che di sua volontà non l'avrebbe mai fatto, e forza non gli voleva fare, perche, strignendolo il bisogno, rivoltosi tutto a dover trovar modo come il Giudeo il servisse, s'avvisò di fargli una forza da alcuna ragion colorata E fattolsi chiamare, e familiarmente ricevutolo, seco, il fece sedere, ed apresso gli disse Valente uomo, io ho da più persone inteso che tu se' savissimo, e nelle cose di Dio senti molto avanti, e per ciò io saprei volentieri da te, quale delle tre Leggi tu riputi la verace, o la giudaica, o la saracina, o la cristiana

Il Giudeo, il quale veramente era savio uomo, s'avviso troppo bene, che il Saladino guardava di pigliarlo nelle parole, per dovergli muovere alcuna quistione, e pensò non potere alcuna di queste tre piu l'una che l'altra lodare, che il Saladino non avesse la sua intenzione Per chè, come colui, il qual pareva d'aver bisogno di riposta per la quale preso non potesse essere, aguzzato lo 'ngegno, gli venne prestamente avanti quello che dir dovesse, e disse Signor mio, la quistione la qual voi mi fate e bella, ed a volervene dire ciò che io ne sento, mi vi convien dire una noveletta, qual voi udirete Se io non erro, io mi ricordo aver molte volte udito dire che un grande uomo e ricco fu già, il quale, intra l'altre gioje piu care, che nel suo tesoro avesse, era uno anello bellissimo e prezioso, al quale per lo suo valore e per la sua bellezza volendo fare onore, ed in perpetuo lasciarlo ne' suoi discendenti, ordinò che colui de' suoi figliuoli appo il quale, sì come lasciatogli da lui, fosse questo anello trovato, che colui s'intendesse essere il suo erede, e dovesse da tutti gli altri essere, come maggiore, onorato e reverito Colui al quale da costui fu lasciato, tenne simigliante ordine ne' suoi discendenti, e così fece come fatto avea il suo predecessore Ed in brieve andò questo anello di mano in mano a molti successori, ed ultimamente pervenne alle mani ad uno, il quale avea tre figliuoli belli e virtuosi, e molto al padre loro obedienti, per la qual cosa tutti e tre parimente gli amava Ed i giovani, li quali la consuetudine dello anello sapevano, sì come vaghi ciascuno d'essere il più onorato tra' suoi, ciascuno per sè, come meglio sapeva, pregava il padre, il quale era già vecchio, che quando a morte venisse, a lui quello anello lasciasse Il valente uomo, che parimente tutti gli amava, nè sapeva esso medesimo eleggere a qual piu tosto lasciar lo volesse, pensò, avendolo a ciascun promesso, di volergli tutti e tre soddisfare, e segretamente ad uno buono maestro ne fece fare due altri, li quali sì furono simiglianti al primiero, che esso medesimo che fatti gli avea fare, appena conosceva qual si fosse il vero E venendo a morte, segretamente diede il suo a ciascun de' figliuoli, li quali, dopo la morte del padre, volendo ciascuno la eredità e l'onore occupare, e l'uno negandolo all' altro, in testimonanza di dover ciò ragionevolmente fare, ciascuno produsse fuori il suo anello E trovatisi gli anelli sì simili l'uno all' altro, che qual fosse il vero non si sapeva conoscere, si rimase la quistione, qual fosse il vero erede del padre, in pendente, ed ancor pende E così vi dico, signor

mio, delle tre Leggi alli tre popoli date da Dio Padre, delle quali la quistion proponeste ciascuno la sua eredità, la sua vera Legge, e i suoi commandamenti si crede avere a fare, ma chi se l'abbia, come degli anelli, ancora ne pende la quistione

Il Saladino conobbe, costui ottimamente essere saputo uscire del laccio il quale davanti a' piedi teso gli aveva, a per ciò dispose d'aprirgli il suo bisogno, e vedere se servire il volesse, e così fece, apprendogli ciò che in animo avesse avuto di fare, se così discretamente, come fatto avea, non gli avesse risposto Il Giudeo liberamente d'ogni quantità che il Saladino richiese, il servì Ed il Saladino poi interamente il soddisfece, ed oltre a ciò gli donò grandissimi doni, e sempre per suo amico l'ebbe, ed in grande, ed ornorevole stato appresso di sè il mantenne

Next, here is the tale in J M Rigg's translation, with first a word or two about his englishing of the *Decameron* which has been rightly praised for its "careful accuracy and much spirit" Like that other first really complete English translation made by John Payne and printed for the Villon Society in 1886, Rigg's work suffers occasionally from a deliberately cultivated archaism, and unlike Payne's, it is sometimes eccentric There are roughly two views of translation and its aims first, one which envisages an old author dressed up for modern readers in what purports to be antique language—which, incidentally, most readers must, in their turn, retranslate into the current language of their nation and time, secondly, the other which recalls that the old author was using a vernacular in his own time and now envisages him speaking in a modern living language

Now, if a translator chooses and abides by either of the views he will produce work stamped, at least, with consistency Its impact will not be confused If, on the other hand, he does mingle the two views, he will produce motley work, impure in texture, and full of prickly irritations This has been the fate of the *Decameron* Boccaccio was not writing a dead language when he penned his one hundred tales but, rather, the fresh, new, impressionable and lively Italian which he, with Dante and Petrarch, helped to establish with a great literature. He himself, however, imagined or pretended to imagine that he wrote in "the vulgar Florentine, and in prose, in as homely and simple a style as may be" The style was

not as " homely and simple as may be " While he did use homely words and salty racy phrases, especially in dialogues between the hardy bucks of the city where the people were collaborators with him, the artist, he also allowed the man of Latin learning who had artificial periods and cadences echoing in his mind to intrude on the artist in the longer descriptive passages and generally in his redactions of classical tales, and thus he elaborated rhythms and constructions, so that homeliness was considerably beautified and simplicity made ornate

Compared with, say, the style of the letters of Saint Catherine of Siena or with the style of Sacchetti's stories, the manner of many of the tales in the *Decameron* is not simple but complicated, yet it was not a dead manner It was the lively, deliberated speech of a great artist Therefore, though his prose could be elaborate and ornate, it deserved to be englished with living English words and phrases Surely there were sufficient living English words in the nineteenth century—Dickens and Thackeray and Trollope considered that there were—without rummaging up the fancy-dress rags and tatters, the scraps of armour and the impossible court shoes, things like " fain " and " behove " and " thou sayest ", as well as " what boots it " and " of a surety " which are really " fewer causes of annoy " than the egregiously deformed " harsh to usward ", which, on being interpreted, means " harsh towards us " ! Zounds, what stiffs ! Translators who decide that dead authors should be translated as dead, forget that readers are living, for it is not recorded that the inhabitants of the next world have much time for reading, or much use for it Nathless, the Rigg translation is, of a surety, a very fine achievement, and the story of the Three Rings is one of the less quaint redactions Here it is ·

> Saladin, who by his great valour had from small beginnings (Payne's " from a man of little account " is closer to the Italian) made himself Soldan of Egypt, and gained many victories over kings both Christian and Saracen, having in divers wars and by divers lavish displays of magnificence spent all his treasure, and in order to meet a certain emergency being in need of a large sum of money, and being at a loss to raise it with a celerity adequate to his necessity, bethought him of a wealthy Jew,

Melchisedech by name, who lent at usance in Alexandria, and who, were he but willing, was, as he believed, able to accommodate him, but was so miserly that he would never do so of his own accord, nor was Saladin disposed to constrain him thereto So great, however, was his necessity that (again, Payne's "wherefore, need constraining him", is closer to the original) after pondering every method whereby the Jew might be induced to be compliant, at last he determined to devise a colourably reasonable pretext (Payne wins here also) for extorting the money from him So he sent for him, received him affably, seated him by his side, and presently said to him "My good man, I have heard from many people that thou art very wise, and of great discernment in divine things, wherefore I would gladly know of thee, which of the three laws thou reputest the true law, the law of the Jews, the law of the Saracens, or the law of the Christians?"

The Jew, who was indeed a wise man, saw plainly enough that Saladin meant to entangle him in his speech, that he might have occasion to harass him, and bethought him that he could not praise any of the three laws above another without furnishing Saladin with the pretext which he sought So, concentrating all the force of his mind to shape such an answer as might avoid the snare, he presently lit on what he sought, saying "My lord, a pretty question indeed is this which you propound, and fain would I answer it, to which end it is apposite that I tell you a story, which, if you will hearken, is as follows If I mistake not, I remember to have often heard tell of a great and rich man of old time, who among other most precious jewels had in his treasury a ring of extraordinary beauty and value, which by reason of its value and beauty he was minded to leave to his heirs for ever, for which cause he ordained, that, whichever of his sons was found in possession of the ring as by his bequest, should thereby be designated his heir, and be entitled to receive from the rest the honour and homage due to a superior The son, to whom he bequeathed the ring, left it in like manner to his descendants, making the like ordinance as his predecessor In short the ring passed from hand to hand for many generations, and in the end came to the hands of one who had three sons, goodly and virtuous all, and very obedient to their father, so that he loved them all indifferently The rule touching the descent of the ring was known to the young men, and each

aspiring to hold the place of honour among them did all he could to persuade his father, who was now old, to leave the ring to him at his death The worthy man, who loved them all equally, and knew not how to choose from among them a sole legatee, promised the ring to each in turn, and in order to satisfy all three, caused a cunning artificer secretly to make other two rings, so like the first, that the maker himself could hardly tell which was the true ring So, before he died, he disposed of the rings, giving one privily to each of his sons, whereby it came to pass, that after his decease each of the sons claimed the inheritance and the place of honour, and, his claim being disputed by his brothers, produced his ring in witness of right And the rings being found so like one to another that it was impossible to distinguish the true one, the suit to determine the true heir remained pendent, and still so remains And so, my lord, to your question, touching the three laws given to the three peoples by God the Father, I answer Each of these peoples deems itself to have the true inheritance, the true law, the true commandments of God, but which of them is justified in so believing, is a question which, like that of the rings, remains pendent"

The excellent adroitness with which the Jew had contrived to evade the snare which he had laid for his feet was not lost upon Saladin He therefore determined to let the Jew know his need, and did so, telling him at the same time what he had intended to do, in the event of his answering less circumspectly than he had done Thereupon the Jew gave the Soldan all the accommodation that he required, which the Soldan afterwards repaid him in full He also gave him most munificent gifts with his lifelong amity and a great and honourable position near his person

Of all the works that Boccaccio had so far written, the *Decameron* was, in one sense, the most detached from his personal life, and in another sense, the most intimate with the journey of his soul It stands midway in his development For a brief while he seems to attain balance, but it is a precarious balance, as if he had been riding two horses, a foot on each saddle, struggling to get erect, and suddenly he finds himself balanced and he stands, laughing with relief, airy, graceful, but sardonic for he knows that he has not yet found assured control and that presently, at a swerve or an

obstacle, he must slip to the security of one saddle One horse was the love of love, with its sexual devotion, its melancholy dissatisfaction and its basically cynical use of women, and the other horse was the love of God—with its necessary rule of life by reason and revealed laws, its prayers and appeals as humble as the mutterings of an old crone huddled in a corner of San Giovanni

A test of the change in his development, and in the attainment of balance, was his attitude towards women In the books of prose and verse that he had written since Maria d'Aquino urged him to tell the story of Florio and Biancofiore, he had intruded within his personal affairs, slipped in passages of disguised autobiography, and tried literature as a lover's blandishment, and all the time he had regarded women as the lovely partners of lovemaking, creatures to be adored and, of course, possessed Possession implied passion, and passion was the ecstasy towards which the cult of love strived as in a parody of the mystics striving for union with the Divine What was wrong with the cult of love was that it was not love set in its Christianly human place, and because it was thus in disorder, its theology became biology The cult was an attempt to rationalise something that was fundamentally irrational, and it failed For Boccaccio, it had issue in the comedy of the *Decameron* just as the attempt to rationalize sexuality in seventeenth-century England had issue in the comedy of the Restoration

For Boccaccio, the cult had meant a passage from love-affair to love-affair, and then the grand passion for the woman who was called the Little Flame, and at last something of disillusionment There had been adoration, possession, loss, wild appeal, and finally, in the *Decameron*, a momentary freezing of his sensitiveness with the sardonic smile of the detached observer The detachment was his defence Women had been enthroned? Well, that was a pardonable error of youth An error, nonetheless, for while women are pretty, delightful, enchanting, cuddlesome little things, ready to pleasure and be pleasured, they must in fact be taken warily, without too much faith, with some condescension and plenty of the indulgence a parent might have for playful children, because, as soon as one's back is turned, there they are off with other men, their hearts straying unconscionably from their girdles, frisky as

young heifers in the spring! Do you wish to see what they are like? Well, here they are, in some of my stories in the *Decameron*, in all their wantonness, their delicious, flighty, naughty animality, their shrewdness, their will-o'-the-wisp fidelity, and their readiness to obey faithfully the man who treats them severely,—like Griseild

The detachment was sardonic, Latin, distortive, and an escape It was a glaze, fixing a pattern but only temporarily It would crack and peel off, blistered by disillusionment He would scorn women, not because they were women, but not gods In a few years he would be writing with the wrath, some of the words, but not with the fiery decorum of a Saint Jerome about the filthy baseness of womankind, and the inadvisability of marriage for those who desired to live in peace as poet or philosopher Don Juan would become a Malvolio, and the last state would be as bad as the first except that he would possess two images to keep him whole and sane, the one of the idealised being whose prototype was named Fiammetta, and the other the Virgin Mother of God whose picture hung in Or San Michele as it hung enshrined over all the flurried, sad, riotous and puzzling traffic of his soul

While there was detachment in the treatment of his themes, there was predilection in the range of them The predilection was for stories about the depravity of monks and for stories about what is modernly euphemised as sex Mostly, he managed to combine the two motifs Because of this predilection he was subjected to criticism which he attempted, somewhat disingenuously, to mollify or avert, even before the *Decameron* was completed Before considering the defence he put up, it will be helpful towards an understanding of himself and his book to glance at the nature of what he had done

He banged away with fine whacks and much coarse laughter at the monks and priests who used privileged position and religious habit to play the gallant, and he guffawed at the antics of layfolk and clerics who would make up to the devil himself were he a personable young woman He wrote many such tales, too many, it may be said, so that the general effect of the book is not of balanced but of too high colouring, but not as many as the same general effect would lead a reader to believe after the attrition

of his memory and time had obliterated details Indeed, smut-hunting readers will be alarmed by the number of tales that fail to provide them with their favourite secret pastime !

Seeing what he did, we may inquire if he invented the sins of the monks just for the fun of the thing Was he an anti-cleric by principle who manufactured sticks for whacking poor dogs ? He was not The shocking and funny pictures he gives of monks gone wild was not a fancy but a reflection of the dismal sordid truths of his time, which is borne out in the indictments of Saint Catherine of Siena, but whereas Catherine in her great Christ-likening sanctity wept the tears of Christ and tried to work transformation, he, being an insecurely minded man, could only rail with laughter at the outrages The Black Death had not improved and fortified clerical and lay discipline which had already been loosened by the removal of the Papacy to Avignon among other things On the contrary, it had sent those who chafed under discipline on a career of profligacy which, but for the reforms of men like Innocent VI, might have imperilled numbers of the faithful with a death-rush of Gadarene swine The rush was stemmed There were preachers and satirists at every hand, lay and clerical, and it might be commented in passing that the feeling of division, almost as of two churches, between clerical and lay folk was not then palpable enough to make a layman very chary of interfering in clerical affairs Far away in England, Chaucer, too, would rail with laughter

There was, then, a gangrenous sore in Christendom that needed to be cauterised and healed by sanctity, and biding that, with something like laughter which is a corrective of disproportion But disproportion was the very fault with which Boccaccio could be charged He did not work into the scheme of his book that other and predominating healthy element without which Christendom could not have survived, and without which his *Decameron* is lopsided For morality is necessary to aesthetics. To correct the historical disproportion we must supply, as we read, a knowledge, even a vague knowledge, of the millions of humble and great folk—Agnes of Montepulciano, Andrew Conti, Andrew Corsini, a Florentine and contemporary bishop of Fiesole, Andrew Dotti, Angela of Foligno, Antony Pavoni, Antony of Amandola, Bartholomew Pucci-Franceschi, Bartolo Buonpedoni, Bonaventure

Badurio, Bonavita of Lugo, Catherine of Siena, then a little girl, Clare of Rimini, Francis of Pesaro, Gregory of Verucchio, Guy Maramaldi, Hugolino Magalotti, Joan Soderini, another Florentine, John of Vallambrosa, once a necromancer, Juliana Falconieri, Lucy of Amelia, Michelina of Pesaro, Thomas Corsini, Raymond of Capua who was Saint Catherine's right-hand man, and Peter Petroni who frightened the soul in Boccaccio, and who knows how many more ?—all who worshipped God and honoured His Mother and the saints with both humdrum and exceedingly holy lives, built and ornamented and thronged the churches, flocked on the pilgrimages, endeavoured to pattern their village, city and state laws on Christian precept, and welcomed death when it was watched and warded by prayers for the dying and the Last Sacraments

" Scandal," wrote Hutton in his introduction to the *Everyman's Library* edition of Rigg's version of the *Decameron*, " scandal is more noisy than virtue We know that the secular clergy, the monks and friars too were not generally but only exceptionally corrupt that had it been otherwise, the revolt would have appeared not when it did and where it did and for quite other reasons, but in Italy and in the fourteenth century, in a country still able to produce numberless saints, and, under the direct influence and direction of the clergy, to cover almost every church with the purest and loveliest art in the world "

Granting, then, that Boccaccio's predilection for stories about depraved clergymen had a basis in fact though a disproportionate and sour fruitage, we must ask whether the outspokenness with which he told many of the stories was completely indefensible A similar question could be asked about many of his sex stories His own answers to charges show that he himself felt uncomfortable, but not at all as uncomfortable as snivelling, indefatigably censorious malvolios imagine who loathe the flesh, suspect matrimony, equate immorality, God help them, with the natural instincts of farmyard animals, ferret odorously around the bookshops and art-galleries of cities seeking what they may bestale, and who would rather see society sick for the sake of preserving euphemisms than made wholesome by the use of a few of the words which, as they know, are not uncommon in the mouths of—which they do not believe—far better people than they

Outspokenness is not in itself indefensible To state it like that is, of course, to remove it from a particular human context, but statements must be removed like that occasionally and dusted, as it were, to test whether they be universally valid or gimcrack expedients Time and place, temporal needs and local conditions and customs—all that we might sum up under the word " mood " —qualify the application of the principle The mood which limits, permits, expurgates or suppresses outspokenness differs from age to age, even from country to country in the same age, and even from place to place in the same country There are dialects, so to speak, of bawdry The mood of Boccaccio's Italy or of Chaucer's England differed from the mood of much of the educated English-speaking world during the reign of that good lady whose presence at the Villa Palmieri in 1888 may have made ghosts twitter at the visitation Chaucer would have chortled ! So different was the mood that we, at the distance of six centuries, can hope to get the feel of it only by a thorough sousing in the literatures of the time and in the folk-tales and by a thorough forgetting of the grave and solemn preoccupation with sex as a substitute for religion which sickened so many minds during the first third of the twentieth century

The sousing will bring breath-snorting surprises We may blink at a story, for example, which the fourteenth-century Chevalier de la Tour Landry included in his book of moral instructions for his three daughters We may find it an impossible effort to attune our minds to the change of mood, for the mood was very different The *Decameron* was criticised, but the *Decameron* was accepted It ran through edition after edition There is a legend that it was one of the books which Savonarola burned among other vanities on the Piazza della Signoria in 1497, but no one can soberly take Savonarola as a test of a prevailing mood Rather was he one of the more bleak summits of an ascetic revolt that expressed, in an intensely exalted manner, the effort of Christendom to elevate itself as by earthquake

A test of the book, though it is a negative test, is the fact that it was not subjected to ecclesiastical censure till the Council of Trent when it was indexed until expurgated The Council of Trent was the deliberated, governing voice of a Christendom at

war and the war was siege Propaganda was being shovelled and pelted around Europe—the language of many of the controversialists was stronger than many of us can stomach even after a sousing in the broader ages—and the religious rebels were prompt to use any means of vilification Defection in the ranks of the faithful had to be forestalled The tales about the clergy in the *Decameron* were of the kind that could be used for the defection of the faithful, and therefore the *Decameron* was indexed However, one cannot but be amused when one reads in Hutton, Corrazzini and other authorities, that there were editions of the *Decameron* published at Florence late in the sixteenth century in which expurgation consisted of allowing the grossness to remain and of metamorphosing the clergy and religious into laymen

Criticism of the *Decameron* began even before Boccaccio had the book finished It seems that he circulated the first three days' storytelling, probably as a test of the merits of the work, and that among the previewers were some critics who rattled him In the proem to the Fourth Day he attributed the deprecation to envy, which suggests that his deprecators were fellow-authors, and admitted jocosely "that I have been shrewdly shaken, nay, all but uprooted by the blast, and altogether lacerated by the bite of this same envy" It was charged against him that he had shown too great a fondness for the ladies in his attempts to minister to their "gratification and solace" with stories, and that "I should shew sounder sense if I bethought me how to get my daily bread, than, going after these idle toys, to nourish myself upon the wind"

No word yet of impropriety ! But the word came In his epilogue to the completed work he takes up new charges and, uncomfortable under them, endeavours to reply with some gravity and also with a great deal of fooling, equivocation and contempt It was cast in his teeth by the unnamed critics that "I have used excessive licence in the writing of these stories, in that I have caused ladies at times to tell, and oftentimes to list, matters that, whether to tell or to list, do not well beseem virtuous women" That he felt there was something telling in the criticism is demonstrated when, many years later, about his sixtieth year, he protested against the reading of his "hardly decent" trifles by the wife of a patron knight, Mainardo Cavalcanti, but nevertheless, he defended He denied, first, that

any of his stories is " so unseemly but that it may without offence be told by anyone, if but seemly words be used "

Next, he added that even granting the stories were unseemly, it was demanded by the nature of them, and thirdly, even if there be " here and there a trifling indiscretion of speech, such as might ill sort with one of your precious prudes, who weigh words rather than deeds ", was it not permissible for him to use the words, of which he gives examples, that men and women used in conversation, fourthly, the location of the storytelling was not a church or an assembly of clergy or philosophers where speech should be seemly but a pleasant garden where were young folk not too young to be seduced by stories, in a time of distress, fifthly, how the stories are interpreted and used depends on the quality of the hearers, for corrupt mind, from which even the Sacred Scriptures are not immune, never yet understood any word in a wholesome sense, sixthly, it was not in his power to omit certain stories because they were improper, since he merely wrote down what was told, " wherefore, 'twas for those by whom they were told to have a care that they were proper ", and lastly, if it be said he has an evil and a venomous tongue in what he says about the monks, why, then, even when the book was nearly finished, a pretty neighbour told him it was the goodliest and sweetest tongue in the world ! And that is all the answer he will give

The contempt in the defence shows what he thought of his contemnors, but he was uneasy Disingenuously, he took refuge in his own fictions, the storytellers, and in the nature of the stories, as if he were not responsible for the choice of them He fobbed off the critics with the hoary retort that it was not he, but they who had the bad mind. In a word, he laughed There is no other way than laughter of dealing with the *Decameron*, save not to read it at all

To him the *Decameron* was a trifle in the sense that it was not to be compared with the serious work of philosophers or even with his own labours as a student of antiquity, but, in truth, it was not a trifle in the sense that he had expended on it much thought, solitary toil and careful artistry Contemporaries praised it, excepting one whose praise he would have exchanged for all the rest He must have felt a twinge of disappointment, not very

deep or lasting perhaps, when, as an old and sick man within a year of death and all vanities put from him, he received a letter from the one living writer he worshipped, Petrarch, then even nearer death, during the summer of 1374 He read that Petrarch had lately got a copy of the work and had run through it like a hurried traveller who just glances but never stops, and had got much pleasure from turning the leaves, and was therefore not fitted to give a considered judgment

Very seignorial and evasive ! Petrarch had a scorn all his life for frivolities that were not his own, as well as a contempt for the vulgar tongue in which he contrarily wrote his perfect sonnets with fanatical care His judgment was not reflected in the career of the *Decameron* in Italian, or, for that matter, in European literature

In all its scores of editions and translations, in its truncated and unacknowledged versions, the book was a treasury for the first-hand or second-hand borrowings of dramatists, novelists, story-tellers, rimers, hacks, painters, illustrators, and, of course, commentators for La Fontaine of course, La Motte, Casti, Chaucer, for material in two of Shakespeare's plays, for Ben Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Middleton, Sir Philip Sydney, Moliere, Otway, Aretino, Beroald, Dryden, Hans Sachs, Lope de Vega, Keats, the Queen's own Tennyson, and an enormous crew of phrase-makers and word-spinners who, with or without a thank-you or a by-your-leave, owed something to the impecunious, fat, melancholy-gay Florentine with his hundred tales that were told among smooth lawns and jasmine and roses in the stillness of Tuscan summer afternoons while all around the Middle Ages tottered, fell and crawled, praying devoutly and in terror, or cracking lewd jokes, to the deep, wide pits of the Black Death

His countrymen have always seen him as one of the trinity with Dante and Petrarch who, within less than a century, exalted by abundant and precisely formed creative effort what was a new literature to the mountain heights three unsurpassed peaks that dominated the vast terrain of Italian letters by their altitude and that, for century after century, had issue in fruitful tributary waters An epic—the true epic of Christendom, as Joyce called the *Divine Comedy*, a collection of sonnets and songs, exquisite in technique,

and a bundle of stories in which the Middle Ages and a good deal of mankind, are held for all men to see it was a miracle of energy and form

Therefore, Boccaccio's countrymen have ever been anxious for his reputation when critics speak Their anxiety has made some of them fume impatiently and rage and explode the fragmentation bombs of invective which Italian writers can almost manufacture at will They have warned off the prudes, and as for the pedants who could not see the story for the words, those they have often blasted, not without the blessing of bewildered honest men

One of the most fiery of the blasters was one Anton Francesco Grazzini A satire which he wrote against a pedant for tampering with the text of the *Decameron* is worthy of a reading, not only as a sixteenth-century pointer to the regard in which Boccaccio was held but as a sample of the battering, rending, laceration, thumping, pounding and atomising that can be just child's play to the masters of Italian vituperation

Grazzini was known by the nickname, *Il Lasca*, which he bore in pride The name which signifies a rather small fish like the dace, abundant in Lake Trasimene, may have been his *panache* for the good living in which he indulged At any rate, that fish was so beloved of the Perugians that their greediness for it became a by-word in Umbria and all Italy, and when their army was defeated by the men of Arezzo in 1335, some of them were hanged with strings of *lasche* dangling from their braces in derision! *Il Lasca* was not a Perugian but a Florentine, an apothecary, an exceedingly fiery, irascible individual, a rimer, a storyteller like Boccaccio, and a writer of cultivated prose as flexible as common speech He loved the Italian tongue, the Tuscan, with the ferocious solicitude that some men give to women, others to horses, others to gardens, and others even to books To him that tongue was so sweet and so capable of expressing every aspect of human life that it took its place with the two primal languages of the West, and in the development of that tongue he considered Dante—the world's end of speech—Petrarch and Boccaccio as unsurpassed He was one of the founders of the Accademia della Crusca.

Then, one Girolamo Ruscellai, whose name might be punningly interpreted as " the Brook " or " the Little Stream ", produced an edition of the *Decameron*, and fell foul of the Fish Said *Il Lasca*

How bold you've grown, you filthy donkey-head,
To walk abroad, brazen, in open day,
Daring to publish what you have to say
About the cloth, not knowing thread from thread ?
You dirty thief, see now which thief's misled !
My Florence, bah ! may you be baked away
If to your great Boccacce, by him who may,
You let such jibing blackguard things be said
Wasn't it enough, you withered pedantling,
Rogue of Phoebus, and of the Muses thief,
To spoil half Dante with your plundering ?
But yet more him, our storytellers' chief,
You've botched so foully with your blundering
That the lance is changed to a lancetling !
At least there's this relief
That all men who know, all men who comprehend,
Upbraid you, reproach and reprehend
In you, gowk, contend
(But which in retreat, which in advance ?)
Both foolhardiness and ignorance
I say that, in substance,
Where of his diction you have treated,
You have only bleated, bleated,
And where completed,
Amended, omitted or re-corrected,
You have wrecked it, wrecked it, wrecked it,
And where elected
To criticise, you've seen what's not,
And only uttered rot, rot, rot

So get the babby's cot,
The lollipops, bottles, soothers, the pappy-bread
Pin well the diapers and get you to bed
I swear if my head
Does not crack with laughter, I'll turn you, fool,
From a little brook into a putrid pool

With that note of comically intense satire in mind, we may pass to the next work, a very bitter thing, that came from Boccaccio It was not pedants, though, that he lambasted, for he was turning into one, but women, his inspiration, his divinities, his plague Exit Don Juan Enter Malvolio

III

Women are the very devil!
—Proverb of Disappointed Men

OFTEN WHEN THE LAST SHEAF HAS BEEN BORNE HOME AND threshed, and the vines stripped for the frothing vats, and even while there is heavy warmth in the sunshine that dries the candying figs on the walls, a change comes in the breezes, in the evenings a touch of the mountain cold, and then the days go down to that winter night on which the dead are remembered

The *Decameron* was Giovanni Boccaccio's last big harvest of creative writing Thereafter, there would be only the handful of fruit—some more sonnets—and the gleaning and gathering of the brittle dry faggots that would represent his work in Latin learning, and besides, a pressing of the grapes that had been his cultivation of Dante, and a jar of bitter crab-apple jelly, clouded, unsweetened, and astringent

The crab-apple jelly was his next book It is called *Il Corbaccio* which may mean "the evil Raven", or by derivation from *corba*, "the Trap", or more likely "the Old Crow" It is a short book that reveals how brutal and vindictive the tranquil Giovanni could be when he was hurt at the tenderest part of his vanity which was his regard for himself as a ladies' man And hurt he was He retaliated with all the silly venom that was secreted in the woman-hating proverbs and satires of the Middle Ages He was hurt into loathing of a woman, into a loathing of love He almost loathed the flesh with the cold, mad scorn of Swift He who had tried to ride two steeds in what seemed the circus of life, now lashed one with a barbed whip He swung from the condition of the lyrical possessive sensualist to the condition of the puritanical domineering satirist

He was about forty-two when he wrote the book He was getting on His body had plumped out, the journeys and the cares, with poverty jogging his elbow, must have lined his face with its cleft chin and mobility of feature, and his hair was streaked with grey He had no place that through the presence of a woman

he could call home, and there was the boy, Jacopo, who also needed home We may surmise that he was a man lonely enough to forget he was not the young gallant who had made conquests in Naples

He was, it seems, writing the *Decameron*, or he had just finished it, to please the ladies as he averred, when a lady caught his fancy It happened in this way, if *Il Corbaccio* is to be credited, and it appears to be as credible as any of the other autobiographical passages in his writings, for here he was not showing himself as a gallant or even as an unrequited lover but as a fool trapped by his folly And he was never a man to flaunt his folly publicly

One day, he and a fellow-citizen were discussing various things, and they dawdled from topic to topic till, as often happens, they arrived at the inexhaustible subject of the ladies We may take it with a grain or two of salt that they began this favourite theme of male conversation with much historical discussion of the bonny women of antiquity whose magnanimity, chastity and physical strength they praised by way of contrast—the old fogies—to the moderns among whom they found few worthy of commendation It was a subject dear to Boccaccio's heart, because in a few years he would compile a book of right renowned ladies

It is more than likely that on that day in Florence he and his fellow-citizen spent little time in argument about classical ladies, all of whom suffered in so far as the woman-hunting or wife-seeking Boccaccio was concerned, from the serious disability of being dead The living unworthy moderns were the theme the women of whose number only a few could be commended And among the few named by the fellow-citizen was a lady, a widow, who was then unknown to Boccaccio Of her the fellow-citizen thought very highly She was a neighbour of his, which lent weight to his laudation What a laudation it was! She had no like for magnificence and liberality, she was gifted with more good sense than other women could hope for, she was an excellent, brilliant conversationalist, she was pleasing and gracious, and in fine, the possessor of all those good qualities that are praised in great gentlewomen

In a word, Giovanni thought, the very one for me

The bait was superb One might even suspect that, like many

women-hunting men no longer young, he was being baited so as to be hooked and played for fun and then tossed back floundering into bachelorhood Such ribaldry is a favourite pastime, as well as a satirical demonstration of the proprieties, for there are times of life when passion appears grotesque to people who accredit it wholly to the young He said to himself "O happy the man on whom fortune so smiles that he is conceded the love of such a lady!" It was a most unfortunately founded exclamation

He inquired the name, family, street and house of the lady All was told, and he departed from his friend with his mind made up to come, to see and to conquer He went to a part of the city where he believed he would find her at that hour, a place that was, apparently, a rendezvous for widows All he knew of her appearance was that she wore widow's weeds, but the other women also wore black How to choose from such confusing plenty? That was a puzzle which, as he hoped, was solved when the glance of one attractive widow swiftly caught his His hope was justified Two gossipers beside him were passing remarks loud enough for him to hear delightedly

"Ah!" said one, "will you take a look at how the white bonnet and the black clothes suit that lady!"

"Which one?" inquired the other "There are many over there"

"The one I'm talking about is the third sitting on that bench"

And then Boccaccio heard some more details which confirmed for him that she was the lady he sought She was the same widow whose glance had been cast towards him with the airiness of a finely cast line tufted with the mayfly, and maw-wide, he had risen He was hooked, gaffed, and in the basket. The ironist of the *Decameron* who had built a citadel in his soul whence he could regard womankind with pleasure and scepticism became as foolishly fond as the young Neapolitan Giovanni Worse, he became a figure out of one of his own more robust tales

With youthful boldness and indiscretion he wrote her a letter professing his love and asking her to return affection Widows, he should have remembered, had been over all that before, and knew the rules of the game, if there was to be a game, better than

himself She replied in a little letter without saying anything explicit about his request for love, and with inquiries about who he was enough to make him think that at least she was courteous, and that she respected him as a worthy man The playing of the poor fish was beginning He wrote another letter under the illusion that the widow would be his, and the disillusionment was both comic and cruel

He discovered that the fellow-citizen who advertised the attractions of the widow had lied in his teeth and in the knowledge that the lady was already furnished with a lover He was to discover worse damage to his vanity

As he strolled the street one day, she, with other women whom he respected, pointed him out and he heard her words "Do you see that gom? He's my beau See if I can't consider myself blessed!"

Just that!

And the stout, grey-headed, amorous lover must have halted, flushed, and wheeled away quickly with angry eyes from the mocking mouths to meditate on the fact that he, Messer Giovanni Boccaccio, who had rhymed and prosed so much about love, not out of theory, mark you, but out of experience got in the royal school of Naples, was a laughing-stock in the streets of Florence

The wrath of such tranquil men as he is not a scurry across the surface of the mind, froth and spume and breakers that pass with the squall, but it boils up from the depths, volcanically, and brings up the sulphurous slime and the lava and dead creatures to poison the waters The *Corbaccio* is volcanic It is the most intense of Boccaccio's prose works in style and the most outrageous in matter It is the least ornate as though no ornamentation or excrescences could abide on the main structure in the terrible temperature of the wrath Because the hunter of widows inveighed against love, women and their bodies in the puritanism of the disappointed man with more physical detail than the sensualist ever noted down in any verse or tale, the book thoroughly horrified a reader like Symonds, but even Symonds should have managed as much as a one-sided grin at the idiotic spectacle of a Lothario screaming shrilly that he had been betrayed by his own folly

It were best at this point to sketch the nature of the little book about the Old Crow,—because that is what the widow, the publicised paragon of women, becomes He had, like Ovid who was one of his antique masters, written his Art of Love, and this, the *Corbaccio*, would be his Remedy He had like Dante been lost in the *selva oscura*, the dark wood, but while love had liberated Dante, it would be angry reason—it was really unreason—that would free Messer Giovanni He needed to be freed

He begins the book with a dismal picture of the melancholy into which the treacherous widow had driven him, and as he sits in his room, sighing, moaning, weeping tears of self-pity, brooding over his torments, he surveys the manifold mishaps of carnal love, *gli accidenti del carnale amore*, for he has learned to distinguish his *bestialità* Presently, sodden with misery, he toys with hanging himself, a consummation that was more histrionic than heartfelt, but the dictates of the Faith give him dread warning of what suicide signifies in eternal life, and in a few minutes he is penitently considering his folly and the futility of pursuing a woman who does not care a fig for him He wipes his sorrows and his tears from his face, leaves his lonely house, and walks out to meet company with whom, according to their old custom, he discusses fortune, its fickleness, the nitwittery of those who embrace it with total desire and place all their hopes in it, and thence they consider the perpetual change and the wonder of things of the world, and finally, the things of God of which the smallest particulars almost completely surpass mortal understanding So, the rest of the day goes by Philosophy was soothing the soul Boccaccio then returns home, sups heartily and happily and takes to his bed, to sleep and to dream He is now a serene reasonable man

He dreams Necromancy will heal the wounds of romance But his dreams betray him He has not really ordered, analysed and controlled his state of mind, but merely suppressed, and up through sleep as through ebullient waters rise the dead things In the dream which he recounts he finds himself in a terrible, savage and desolate valley, lost in a landscape that is Dantesque, and as he wanders he is met by a spirit whom he recognises It is the ghost of the widow's husband who has come to guide the unhappy Giovanni to safety, sanity and salvation

"Do not doubt," said the spirit calmly "Speak confidently to me Have faith in my company, for indeed I am not come to harm you, but to draw you from this place, if you render full obedience to my words" The place, the spirit added companionably, was called by some the Labyrinth of Love (a sub-title given by later editors to the book), by others the Enchanted Valley, by others the Piggery of Venus, and by many, the Valley of Sighs It was a valley easy to enter by lascivity and craziness but difficult to escape from, except by trials, good sense and fortitude Two vices had brought the ghosted gentleman there one, his insatiable greed for money, and the other, which is not without humour, the indecent patience with which he suffered the wickedness and unseemly behaviour of the very lady for whom Boccaccio had hungered He will instruct and guide Boccaccio to whose mind, he says, the ray of true light has not yet reached since he still thinks there is something good in carnal love Thereupon, the ghost and the battered lover discuss the details of the widow's trick, her habits and vices, and the weakness of women in general

It is then we begin to piece the comic story together, and the pieces are strewn all over the thorny satire like rags on bushes Some details must have been ferreted out by Boccaccio himself with circumspect inquiries among the gossiping dames of Florence, for we need not believe that he did manage to make the acquaintance of the widow's dead husband, and they are of the sort that would curl the tongues of the mockers of that city in which mockery has been always hard and edged and cruel

Giovanni confesses his side of the story, up to the point where he was the laughing-stock of the streets The worthy ghost, armed with superior knowledge, continues, but not before he has solemnly instructed the ignorant mortal in the nature of women and of the widow First, he castigates Giovanni for having been prone to enamourments and for not having given good example to the young. He undertands that Giovanni, even from his youth, has devoted himself, not to any manual craft, but to learning, both ancient and modern, which learning should have given him a notion of the evils, the burnings, deaths, disasters, ruinations and exterminations that have been caused by this damnable passion of carnal love. Learning should also have given him a knowledge of

the kind of thing women are And here is scrawled a blazon of ugliness that was both the opposite of troubadour idolatry and the quintessence of the hate borne to womankind by male satirists of the Middle Ages To Boccaccio, the harsh exaggerations of Saint Jerome, if they were exaggerations in those Roman times, were balm and authority

Woman, declared the knight in effect, is an imperfect animal, moved by a thousand unpleasant passions, abominable even to think, much less talk, about No other animal is less clean than she, not even the pig that wallows in the muck because that is of the pig's brute nature Women abound with malice, because when they consider their lowly ordained condition in the scale of things, they endeavour to make themselves great with snares for the liberty of men by titivating with unguents and pigments, by bleaching their hair under the sun, by quiffing and head-dressing, by garlands, belts and cloths of gold They dominate their husbands, bicker with them all night, and fill the house with relatives who devour the master's substance and squabble all day

All the thoughts, studies and activities of women are directed to no other end than the robbing, domination and deception of men There is no slobbery old man whose eyes drip rheum and whose hands and head shake in palsy that they would reject as husband if they knew him to be rich, in the firm hope that they would be widowed opportunely, nor do they refrain from dolling themselves up for such a vile purpose and from petting the palsied hands and kissing the toothless, slavering, fetid mouth Nothing is harder to endure than a rich woman who strives to reduce everyone to servitude Unlike poor students who suffer cold, hunger and vigils for learning, women think they know all when they have been to church one morning, hardly for long enough to hear one Mass, and they can tell all about the movements of the heavens, how thunder, lightning, the rainbow, hail and everything else are made, where the Nile rises, what is happening in India and Spain, with whom a neighbour woman slept, which month a child will be born And for want of bibble-babblers, they will cackle with the cook, the baker's wife, the vegetable man or the laundress

O Aristophanes ! O Theophrastus ! O Jerome ! O Clare Boothe !

Often they will glorify themselves saying that she in whose womb was conceived the Saviour of the World, a Virgin before and after the Birth and solemnised by the Church of God, was female like them, and from this they contend that nothing should be uttered against them But the contention is baseless, since the unique spouse of the Holy Ghost " was so pure a being, so virtuous, so chaste, so filled with grace and removed from all corporal and spiritual ugliness, that in respect of other women, she was not composed of the elements but of a quintessence "

We may here interrupt the unwearying ghost's tirade with a word or two about Giovanni Boccaccio's devotion to Our Lady His devotion was plenary, sincere, filial and abiding He had worshipped women, deifying their bodies, he had scorned women, degrading their souls, but before his oscillating mind, swerving like the prow of an ill-steered boat through mist and turbulent waters, there was always the high promontory, the landfall, the light and the Star of the Sea He had not escaped the Manichaean sickness which had infected Christendom, almost in the blood to break out in vast epidemics like the heresy of the Albigeois, there to be suppressed by saints, preachers and soldiers, with holiness, exposition, heroism, and great cruelty, to appear as a malady in the songs of the later troubadours till physical love was too subtilised for gross humanity, and to be disinfected even by such extreme men as Boccaccio with ribaldry and laughter. There were men who could say that woman was not made in God's image, and men who could exalt women till she was impossibly angelic

A preacher like sainted Bernardino of Siena could say that he wished he were the husband of some one of the well-dressed women of his congregation so that he could give her a drubbing with feet and fists Those threats were exaggerations, not necessarily finding their origin in evil principle But the evil principle had once swept the south of Europe like a nightmare storm of bats, flying unerringly into the darkest recesses of human souls It was only an exact century before Boccaccio's birth that De Montfort had broken the Albigensian power in arms at Muret, and all during the century before that, the most horrible of heresies, humanly speaking, had found adherents and centres of propagation

in the south of France and the north of Italy, among the nobility and the lords They hated the material element in the universe as the work of the devil It was wholly evil They hated the body because, as they thought, it imprisoned the soul Therefore, to propagate life was an abominable crime, and a pregnant woman was possessed of the devil, and marriage was to be utterly condemned It was purity gone sick with a plague of hate It was the illness of men trying to be angels and becoming more like devils Down in Tuscany, in Florence, in the year Dante was born, a third of the best families were Catharists

This sickness Boccaccio had not escaped He was infected by its secondary form His mind swung in slow delirium from side to side of the truth anger in defence of his poor hurt vanity could jerk him into the outrageous exaggerations of his satire, but there was always that central point, that *punctum deferens*, that living creature chosen of all women who was there as a measure and a refuge, to keep him in his extremes from the final insane hatred of womankind There was always the Woman, Mary, the Virgin Mother of God She was the wonder to him and to all Christendom where her image stood enshrined in the great cathedrals, Florence, Paris, Chartres, or in the roadside and street shrines, painted, gilded, carved in wood, sculpted in stone, wrought in metal, or blazing in tall glass. "A woman clothed in the sone," said a preacher, "and the mone undir her fete, and uppon her hede a crowne of twelve steres for she is ther emprys, sything aboven all ordres of angels" "O treasurer of bounty to mankind," exclaimed Chaucer "In thee," wrote Dante, in that ordered, singing, stellar movement of the thirty-third canto of the *Paradiso*, "in thee is tenderness, in thee is pity, in thee munificence, in thee united whatever in created being is of excellence" Her praises rise from the poets of those ages, in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, England and Ireland, with an insistence that was in itself a sign of her honouring

There is a spring freshness in the words of the geniuses, a revelation of new tender flowers and young grass and birds all singing, as if she were a discovery suddenly made by them in cold and darkness, and so to them she was the *primavera*, since discovery is an attribute of genius Boccaccio was of them Before her, he

is reverent, her glad son, as all men are her sons Whenever his words gather about her name in romance, satire, commentary or poem, they are instinct with reverence He knows she was the instrument of the awful descent of God into human flesh, and the old, preached, hymned and theologically expounded truth about her humility fills him with perpetual astonishment The wonder of her " whom God chose to mother for humbless " shines in one sonnet of his that is among his best, perhaps is his best He was an enfeebled sick man when he wrote in his commentary on Dante, his last work which was interrupted by final illness and the all-revealing gloss of death, that God did not look upon royal blood or age, not beauty nor simplicity, but humility only when he descended from heaven to earth and was made flesh and became invested with our humanity This was the theme of the sonnet that hangs clear in the colours of high glass ablaze with the sunlight

Non treccia d'oro, non d'occhi vaghezza,
Non costume real, non leggiadria,
Non giovanetta età, non melodia,
Non angelico aspetto nè bellezza
Potè tirar dalla sovrana altezza
Il Re del cielo in questa vita ria,
Ad incarnare in te, dolce Maria,
Madre di grazia, e specchio d'allegrezza,
Ma l'umilità tua, la qual fu tanta
Che potè romper ogni antico sdegno
Tra Dio e noi, e fare il cielo aprire
Quella ne presta dunque, Madre santa,
Sicchè possiamo al tuo beato regno,
Seguendo lei, devoti ancor salire

The spiralling ascent of that first eleven-lined sentence of salutation, smooth in its movement, ringing with fluent Italian music, is beyond the capture of the translator Nevertheless, here is an attempt

Nor hair of flowing gold, nor eyes alight,
Nor queenly courtesy nor loveliness,
Nor singing throat nor girlhood tenderness,
Nor countenance angelically bright,

Could enchant down from His sovereign height
The King of Heaven through this world's wickedness,
To be manned in you Mary all Matchless,
Mother of Mercy, Mirror of Delight,
But your humility could so prevail
To shatter utterly the old disdain
Between God and us, and Heaven's door unbar
Then, Mary Mother, let it now avail
That we may ascend where blessed you reign,
Following you, to where the faithful are

Let the devotion and the poetry it could inspire be remembered for Boccaccio as we toil with him, knee-deep, through the Piggery of Venus Toil it is The ghosted knight is indefatigable, like an old ostracised bore who has at last, to his joy, got a victim firmly by the elbow "Now," says he, to draw breath, "I haven't told you how this perverse mob is gluttonous, wayward, pretentious, envious, slothful, cantankerous, and daft, nor how as they try to enslave they are bossy, tiresome, wheedling, disgusting and troublesome, and many other things, nor do I intend to tell you at present, for the story would be too long" For this relief, much thanks! The old knight is abridging, however, so that he can hasten to the delightful topic of male superiority, and to the tale of his own sadly devised marriage.

His wife was a snob who tried to boss him with clubs broken from the family tree, she bossed him by day and night, and he perceived quickly that the law-courts and the noisier places of debate in the city were more congenial than his own home She became mistress of himself, his house, his goods, and of everything. She dressed, ate and drank at her fancy. And what gormandising! She had a fine tooth for fat roast capons, for jugged hare with macaroni and Parmesan cheese which she gobbled not from a dish but from a tub like a pig, for milk-fed veal, partridges, pheasants, plump thrushes, pigeons, lombard soups, macaroni with sauces, pancakes with elderberry jelly, and white chestnut fritters, and, when she hadn't her paunch packed by then, she filled up with sweetmeats made of figs, cherries and melons It wouldn't be credited what a subtle taste she had in right good wine, in vernaccia and Greek and any other soft, comforting liquor.

So much for her insides To care for her complexion, she distilled and manufactured oils, searched for the blood of various animals, for herbs and similar ingredients The house was cluttered with apothecary's furnaces, limbecks, jars, phials, bottles, and boxes There wasn't a neighbouring druggist in Florence nor a herbalist in the countryside who wasn't summoned to her presence with mixtures and compounds, wild roots and herbs you never heard of, and these, with egg-shells and the crust of wine, were confected into ointments with which she daubed herself, so that her husband when he kissed her, was limed like a bird to a twig Her washings of her blonde hair with lye were innumerable Her sun of delight and greatest recreation were the services of certain smart little baggages in whom Florence abounded, who were knackers to the ladies, plucking their eyebrows and foreheads—mark the fine brows in Florentine portraits—shaving their cheeks with glass and removing the scales from their necks

The ghosted gentleman is only warming up He becomes a satirical universal surveyor of feminine sprunking in the Middle Ages This kind of survey is a perennial male pastime and the source of an infinite quantity of prose and verse, most of it as boring as it is ineffectual in its reformation of the beautifiers Boccaccio must be included among the bores, not because his prose lacks liveliness which it does not, or because his survey is not of interest to students of social history, but because it is a sermon that should have stopped, or that at least should have been compressed Had the garrulous ghost paused to reflect on his vindictive monologue, he surely would have remarked that he had said all he had to say in a few descriptions of his widow

It is morning, the testing time of beauty She rises from her bed Where is the attractive young widow who conquered Boccaccio even before he saw her? She boasts she is twenty-eight, but she is nearer forty than thirty—an age that marks women more cruelly in southern than in northern countries Her hair is greying Here she is

> with greeny-yallery face, smutched, of the colour of bog-mist, goose-fleshy like the birds when they are moulting, wrinkled and scruffy, and altogether tottering, so different to

what she seems after she has had time to titivate herself that anybody would hardly credit it if he had not seen her, as I saw her thousands of times, and who does not know that smoky walls, not to speak of women's faces, become white when the white lead is put on, and as well as that, coloured, according as it pleases the painter to work over the white? She so massages herself and so paints and does up her hide that had sagged during the watches of the night that, when I first saw it, a strange wonder it was to me, and if you had seen her, as I saw her many a morning, with the nightcap stuck on her head, and with a woolly kerchief round her neck, thus muddy in the face as I have told, and with a fur-lined mantle, sitting on her heels to hatch the fire, and to cough with livid eyesockets and to spit butterflies

This is Swiftean in its particularised loathing of natural physical infirmities Observation is fascinated and sharpened by the thing the observer loathes, but the description is continued for page after page that become outrageously disgusting, until the reader feels that between repulsion and an absolute insane and cold hatred of the body there is only a thin line Hatred almost becomes a pleasure

The wretched figure beside the fire shifts to begin the desperate work of rehabilitation There is the maid, the tall mirror, the jars of ointments and pastes and pigments, the nets, flowers, pins, ornaments, and scattered clothes all the gear with which a woman tries to outwit mortality The silent maid fusses; and in a few minutes, the sleepy morning quietness of the house is broken by shrill railing and abuse

"This veil has got a bit yellow, and this other hangs too much from this side Pull that other one down. Draw that one tighter so that it covers my forehead Take out that pin you put under my ear, and put it over there a bit, and stretch out that wrinkle that it tends to give me under the chin. Remove that glass, and wipe off that pimple I have on the cheek under the left eye . . . Go away! You're fit for nothing except washing dishes. Go and call me Monna So-and-So"

This was the voice of the Helen, the paragon of ladies, who, after the tetchy process of rehabilitation, frequented the churches

to ensnare the coxcombs, with a book about Lancelot or some other old romance in her hands to while away the waiting hours, who ensnared Boccaccio with one glance, and then pointed fun at him in the streets, and who showed the middle-aged ardent admirer's letters to her sweetheart with such terms of scorn as "snotty-nosed loon" and "pumpkin" and "Messer Soupladle" and "Let him go back to weed the onions, and leave gentlewomen alone"

Boccaccio would certainly leave gentlewomen alone The dream of the Piggery of Venus runs to its end with the release of the thoroughly instructed wanderer from the wild valley and from sleep

He awakes, soaked in sweat, as if in fact he had climbed a mountain-side to be free It is as a freed man he sees himself

"My tiny booklet," he says, "your end is come"

There is a deep sigh in the valedictory words that conclude his *tour de force* which, he hopes, will be of much use to erring young men But is he freed? Has he not substituted irrational hate for inordinate love? It seems that he has Will the oscillation never cease so that he can attain and hold the poised centre and be wise? We cannot tell whether he ever became, during the last twenty years of his life, a ripe wise man, balanced in humanism, emptied of vanity and folly, replenished with philosophic tranquillity such as seemed to fill his friend, Petrarch, secure and satisfied in Padua or in distant Vaucluse We do know that during his last years when he was writing his commentary on Dante, he would consider the illicit love of Paolo and Francesca with a dry, exceedingly unromantic mind

Though widows and other gentlewomen should fail him and move him to anger, the image of Fiammetta which his mind preserved as in a reliquary would not fail, precisely because it was not really her image fashioned faithfully in her likeness, but in the likeness of his desire He would imagine her in heaven, among the blessed, and his yearning would make him wish to follow, to rise like a bird to God above the spheres He would call on dead Dante to pray Fiammetta in heaven that her own prayers never cease for his comforting This he would do in a sonnet, a fine thing, translated a little too quaintly by Rossetti

Dante, se tu nell'amorosa spera,
Com'io credo, dimori riguardando
La bella Bice, la qual già cantando
Altra volta ti trasse là dov'era,
Se per cambiar fallace vita a vera
Amor non se n'oblia, io t'addimando
Per lei di grazia ciò che contemplando
A far ti sia assai cosa leggiera
Io so che intra l'anime piu liete
Del terzo ciel la mia Fiammetta vede
L'affanno mio dopo la sua partita,
Pregala, se'l gustar dolce di Lete
Non la m'ha tolta, in luogo di mercede
A se m'impetri tosto la salita

Dante, if thou within the sphere of Love,
As I believe, remain'st contemplating
Beautiful Beatrice, whom thou didst sing
Erewhile, and so wast drawn to her above,
Unless from false life true life thee remove
So far that Love's forgotten, let me bring
One prayer before thee for an easy thing
This were, to thee whom I do ask it of
I know that where all joy doth most abound
In the Third Heaven, my own Fiammetta sees
The grief which I have borne since she is dead
O pray her (if mine image be not drown'd
In Lethe) that her prayers may never cease
Until I reach her and am comforted

To Dante, the Poet, he called then, and it was about Dante that he would write his next work, almost his last in the vernacular, to offer and demand the homage of men But much of the black mood that darkened his mind would remain with him as he wrote.

PART FIVE

WINTER

Dante Alighieri son, Minerva oscura
D'intelligenza e d'arte, nel cui ingegno
L'eleganza materna aggiunse al segno,
Che si tien gran miracol di natura
L'alta mia fantasia pronta e sicura
Passo il tartareo e poi 'l celeste regno,
E 'l nobil mio volume feci degno
Di temporale e spiritual lettura
Fiorenza gloriosa ebbi per madre,
Anzi matrigna a me pietoso figlio,
Colpa di lingue scellerate e ladre
Ravenna fummi albergo del mio esiglio,
Ed ella ha il corpo, e l'alma il sommo Padre,
Presso cui invidia non vince consiglio

—BOCCACCIO

Dante Alighieri, a dark oracle
Of wisdom and of art, I am, whose mind
Has to my country such great gifts assigned
That men account my powers a miracle
My lofty fancy passed as low as Hell,
As high as Heaven, secure and unconfin'd,
And in my noble book doth every kind
Of earthly lore and heavenly doctrine dwell
Renowned Florence was my mother,—nay,
Stepmother unto me her piteous son,
Through sin of cursed slander's tongue and tooth
Ravenna sheltered me so cast away,
My body is with her,—my soul with One
For whom no envy can make dim the truth

—*Translated by* D G ROSSETTI

I

Egli giace con compagnia assai più piacevole, e lodevole che quella, che tu gli potessi dare Egli giace in Ravenna

—Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante*

He lieth in company far more desirable than any which thou couldst give him He lieth in Ravenna

—Translated by Philip H Wicksteed, M A

IT WAS MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS SINCE THEY REFRAINED FROM publicly lamenting in Florence the death of the exile, Dante Alighieri Only the very old people, if any had escaped the plague, could remember him as he had been in those days, yet another twenty years earlier, when the decree of banishment under pain of death by burning was promulgated His enemies as well as his friends had died, dropping at intervals in the natural course of mortality, and then thickly and altogether in the blast of the plague Very soon his memory could have been exiled from their minds as his presence had been exiled from their city, but not completely Ravenna held the mouldering bones and the crisply withered leaves of the laurel crown, but the young men in Florence had come upon the *Comedy*, the *Vita Nuova* and the sonnets, penned copies of them with the fervour of worship, and become evangels Chief among them was Giovanni Boccaccio who wrote the first biography, as a disciple, an evangel and as a prophet pouring scorn on the ungrateful city

He was fitted for the work of writing the biography both by sympathy and knowledge. Dante, as he said, was the first guide and the first light of his studies, and the light was still burning for him when illness or some sudden interruption halted his pen in the middle of a sentence in the commentary on Dante, just a year before he died Although it has been stated by De Blasius that Boccaccio was introduced to Dante's writings at Naples by Cino da Pistoia at some time in the late twenties or early thirties of the century, it is more likely that he had already seen something of them as a boy in Florence. In any case, Boccaccio's own writings

were steeped from the beginning in that sharp, clear, heady and golden wine which was sacramental not only of the whole Middle Ages, of a man and his gradual discovery of the truth by love, of a city, of a country and of an entire empire, but of the threefold other world which is man's destiny and end

In the novel, the *Filocolo*, the young Boccaccio spoke reverently of Dante's measured verse and of following him as a disciple, which he did, by imitating In the poem, the *Filostrato*, he was so intoxicated by large potations from the *Comedy*—it has even made heretics see double!—that he took over phrases, lines and passages *verbatim* with an old-world contempt for accusations of plagiary And in the sonnets his model was still Dante

It was not entirely a process of mechanical and inglorious plagiary but mainly of assimilation Dante mastered him with the cast of phrases, with images and with majestic cadences, but he also schooled him in the choice of precise words, in music, lucidity and continuity It could hardly have been otherwise had Boccaccio done no more than to copy out in his own hand the entire *Comedy*, since copying is a good schoolmaster, which he did copy to send it to Petrarch with a Latin poem in laudation of the author The copy was accompanied also by a letter which, it has been surmised, was somewhat apologetic for the enthusiasm Remote in glory, Petrarch was not as impressed as deeply as Boccaccio would have liked Dante, wrote Petrarch in a letter in 1359, was in truth a poet for the people by reason of style, that is, he had not written in the lordly Latin which Petrarch cultivated but in the vernacular, and really there was no need for Boccaccio to apologise for enthusiasm! Was he not acting with fitting piety and gratitude? And he, Petrarch, commended the work of laudation and crowned the Poet with praise

It was polite and restrained It was not worship It was this worship which impelled Boccaccio to seek out knowledge of the Poet's life and works wherever and whenever he could His prime documents were the living men and women who had seen Dante plain At Ravenna, it may be recalled, he had met the daughter, Sister Beatrice, and brought her florins when she was in need He met, too, *Pier Giardino, il quale fu uno de' più intimi amici che Dante avesse in Ravenna*—who was one of the closest friends that

Dante had in Ravenna, and from him he learned Dante's age as told by the dying Dante himself, and the story about the loss and recovery of the last thirteen cantos of the *Paradiso* There was, as well, Andrea Poggi, Dante's nephew, son of a sister, with whom Boccaccio became very friendly, perhaps more of set purpose than by any circumstance of friendship

Poggi was a find that would have delighted any biographer He " marvellously resembled Dante in the features of his face, and again in the stature of his body, and he walked with the same little hump as Dante was said to walk He was an untutored man but with plenty of native good sense, and good-mannered and worthy in his speech and habits " It was he, according to himself, who found the first seven cantos of the *Inferno* in a strong box which Madonna Gemma, Dante's wife, had sent for safety to a neighbour's house when the exile's confiscated goods were being sacked Boccaccio tells the story in more detail in the *Comento* than in the *Vita* Even at the distance of six centuries, a reader may still feel a twist of the terror that moved Boccaccio when he realised from the simple words of Dante's physical parody, Poggi, that the great *Comedy* might well have never been finished and that it had been subject to indifferent, barbaric chance For when the newly found cantos reached the wandering Poet at last, he said " I certainly thought that these, with my other things and some writings, had been lost when my house was sacked And therefore I had lightened my soul and my thoughts of all care for them But since it has pleased God that they were not lost but returned to me, I purpose to do what I can to follow up the work according to my first intention "

And among Boccaccio's informants, there was also Dino Perini, who likewise claimed to be the discoverer of the same lost *Inferno* cantos ! Boccaccio could never make up his mind which of the claims was genuine Indeed, acceptance of either of the rival claims was difficult since those cantos, supposed to have been locked away in a strong box when Dante was exiled, contained a " prophecy ", in *Inferno* VI., 55, which could not have been written until after the exile. The claimants to the discovery, or one of them, might have been mistaken about the number of cantos found, or even about their condition, and besides, it must be presumed

that the Poet revised At any rate, Boccaccio believed the cantos had been lost

Lastly among the informants he mentions was the unnamed person, a close relative of hers, who identified Beatrice Portinari as the Beatrice of a lifetime of immortal verse

Boccaccio was prepared, then, for the writing of the *Vita di Dante*, also known as the " Treatise in Praise of Dante ", which, it has been reckoned, he began during the splenetic period of the *Corbaccio* The little book has been ground fine in the mill of scholarship, and with good reason Among the recensions that have come down to us, there are two works that possess large portions in common and large portions peculiar to each, one being called the *Vita*, and the other, the shorter, called the *Compendio* Did Boccaccio write both ? Or if he wrote only one, which ? Here are questions to make quiet, industrious and inoffensive scholars turn purple and rage through the universe in a battle of books, to the great perplexity and terror of readers who fear recensions, attributions, variants, apocryphal texts, probable readings, deductions, ergos, the jog-trot of On-the-one-hand and On-the-other and other magical beasts, as, to use a favourite phrase of Boccaccio's, a dog fears the stick

The clearest and most delightful presentation of the evidence which is internal, and the shrewdest judgment may be found in Edward Moore's *Dante and His Early Biographers*, which a man may read pleasurably without caring a straw for either Dante or Boccaccio, a sin of rejection that no theologian has yet pronounced to be damnatory The weight of scholarly opinion tilts the scales in favour of the genuineness of the *Vita* as against the *Compendio* which is assigned to the limbo of unauthorised recensions, and the scholars are Moore himself, Bisciani, Pelli, Tiraboschi, Gamba, Badelli, Foscolo, Paur, Scartazzini, Koerting, Macrì-Leone, and Witte who hesitates to condemn the *Compendio* altogether Let us then, for peace-sake, turn to the *Vita*

Wicksteed who englished it superbly describes its prose, with that special Boccaccian flavour,—" With its quaint harmonious meanderings, flowing, in long and intricate windings through dependent clauses and participial and parenthetic constructions, to the uniting periods which we reach at last (if they come at all), with a half

surprised amusement at the long delayed gathering of the waters into a single channel The task of the reader is certainly not lightened by this method, nor is sharpness of impression furthered by it" In a few words, the first biography of Dante is slow, ruminative and digressive But it would be wrong to think that it is wholly so, or that there is no sharpness of impression There are rapid lively passages, and there is vivid portraiture The purpose of the work and the life-time mood in which the materials had been gathered to smoulder, blaze and spark, prevented the prose from becoming entirely precious and self-conscious Boccaccio wrote out of a full mind and a fervent heart

The purpose was two-fold in that it was both propaganda and piety As a citizen of ungrateful Florence and as a devoted student of letters, he considered he owed a debt to Dante's honour, a debt he would repay with words "though poor for so great enterprise"

"Hereof I have, and hereof I will give, lest foreign peoples should have power to say that his fatherland had been alike unthankful to so great a poet, whether taken generally or man by man And I shall write (in style full humble and light, because my wit provides me not with aught of more exalted, and in our Florentine idiom, that it may not depart from what he used in the greater part of his works) those things as to which he kept seemly silence concerning himself, to wit the nobleness of his origin, his life, his studies and his character, and thereafter will I gather together he works he composed, wherein he hath rendered himself so illustrious amongst those to come that perchance my letters will serve no less to darken than to brighten him, albeit this is not my purpose nor my will, content always, in this and in every other thing, to be set right by any wiser than myself wherever I have spoke amiss But that occasion thereto may not arise, I humbly pray that he who drew that other to his vision, by a star so lofty as we know, do give his present aid and guidance to my wit and to my weak hand"

This is reverent and humble The crouching lion, however, is just licking his chaps and tongueing his teeth for a rending of the ungrateful city. The roar comes: "Oh ungrateful fatherland! What frenzy, what recklessness possessed thee—or doth still

possess—that thou didst chase into exile, with such strange cruelty, thy dearest citizen, thy chief benefactor, thy unique poet?" Then, the lion bounds and the victim is caressed by the unsheathed claws

Boccaccio was by practice skilled in the art of abuse which he could play equally well on either men or their institutions But for all the rhetoric, there is more than mere skill in his denunciation of Florence There is sincere anger This anger was not altogether justified if one regard the case of Dante and of Florence from the viewpoint of the merchants who at least provisioned the society which kept artists and their art alive It was the merchants and the artisans, the rude mechanicals, that Boccaccio scorned "Alas! wilt thou glory in thy merchants and the abundance of artists wherewith thou art filled? Foolishly wilt thou do The first perpetually goaded by avarice, ply the servile trade, and the art which was once ennobled by men of genius till they made it a second nature is now corrupted by that same avarice and is nothing worth"

He scorned them for their avarice, for their snobbery, and for their shameless lack of piety in not claiming him who was theirs, as Cyme, Chios and Colophon claimed Homer, Mantua Virgil, Sulmona Ovid, Venusia Horace, and Aquinium Juvenal "Dead is thy Dante Alighieri, in that exile which thou, envious of his worth, didst unjustly inflict upon him" He stormed and railed, and pleaded that Florence should take back Dante as a mother her son "Proffer thy citizenship, thy bosom, thy grace, to his memory Do thou then go about to desire to be the guardian of thy Dante Require him again Make show of so much gentleness, even if thou hast no desire to have him back Remove from thyself by this fiction some part of the blame thou hast acquired in the past"

For a moment it seems as though Boccaccio will compromise with the merchantry, and forget their hatefulness in his desire for the Poet's honouring, but then, the anger rises and out flashes the macerating paw "Scarce do I believe that, if dead bodies have any perception at all, Dante's body could endure to depart from where it is for the sake of coming back to thee He lieth in Ravenna, far more venerable than thee for antiquity, and though her age hath somewhat disfigured her, yet was she in her youth far more blooming than thee She is like one great sepulchre of most holy

bodies, nor can any part of her be trodden without passing over ashes most reverend" Boccaccio had walked in Ravenna where, as it were, antiquity had withdrawn into an august cloistered silence among the tombs and the mosaics, not far from the everlasting keen of the tall pine woods that stood for miles along the shore of the Adriatic sea, and Dante, dead, lay among the kings, and Dante's daughter was there to recall the sad rapt countenance for Boccaccio to make memorable "This our poet, then, was of middle height, and when he had reached maturity he went somewhat bowed, his gait grave and gentle, and ever clad in most seemly apparel, in such garb as befitted his ripe years His face was long, his nose aquiline, and his eyes rather large than small, his jaws big, and the upper lip protruding beyond the lower His complexion was dark, his hair and beard thick, black, and curling, and his expression was ever melancholy and thoughtful"

This was the Poet who required rehabilitation among the citizens of his native city There was also Poetry in need of resurrection

Nothing really gives us the measure of Boccaccio's pride in the profession of letters, nothing truly helps to mollify the reader's contempt of him for his unfilial treatment of his father for the sake of literature, as does his grave, enunciated belief in poetry He was obdurate from youth in defence of that belief He was bellicose before its enemies And of enmity to poetry he was conscious not only among the worldly who spent their lives in eating and drinking and womanising, and among the smatterers of knowledge who required everything in "digest" form, but also among those people who, though cultivated, measured every human activity by its value in money or in personal, material advancement Time has not changed the enemies! He was conscious of the sniping by doctors, theologians and lawyers who had at some time or other declared or implied that poetry was a mere triviality unworthy of rational human beings, that it was lies, meaningless, and only commendable in so far as it aped philosophy The enmity enraged him. That tranquil man must have been perpetually volcanic The pressure of the enmity shaped his ideas so that he could write—without any help from treatises like, say, Aristotle's *Poetics* which had not then been recovered—page after

page of argument and exposition He wrote in the life of Dante, he wrote again, at greater length, in the fourteenth book of the *De genealogia deorum gentilium*, and lastly in the *Comento*

To him, poetry appeared exalted in its origins, old as the race, old as the worship of the gods On poets alone of the men of learning was the laurel crown bestowed, because the laurel was evergreen, fragrant and never struck by lightning Poetry was part of the ancient religion of the pagans who, having discovered the awful presence of divinity as the cause and sustainer of all things, worshipped through sacrifice with gold vessels, marble altars, purple vestments, and with the words of appeal and propitiation "lest silent and as it were dumb honour should be paid to this power", and "in order that these words might seem to have more power they were minded to compose them under the law of fixed numbers, whereby a certain sweetness should be perceived, and weariness and languour should be dispelled" Next, this hieratic poetry was used to praise the godliness and the virtue of heroes and princes, and to guide men to the goal of blessedness by setting forth "the causes of things, the results of virtues and of vices, what we are to flee and what pursue" by presenting them "now under the fictions of diverse gods, now under the transformation of men into vain forms, and now with winsome pleadings" The ancients imitated as far as possible the footprints of the Holy Spirit The Old Testament was full of the poetry that shone bright in the New

To Boccaccio it seemed "not only that Poesy is Theology, but also that Theology is Poesy" Of its nature, he said that poetry "is a sort of fervid and exquisite invention, with fervid expression, in speech or writing, of that which the mind has invented It proceeds from the bosom of God, and few, I find, are the souls in whom this gift is born, indeed so wonderful a gift it is that true poets have always been the rarest of men This fervour of poesy is sublime in its effects it impels the soul to a longing for utterance, it brings forth strange and unheard-of creations of the mind, it arranges these meditations in a fixed order, adorns the whole composition with unusual interweaving of words and thoughts, and thus it veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction" The translation of that passage is Osgood's from the

Fourteenth Book of the *De genealogia &c* , and a blessing on him for the absence of quaintness !

While Boccaccio's history of poetry's origin and nature and of the Poet's absolute condition may not be all that old Chelsea would desire, and while it would be diverting to watch him sweating over an attempt to elucidate the theology in, say, his own *Ninfale Fiesolano*, there shines in his ideas the honour he offered the art which gives men, even base men, the mouths of angels Dante, and Petrarch as well, were of the few souls with whom the gift was born And Dante was the man whom Florence had cast out !

We should not know even half of what we know about Dante were it not for the *Vita* Boccaccio fulfilled his pious purpose He persuaded his city into such a rehabilitation of Dante that before his own death, the authorities appointed him to lecture publicly on the *Comedy* But it would be an exaggeration to imagine that the warming up of the cold hearts began at zero or below it, that Boccaccio was one brave man against the world Man's memory is not so tenacious of its loves or its hates to carry on for more than thirty years, from the day Dante was exiled to the day his evangel set pen to paper, all the political and social bitterness between White Guelfs and Black Guelfs and between dead Emperor and dead Pope When Boccaccio wrote his biographical pamphlet he must have been aware that his castigation of Florence would be approved substantially by many Florentines It was part of his purpose to increase the number We must remember this purpose, then, as we criticise his attempt

He had been criticised for uncritical acceptance of stories about Dante, such as the legend of the discovery of the missing last thirteen cantos of the *Paradiso* Their whereabouts was revealed to Dante's son, Jacopo, in a dream of his father clad in white, his face shining,—a gift for the Pre-Raphaelites ! It is a story that bears retelling.

Eight months after Dante's death, his two sons, Jacopo and Piero, finding thirteen cantos missing, searched the house in Ravenna, and failing to find the crowning of their father's work, sat down to fashion it themselves They were rhymers of a sort, but they were only the sons, not the father We can picture them labouring over the paper and knowing if they were not fools, that

they were falling far short of the paradisal summits We can imagine their minds wandering in search over every possible hiding-place in the house, checking and rechecking cupboards, boxes, drawers and alcoves Then, one night Jacopo had a dream in which his father came to him and informed him where the cantos were hidden, in a wall in a chamber Awakening, he went out to call a neighbour, Piero Giardino, " that they might go together and search in the place indicated to him, which he held most perfectly stamped on his memory, to see whether a true or a false delusion had shewn it him " It was at the hour called matins, about three o'clock in the morning They went, and searching, found behind a mat fixed to the wall a recess of which they had been unaware, and in the recess were the last thirteen cantos, ready to rot with the damp and covered with mould

That is the story which Boccaccio heard from Piero Giardino What are we to do about it ? " It is easy," to quote Charles Osgood, " for modern scholarship, from its impregnable if sometimes cheerless heights, to patronise Boccaccio's way of proceeding " But is it necessary to call Jacopo and Piero Giardino conspirators in a lie, and Boccaccio a superstitious fool, so that the cheerless heights may be left impregnable ? The biographer told what he was told Was it necessary for him to reject it because he could not find an explanation which would anticipate and satisfy the objections of scientific historians ?

Again, he has been upbraided for reading into Dante's life a love for women, for " his flames " such as Boccaccio himself had possessed " Amid all the virtue," he wrote, " amid all the knowledge, that hath been shown alone to have belonged to this wondrous poet, lechery found most ample place not only in the years of his youth but also of his maturity , the which vice, though it be natural, and common, and scarce to be avoided, yet in truth is so far from being commendable that it cannot even be suitably excused But who among mortals shall be a righteous judge to condemn it ? Not I "

This is a Dante who differs more than somewhat from the pale, bloodless, cerebral and exceedingly respectable poet of the Victorian popularisers , and this is a Boccaccio who bows his head and beats his breast and says *mea culpa* from the heart Even Wicksteed,

for all his cool scholarship, barks warning from the cheerless heights that "the student may safely form his own judgment from the material in his hands, without attaching any authoritative significance whatever to Boccaccio's assertion" But what judgment can the student safely form when he remembers, first, that Boccaccio apologised for having been "forced to taint the fame of such a man with any defect", secondly, that he had sources of information denied even to such scholars as Wicksteed, and thirdly, that had Boccaccio been criticised for his statement—and there is no record of such criticism—he would have said something about it, more than likely in the biographical notes in the *Comento* There is no sound reason for declaring that Boccaccio was drawing on his amorous fancy, unless we go on the principle that such a writer as produced the *Divine Comedy* was incapable of being a ladies' man, which is manifestly begging the question There is sound reason for believing, however, that Boccaccio was incapable of understanding deeply the spiritual asceticism which could purge human love of its dominating carnal excitement and perceive it as a step towards, and as a symbol of, progress towards beatitude In a word, Boccaccio never truly knew the meaning of the name of Beatrice

Even while he wrote the *Vita*, he was obsessed with his fearful scorn of womankind He laments that Dante took a wife "Oh, weariness beyond conception of having to live and hold intercourse, and finally grow old or die, with so suspicious an animal!" The widow of the *Corbaccio*, whose image was a crystallisation of acid scorn, jeers him once more into spluttering and loathing him, the fattening, grey-headed scholar who had been a conquering gallant. Once more he analyses the frivolities, the peevishness, and the caprice of women. It is a digression "What shall I say of their ways?" he asks. It does not matter as a qualification for us of his scorn that he paraphrases from Saint Jerome who had quoted against Jovinian on the woes of marriage from the now lost work of Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor in the school at Athens An old stick, as well as a new, was good enough for lambasting the women who are the devil and all! Marriage was all right for those who were in the way of it It could be commended, but not for everyone! "Let philosophers leave marrying to wealthy fools,

to noblemen and peasants, and let them take their delight with philosophy, who is a far better bride than any other"

It seems that Boccaccio had decided finally to give up the game of finding the woman, and of making a home for the comfort of his middle-aged loneliness He is obdurate, he scorns, he tells men to beware, and he will cleave to philosophy Despite the warnings and the protestations and the invective, one feels that there would have been a swift change in that plump and now rather sullen face, a loosening of the mouth into a complaisant smile, a twinkling of the bright expectant eyes, and not a little preening, if some lady, not even too good-looking, even a widow, had flattered him with a glance and a mischievous raising of the plucked brows and a murmured snatch of Florentine coquetry He might have been warier in his approach, he might have refrained from writing letters, yet, he would have fallen But those days were over The pendulum of his spirit never swung back

II

Think of the rococoicity *of a gentleman studying Seneca in the middle of February* 1844 *in a remarkably damp cottage*

—Edward Fitzgerald (Letter)

THE REAPING WAS COMPLETE, THE SINGING BIRDS GONE, THE barns and storerooms filled, and the door would now be shut against the cold It was such a cold as the wind bears seasonally from the mountains, and with it, the hurried darkening clouds and the snow to make the beasts huddle in their byres Neapolitan spring and summer, and the Tuscan autumn with its abundant corn, oil and fruit and its wine, were no more than stored and casked provender to warm the spirit or fill it with regret for folly, while the logs spluttered on the hearth The Arno ran steely-grey and then thickly yellow, roaring with the debris of the uplands The ghostly snowlight and the snow itself reduced the subtle colours and the limited variety of the landscape to simple configuration Catastrophic violence underlay all things, with the world in sparse simplicity that the soul shunned, the cold assaulted bitterly, it was time to withdraw to the candle-lit room and the fireside, but even there, the door could be slapped wide open by a gust of the turbulent winter

Giovanni Boccaccio withdrew from life as an activity that could provide sustenance for the artist, for the man of imagination, for the writer, and stooped to warm his soul with the old encrusted logs and brittle faggots of mediaeval classical learning Creativeness had gone cold, the sap was ebbing down the myriad channels We can only guess at the anxiety, the irascible feeling of futility that this condition must have signified for him who had been so filled with hot, generative vitality

The springs of creativeness are a mystery that remain a mystery whether one speak of the Muses or of the Holy Spirit, or even in the name of Freud For some men they provide lifelong abundance, for others, a gush in youth and then the aridity; for others, a fickle provision that has as many vagaries as the weather Racine knew long years of silence Wordsworth tormented verse with

memories of more copious fountains Balzac, on the other hand, worked under a fury in which, as he described, ideas clashed like the battalions of a great army on the battlefield, memories arrived at the charge with banners shaken out, the artillery of logic rushed into action with its teams and carriages, the darts of wit appeared as sharp-shooters, metaphors got ready and the paper was covered with ink as the combat opened, and on his death-bed he called for one of his own fictitious doctors For Boccaccio there was a silence, a drying up, a retreat of his forces as under heavy and irremediable defeat

Because of the mystery, no exact cause can be assigned to the death of his creative power which had produced prose and verse year after year Was the decline connected with diminishing sexuality, with love even as he understood it, which had gone impotent with a scorn of the creatures he once adored as his inspiration? Was his decline related to the break-up of his health which reacted in making him irritable, troubled, restless, and rather afraid? As we shall see later, he became exceedingly ill with, as has been diagnosed, a form of diabetes

These inquiries may be wide of the truth Indeed, his withdrawal into the study of old lore and into the compilation of big forgotten books may have been the result of his own ambition, fostered by Petrarch's counsel and example He knew Petrarch's European reputation as a Latin scholar who was fit, as he thought, to be numbered among the illustrious ancients For Petrarch he copied extracts from Cicero and Varro He knew Petrarch's disdain for the vernacular as compared with Latin, and with Greek, which Petrarch lacked but desired. He treasured Petrarch's letters—alas! the cherishing was not mutual—as though they were more precious than anything he could write himself To Petrarch he would not dare compare himself who, in truth, had mastered in the vulgar tongue a whole world beyond the lordship of the solitary of Vaucluse Petrarch urged, or rather goaded on his study of antiquity, and nourished his ambition of bringing back a knowledge of the neglected epics of Homer But all the urging in Petrarch's power would have been ineffectual had not there been present in Boccaccio himself the desire of being a scholar. It was just as well he had the desire It comforted his last and rather lonely years

All his life, Petrarch lamented his own lack of Greek Whenever he got the opportunity at Avignon, he cultivated the society of men who knew Greek like the Calabrian monk, Barlaam, who was sent from Byzantium by the Emperor Andronicus to the Pope as an ambassador in the reunion of the Eastern and Western Churches, or like another Byzantine ambassador, Nicolas Sigeros, who sent Petrarch the Greek text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Petrarch was ready to worship the texts though he could not read them During the winter of 1358–59, he met a new bearer of the Greek thing at Padua, and in the spring brought him, it seems, to Milan, where, in March, Boccaccio rode the long journey from Florence to meet them Boccaccio found Petrarch planting laurels in a garden and his advent was greeted as a good omen for the growth of the poet's shrubs Boccaccio protested that he was no poet, and Petrarch, with empyrean graciousness, insisted that he was And so they talked of poetry and of Greek and of this newcomer Who was the newcomer? He was the very man to translate Homer His name was Leontius Pilatus, or Leonzio Pilato He would be the bridge to cross the abyss of ruin to the kingdoms of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*

Before the year's end, the Greek gift of the gods was back in Florence to live with Boccaccio For three years Boccaccio suffered him with a heroism that must have been ironically homeric "They may not know it," Boccaccio declared to the world in the *De genealogia &c* —the translation is Osgood's—"but it is my peculiar boast and glory to cultivate Greek poetry among the Tuscans Was it not I who intercepted Leontius Pilatus on his way from Venice to the western Babylon, and with my advice turned him aside from his long peregrination, and kept him in our city? Did not I receive him into my own house, entertain him for a long time, and make the utmost effort personally that he should be appointed professor in Florence, and his salary paid out of the city's funds? Indeed I did"

Indeed he did But he had something to boast of other than the cultivation of Greek among the Tuscans Pilato was an adventurer, one of the tribe that wandered Europe, and perhaps one of the more unsavoury He bragged of being from the fount itself, from Thessaly, but confessed himself a Calabrian in his more

sober moments He was rough in manners, gloomy, surly, restless and grumbling, he was personally filthy and wore dirty ragged clothes on a dirty body, his black beard was a mass of bristles and his hair a tangle Petrarch, less strong in his love of Greek than in his endurance of such uncouth company, candidly termed him a *magna bellua*, a great brute Boccaccio perceived the brutishness but condoned it "For all that he is a most learned Hellenist, as any inquirer discovers, and a fairly inexhaustible mine of Greek history and myth" He was not, in fact, "a most learned Hellenist" as was demonstrated by the translation of Homer he helped to make, blindly and with guesses Yet, he was one of the weak vessels that held the chrism for the Greek scholastic succession to the Renaissance This *magna bellua* was, through Boccaccio's heroism, one of the forerunners of the Greek scholars who would make Florence a centre of Hellenism in later years like Manuel Chrysolaras who, some twenty years after Boccaccio's death, would fill men's dreams at night in Florence with the learning they had heard during the day, and Georgius of Trebizond, and Gemistos Plethon whose influence would lead Cosimo de' Medici to found the Platonic Academy, and John Argyropoulos, who would hold the Greek chair for fifteen years

Pilato lectured, tutored,—and lived with Boccaccio Between them, the hairy ruffian and the fat, enthusiastic amateur, they hammered the hexameters, first of the *Iliad* and then of the *Odyssey*, into equivalent Latin prose Petrarch had provided the texts He also lavished advice,—from a distance He admonished them about the innate deficiencies of word-for-word translations, and, to dignify his warning, he quoted from Saint Jerome's preface to the Latin translation of the *De temporibus* of Eusebius "If anyone says that translation does not change the grace of the original, let him try to turn Homer into Latin word for word, more than that I say, let him turn it into prose and he will see how ridiculous is the sequence of the words and how the most eloquent of poets stammers like a child" Petrarch was ravenous for Homer "Penelope," he said, "did not more ardently desire Ulysses" In a morsel of Homer that Pilato had cooked for him, he professed to savour a secret charm, and he prayed that Pilato would continue and that lost Homer would return. Thus the work went on for

three years, at first with excitement for Boccaccio and towards the end, as we may surmise, with the weary determination of a man who suffers more than he gains

The end meant the departure of Pilato from Florence for Venice where, before sailing for Byzantium, he was suffered by Petrarch for a while From Byzantium he wrote to Petrarch, pleading for a recall to Italy, and he received no answer Instead, Petrarch told Boccaccio that the worms of Greece could have him In the summer of 1365, Pilato decided to return anyway, and while his ship was in the Adriatic, a violent storm arose, and Pilato, for his safety, was lashed by the sailors to a mast, but he was not of the divine stuff of the laurel Lightning struck Pilato was incinerated The sailors cast his body into the sea Petrarch wondered if among the poor baggage were the copies of Euripides and Sophocles that Pilato had promised to bring, and commented that it was not the worms of Greece that had got him but the fishes of Italy The work remained, the first translation of Homer into a western tongue It would take Boccaccio five years to sort the manuscripts of the translation into order and to copy them with his own hand, while Petrarch wrote impatient letters to expedite the work

It was mechanical work, like most of the toils of Boccaccio's decline It is to this period of withdrawal from life that his books in mediaeval Latin may be assigned, although it must be pointed out that at least one of them was begun long before his creative powers became arid These books are four, and their dates are disputed as indeed they might be, considering that the *De genealogia &c* was the pet brain-child of a lifetime, the other three being *De claris mulieribus*, *De casibus virorum*, and *De montibus*, *silvis*, *fontibus*, *lacubus*, *fluminibus*, *stagnis seu paludibus*, *de nominibus maris* These are huge compilations, dictionaries and encyclopaedias of myths, peoples and places They gave Boccaccio a European reputation among Renaissance scholars when, beyond the Alps, his *Decameron* was little known, and in time they went through numerous editions and translations. These hundreds of years, the books have gathered the dust of oblivion. To toil through them, and one can do nothing but toil, is a weariness of the flesh and the spirit Were they a weariness to the man who compiled them? They have the mark of it.

For this toil, he withdrew from the life that had filled his vernacular prose and verse with vitality He shut the door, heaped on the logs when he could afford them, or warmed his cramped fingers with a few fragments of glowing charcoal or even a handful of roast chestnuts, set the old books on his table in the candlelight, dipped his pen, wrote, dipped again and added dry word to drier phrase He tinkered ingeniously with the Latin that there might be some novelty, some simulation of freshness, to substitute for organic vitality He had need of enchantment He had need of a potent conjuration for the pen and ink such as the neighbours and the people of the streets attributed in their folklore to him and to other writers, the magicians

> A questo tavolino io mi siedo,
> Calmaio, penna, carta io lo prendo,
> E lo spirito della Bellaria lo scongiuio,
> Che il cielo fa rasserenare,
> Che tutto ciò che scrivo sia per me,
> Sia di buona fortuna ! [1]

Bellaria was invoked in vain when he compiled his four Latin books First, let us take the *De genealogia deorum gentilium*—" The Genealogy of the Pagan Gods " According to the dedication, this is supposed to have been written at the request of King Hugo of Cyprus who died in 1359 As early as 1332, Boccaccio's father had met this king, presumably on business Therefore, it is probable that the book was a hobby of Boccaccio's for a long time, and he still fostered it, even in its almost completed form, till two or three years before his death In fifteen books he set about giving " a speculum of ancient myth ", as Osgood says In a sense it was original work " Boccaccio makes the first attempt on a large scale to assemble, arrange, incorporate, and explain the vast accumulation of legend, and reduce it, after the manner of his times, to convenient encyclopaedic form "

[1] Here at this table I now seat myself,
Having my inkstand, pen, and paper spread,
To invoke the spirit of Bellaria !
The one who makes the heaven serene and fair,
That all which I write may ever be
A source of happy fortune unto me !

The last two books, the fourteenth and the fifteenth, are now the most valuable, since they give a precious chapter of Boccaccio's *apologia pro vita sua*, as well as his defence of poetry, though he sometimes used the word "poetry" to connote scholarship as well It was patient work, a back-breaking stooping for faggots that lit fires to keep Renaissance scholars warm But something green slipped in among the kindling Life slipped in, furtively as it were, through an unlatched door There is his account of a Tuscan Christmas custom, an immemorial rite that conjoined Christendom to the pre-Christian world in continuity and fulfilment On Christmas Eve the father of the house would lay a huge log upon the *lari*, as the fire-dogs on the hearth were called, and gathering the family, he would take a cup of wine, drink and pour a libation on the burning wood, and then the household would drink in turn The log would burn, it was the hope, till Twelfth Night That little picture, as clear as a little coloured sketch made playfully by an illuminator of manuscripts, brings Boccaccio and his age near, and indeed, all Christendom of the West the glowing wood, the biting fragrance of the smoke, the sudden leap of the flame and the sizzling wine, and the cup going from hand to hand in family communion

Next among these books is *De claris mulieribus*, that is, to use the Tudor English of the Lord Morley who translated for the favour of Henry VIII, a king not unknown for a mortal taste in women, "Of the Righte Renomyde Ladies" Although Boccaccio had wished to dedicate the work to Queen Giovanna of Naples, he modestly refrained, and instead offered it to Andrea, sister of the Niccolò Acciaiuoli whose patronage he had long courted The idea of the compilation was taken from Petrarch's *De viris illustribus*, and Petrarch's example was in a sense lamentable

"There be of the olde auncyent wryters," to use Morley's translation, "and also of late, of right famous clerkes that have brevely wrytten the lyffes of the illustriouse noble men Among others, the ryght exellent poete Frauncys Petrark, my maister, hathe endytyd and gathrede theyre actes in a compendiouse volume, and well worthy Surely, I have not a little mervelyde of theym that have thus wrytten, why they have not sumwhat touchede the gloriouse actes of women, when it is evydente that dyvers and sundry of theym have doone ryghte notable thynges"

Some three hundred right renowned ladies are reviewed briefly but tediously Here is no lyrical adoration of womankind but only the dark mood that made him wary of love and all ladies, especially widows He fashioned the renowned ones of antiquity into sticks with which to beat the moderns Yet he professed to have composed the work not for civic usefulness but for the praise and pleasure of women ! What pleasure ! What praise ! The Old Crow perches on his shoulder to squawk like a sick conscience " Let the matrons then be ashamed," he says, " to see the body of Dido dead and without spirit, and when they call to mind the cause of her death, let them look downward to the ground, that a member of the devil, a pagan, should with her chastity surpass a Christian woman's chastity Let not then the widows think with their tears, nor with their black gowns, to have done all they should do to their husbands, when they be dead, but keep to one their love for ever, if they fulfil the office of a chaste widow " The only commentary is " Sour grapes ! "

Although the admonitions it contains are tedious, the book of renowned ladies is the least fatiguing of the Latin works The stories are brief Some of them are hardly stories at all but a few lines of anecdote tricked out with dull sermonisings Occasionally, the old zest of the storyteller returns, when he hits on some tale that might have been in the *Decameron*, like the history of Paolina who was wiled into infidelity He starts with Eve and concludes with an encomium of Queen Giovanna that really tells us nothing about her, and in between, to name an armful of sonsy lasses, are Juno, Ceres, Venus, Europa, Thisbe, Niobe, Medea, Medusa, Jocasta, Clytemnestra, Helen, Penelope, Dido, Sappho, Lucrece, Cleopatra, Poppea, Sophonisba, and, that thrill of the Middle Ages, Pope Joan It is the best book from which to take a sample of the Latin he wrote,—Latin which classicists will naturally damn It is a flat, serviceable, undistinguished prose Here is a passage from his entry for Cassandra, followed by Morley's Tudor translation with a slight change of wording and a modernisation of the spelling

Cassandra Priami fuit, Troianorum regis, filia Huic quidem, ut vetustas asserit, vaticinii mens fuit, seu quesita studiis, seu dei dono, seu potius dyabolica fraude, non satis certum est Hoc

tamen affirmatur a multis eam longe ante rapinam Helene, audaciam Paridis et aduentum Tyndaridis et longam ciuitatis obsidionem et postremam Priami atque Ylionis desolationem persepe et clara cecinisse voce Et ob hoc, cum nulla dictis suis prestaretur fides, a patre et fratribus verberibus castigatam volunt ac etiam fabulam inde confictam eam scilicet ab Appolline dilectam et in ejus concubitum requisitam, quem se prestaturam promisisse dicunt, si ab eodem ante eidem futurorum noticia prestaretur Quod cum suscepisset negassetque promissum, nec Appollo posset auferre concessum, aiunt illum muneri adiecisse neminem quod diceret crediturum Et sic factum est, ut quod diceret tanquam fatue dictum crederetur a cunctis

" Cassandra was a daughter of Priam, King of Troy And this woman had, either by her study, or else by the gift of God, or by some diabolical craft, the spirit of prophecy And this is affirmed to be true, that long ere Helen was ravished by Paris, and ere the city was besieged, she told that—as well as the ruin of Priam and the burning of Ilion and the final destruction of her father's kingdom And because neither her father nor her brother did give credit to it, she was oft times beaten and chastised for so telling, and of this is risen the fable that she was beloved of the god Apollo, and that she granted to be at his commandment, so that by him she might have the knowledge of things to come Which when Apollo had granted, she denying her promise, Apollo could not take from her that once he had freely given her, and for that cause, being sore displeased, willed that no man should believe her sayings, were they true or false, and for that, whatsoever she prophesied, no man gave thereto credit."

In the compilation of the next book, *De casibus virorum*, Boccaccio was goaded like a plough-horse by Petrarch Through the histories of famous men—and of a few women—beginning with Adam and Eve and ploughing down to Filippa la Catanese in tragic Naples, he laboured and panted through nine books to produce that fine, fat, rare crop of wisdom the fickleness of fortune ! John Lydgate ground the stuff into verse for " The Fall of Princes ", and while it is comparatively a purgatory to consume Lydgate, it is hell to

feed on Boccaccio He moralises with senile, croaking tediousness, he philosophises, exhorts, admonishes, digresses to consider once more the crookedness of women He is an arch-bore because he is bored himself Yet, it is here we find in an account of the burning of the Templars in Paris the valuable statement that helps to date Boccaccio's birth "These things were told to me by my father, a worthy man named Boccaccio, who was present when it happened"

In one of the digressions he referred to the *acedia* of writers, that paralysing sadness of the soul which he seemed to think was an occupational sin Was this self-revelation? It appears that it was Certainly, among other writers he could not have made an example of Petrarch who could be dismally sad but whose heart was sane But it must not be taken as true that Boccaccio was accusing himself precisely of the sin of *acedia* in which the soul grew sluggish, full of a weariness of well-doing in charity, a prey to the Seventh Deadly Sin, to serpentine anaesthetic Sloth The English word is not really an exact equivalent of the Latin, since usage has worn it to mean something like laziness We must look to a secondary meaning for the sense in which Boccaccio applied the word to writers, or rather to himself, a meaning that will involve cumulative melancholy without disgust of all spiritual good

To put it another way, we must look for some conditions and some effects of *accidie* without looking for the sin itself Now, mediaeval men did not neglect to consider that a man's feeding, the state of the weather, or the state of health, might breed the blue devils of melancholy like maggots in a carcass Boccaccio, we know, was poor, and he did not wish to be poor His health was breaking up A cessation had come to his creativeness We know that he railed disproportionately against women and marriage, that he was fond of telling rancorous stories against the clergy who, weak though they might have been, were instruments of religion, that he was bitter, that he became verbose, a heaper of words, and lastly, that he was restless

It is just here that a well-wisher of Boccaccio's would begin to see difficulties in persuading him that he had not truly fallen a prey to *accidie*, since there were the theologians, or a confessor just around the corner, to declare that among the effects of the sin one could note disgust with spiritual good, immoderate vituperation

of evils, rancour, restlessness, and, oddly enough, verbosity But in his favour were his industry, his filial devotion to the Mother of God, and his precise profession of Faith in the last part of "The Genealogy of the Pagan Gods" Was his industry part of his struggle against *accidie*? Was he battling in the soft cobra-like coils when he compiled the fourth book, *De montibus &c*, the alphabetical geographical dictionary of mountains, woods, fountains, lakes, rivers, swamps or marshes, and of the names of the seas? That cumbersome *vade mecum* which was to be a standard Renaissance reference book, was drudgery indeed "Usage of labour," said Chaucer's Parson about *accidie*, "is a full great thing, for it maketh, as saith Saint Bernard, the labourer to have strong arms and hard sinews" Was the drudgery the fight of a darkening spirit that recognised and dreaded the peril of Sloth? The answer, it seems, must be yes Petrarch in a letter told him that he had a troubled soul

To perform these dry but necessary tasks he had turned from life to the confines of a room and the company of books which had nothing to do with the streets of bustling Florence It was flight The door was shut In isolation he would toil—dip the pen and write, dip the pen and sigh—and nurse the small warmth that remained of his ancient exuberance In exuberance he had scoffed at many monks, the Fra Cipollas who roamed Italy, sometimes in roguery, sometimes on genuine missions, holy men as well as deluders, rascals and manufacturers of relics Out of the hundreds of sincere evangelists who trudged, haggard with travel and with burning eyes, from village to village and town to town, one chose him out as he sat in his room to give him a message, a few precious words for his eternal salvation After the knocking on his shut door, after the message that blew upon him with the austere simplicity of winter, he was bewildered in terror before the hurtle of hell

III

Il diavolo invecchiato, si fece frate
When the devil is old, he turns friar

—Italian proverb

ONE DAY EARLY IN THE YEAR 1362 HE WAS IN HIS HOUSE WHEN A knock came to the door and a strange visitor, a Carthusian monk, was admitted His name was Gioacchino Ciana and he had come from Maggiano near Siena, or probably from Siena itself, with a special message for Messer Giovanni Boccaccio

Who sent the message? If Boccaccio put that question, as he likely did, we can imagine his manner as being affable and courteous, such as would befit a man who had rubbed elbows on missions and embassies with all sorts of God's children from muleteers to cardinals and trollops to queens, but of the potent terror that lurked in the answer he could have had no notion

The message was sent by a certain Carthusian monk named Pietro Petroni, in high repute for sanctity and for the miracles he had worked Messer Giovanni had heard of him, had he not? No! Messer Giovanni must confess ignorance, but how was he known to Pietro Petroni? Well, when Blessed Pietro Petroni—for that is his honour—lay dying in May of the previous year, he was granted the gift of prophecy which is sometimes given to human creatures while the veil of the body wears thin towards death and the soul glimpses eternity Messer Giovanni knew, of course, that dying men are sometimes granted the gift of vision as they draw near the Creator of all things? Yes! to be sure! Messer Giovanni believed in that and . but the message? what was it? What did Beato Pietro Petroni say?

He said that Messer Giovanni Boccaccio had only a few more years to live and that he was to give up the study of poetry, he also had left counsel for Francesco Petrarca whom he, the messenger, Gioacchino Ciana, would visit in due course after other chosen people in Naples, France and Britain, had received their appointed share of the prophecies

Such were the message and the messenger We do not know whether the effect on Boccaccio was like a Damascus-road flash, a simulation of the impact of heaven on Saint Paul, or like a gradual seeping of winter-cold through the flesh into the chambers of the heart We know that the effect was terror He was an imaginative man In a way, he could vividly see things happening before they happened Now he was seeing This was the end of clemency, here was merciless winter that resolved all heat and colour to iciness and crude black and white He saw finality He was also a reasonable man, once he had accepted the premises, but reason now tripped him and laid him prostrate, for, as he would argue in his *Comento* on the sixth canto of the *Inferno*, had not God placed the capacious human intellect, which could understand mysteries, in a fleshy vesture that made it difficult or rare for the intellect to operate intensely unless the enshrouding vesture were worn thin as a gauze by prolonged illness or the approach of death?

He was, as well, an emotional man, but now fear which he felt as strongly as he had once suffered the ache of the body in lust and love, had grasped him by the neck to shake him and snarl over him till he grovelled He was to give up his studies! All the books, manuscripts, and letters, this Homer, Cicero, Ovid, this Petrarch, this Dante, were to be put away for ever that he, who had no other consolation but these, might devote his life to prayer! Well, he would put them away All He would pray He would wear his knee-caps thin He had never prayed well No! Not very well He had done things which he could not defend by any manner or means Women and their bodies and the thought of their bodies—like the Delilah in *De casibus virorum* pink and white skin, black, large, grave eyes, musical voice, gleaming golden hair, little mouth, slender, straight neck rising from curved shoulders, round, gently swelling breasts divided by a small space, little hands, small soft feet; strong, rounded thighs,—these had been leading him to the dance of the devil, and the devil was the lord of hell, and images of hell, smoky and flame-lapped, precise in the tortured lines of vilely gaping, fanged mouths and distended, flattened nostrils, crowded with the never-ending wailing stream of descending multitudes as in mural fresco and painting, could fall upon his mind in one vision, integrated for his terrorising by the terror itself

We guess at these effects We guess that his mind, as it became weary of scuttling round wildly inside the trap, tried to discern a chance of escape, or even some consolation as relief What was that the monk had said? That he was on his way to Naples, France and Britain, and that he would reach Petrarch in the end There was escape Petrarch would know Petrarch was grave, good, serene, a philosopher Boccaccio wrote a letter

He had chosen rightly He received a reply from Petrarch so serene, good and grave, and so paternally humorous—like a father trying to draw a smile into the face of a child crying and sweating in the fears of a nightmare—that the joy of the great friendship can still bring tears It is from this lengthy letter of Petrarch's, written from Padua on May 28, 1362, that we learn the whole story, except for a few minor details, about Boccaccio's conversion, for Boccaccio's own letter is unfortunately lost

"O my brother," Petrarch wrote, "your letter filled me with terror, and while I was reading it, amazement and sadness by turns took possession of my soul, but both one and the other melted away when I had finished reading How could I read, without weeping, about your tears and approaching death when I did not know the true story and only took heed of the words? You write me that a certain Pietro, native of Siena, a religious of great repute and already famous for miracles done, foretold in prophecy some things about many people, and again about us, when he was come almost to the end of his life"

But Petrarch was cool He proceeded to re-state Boccaccio's account of what happened,—and of the dying Blessed Pietro Petroni's commands

"A great portent indeed, I agree with you, if true, but it is no new or strange thing for falsehoods to be hidden under the veil of religion Your messenger, I take it, is to visit Naples, France and Britain, and lastly myself I will take stock of him when he comes, his face, his eyes, his manners, his gestures, how he walks, how he carries himself, the sound of his voice, the drift of his talk, and especially what he says and what his object seems to be The message to you is twofold you have only a short time to live and you must give up the study of poetry This is the cause of your terror which I made mine on reading your letter, but which

I have put from me on thinking the thing over, as you will do yourself, because if you will only pay attention to me, or rather to your own good sense, you will find that you have been troubled by something that should have pleased All that is said by Christ cannot be other than true, it is impossible that the truth could ever lie But here is the rub I ask myself if the author of the prophecy is Christ, or whether someone else has not used Christ's name to lend weight to his own saying"

Then Petrarch goes on to insist that he himself believes in death-bed prophecies, and that the histories of Greece and Rome are full of instances But even if the old stories and the monk's message are true, why should Boccaccio be distressed? Did he not know that he could not have a very long space of life left to him? And life? What was it anyway?

"A smoke, a shadow, a dream, an illusion is this life we lead, a field of toil and struggle, and valuable only in that it is the road to a better life" Life, it is true, is better than not-life, although life is a misery, a vale of tears and "I wish to say this only, that whatever be the judgment on the truth of these propositions, our life is certainly such, that while we should not love it too much, so also we should endure it to the end, and by it as by a rugged road accomplish our journey and attain the desired country"

As for giving up studies, this would be apt advice if addressed to an old man about to take up studies for the first time Letters when new are bitter food to the old, but to those who have grown up with them, they are consolation They are also nourishment of the Faith. "But," added Petrarch, "if, despite all this, you are fixed in your intention, and if you are bent on casting away not only your learning but the humble means of it, then I will thank you for giving me the option of your library." A cunning stroke like this, which forced Boccaccio to consider the particular effects of his intention, was worth a page of preaching Petrarch confessed that he did not know what price to put on the books, or what were their titles or numbers, as though such itemising would force Boccaccio to look on his books one by one, till he should realise that they were a part of him that might not be cut off without spiritual disaster.

Petrarch was in many ways an astonishingly practical man.

"Send me," he wrote, "an exact list of them, and take heed of the agreement I propose If it ever happens, as I have always desired and as you more or less promised me one day, that you resolve to pass with me whatever is left of your life, you shall find those books, and these gathered by me, united in such a way as will make you recognise you have lost nothing but gained something new It remains for me to say that since you insist you are my debtor for I know not how much money, I, for my part, deny it, and I wonder at this foolish, not to say inept scruple of your conscience I can say to you with Terence you seek for difficulties where there are none Of one thing only you are my debtor of my love But no, since I must confess that you have been from the first a payer in good faith"

There was nothing in this profession of friendship that could be accounted cold, remote, delusory, or affected by a desire to emulate bookishly some friendships of the ancients It was warm, generous love responding to the terrible need of a man who had perceived suddenly that for him, an individual, there was now the infinite solitude of the soul face to face with its Maker The encouragement was humanly total

Petrarch had tried to get Boccaccio secretarial positions which Boccaccio refused, preferring the liberty of his mind and life, and he had praised him for it "But for the belittlement you have made of a friend who has often invited you, for this, no, I cannot praise I am not of the kind that can make you rich now If it were possible, not words nor the pen but deeds should speak for me I am however of the kind who possesses more than would suffice for the needs of two who live conjoined in heart and house You do me a great wrong if you shun me, if you do not believe me, you do a greater Farewell"

Petrarch could do no more except to await the effects of his consolation. And effects there were At least the terror was tamed and the confusion of soul somewhat ordered, though death still proffered its harsh decision The books were not neglected Boccaccio returned to them, resolute, in good heart

A sonnet of his, of uncertain date like all his sonnets, may have been written about this time, though some commentators attribute it to the period of the Black Death.

Dura cosa è ed orribile assai
La morte ad aspettare e paurosa,
Ma così certa ed infallibil cosa
Nè fu, nè è, nè credo sara mai,
E'l corso della vita è breve c'hai,
E volger non si può nè dargli posa,
Nè qui si vede cosa si gioiosa
Che il suo fine non sia lacrime e guai
Dunque perchè con operar valore
Non c'ingegniamo di stender la fama,
E con quella far lunghi i brevi giorni?
Questa ne dà questa ne serva onore,
Questa ne lieva dagli anni la squama,
Questa ne fa di lunga vita adorni [1]

And Messer Giovanni prayed There in Florence he prayed, and down in Certaldo whither he removed himself later with the homing instinct of the exiled countryman to whom, in old age, memories of the fields he had walked in childhood become more vivid than the fading world "According to my intention, about which I told you," he wrote about this time to a friend, Pino dei Rossi, exiled for a part in the political disturbances of 1360, "I have returned to Certaldo, and there I have begun, with much less difficulty than I expected, to find comfort in life I have begun to like the rough clothes and the country fare It is such a consolation to my soul not to see the ambitions, unpleasantness and annoyances of our fellow citizens that, if I could manage never to hear anything of them again, I believe my peace would grow exceedingly Instead of the importunate and endless entanglements of citizens, I see the fields, woods, trees clothed with green leaves and various flowers Whenever I please I can without any trouble converse freely with my little books "

He could pray there, too Among the articles left by his Will which he made a year before his death there was a Breviary, and there were relics from many parts of the world, and a chasuble,

[1] A hard thing it is, and very horrible and fearful to wait for death, but so certain and inevitable a thing there never was, nor is, nor, I believe, will ever be The course of life is short and one cannot retrace it, or halt, and here nothing so joyful can be seen that has not an end in tears and lamentation Therefore why should we not try to extend fame by working worthily, and with that to make the short days long? This bestows and serves honour, this removes the squalor from the years, this makes splendour of a long life

a stole, a maniple, a small altar pallium of red Lucca cloth, and three cases for corporals things that enticed later commentators into claiming that he had become a priest, when, as is more likely, he kept those vestments that Mass might be said in his house Those vestments and other things he left to the church of San Jacopo in Certaldo, and as well, an alabaster plaque of Our Lady Her he had not forgotten Through her he could ask for intercession in his dread state with all the old and new words, the prayers and the poetry, that Christendom offered without stint And there, too, his friend Petrarch could come to his help with the untranslatable *canzone* which begins

> Vergine bella, che di sol vestita,
> Coronata di stella
> Virgin most lovely, robed with the sunlit sky
> And crowned with stars

IV

Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help?

—Dr Johnson

THE POVERTY WAS REAL AND PRESSING, AND SO WERE THE DESIRE to be free and the pride Boccaccio still required a patron, but the patron would need to be an unreckoning dispenser of florins, and very cautious in his demands There was always Niccolò Acciaiuoli, an expectation rather than a reality

Niccolò, at this time in his early fifties, had been mounting from power to power and riches to riches, which was a way the energetic Florentines had all over Europe when their city could not contain them His success was partly due to the favours of Catherine of Courtnay, King Robert's sister, who was vainly titled Empress of Constantinople A bedroom had figured in obtaining the initial favours, and an expedition to Greece—recall how fulsomely Boccaccio regretted his departure!—for the purpose of securing lands belonging to Catherine's family, had figured in obtaining yet more favours He it was who engineered the marriage of Prince Louis of Taranto to Queen Giovanna when the Neapolitan royal air was still tainted with murder, and when the Hungarians had departed, and Louis and Giovanna had come back from Avignon, Niccolò became Seneschal of the Kingdom He intimidated the Florentines into remitting all taxation of his Tuscan properties, which showed his power He was wealthy He could afford regal entertainments that shocked the frugal Florentines He was magnificent The grand Certosa stood, and stands yet, a few miles outside Florence in testimony.

All this in twenty years. His father had been a merchant of plebeian origin, his grandfather had sold feathers to the wife of the first Angevin monarch of Naples, and he, Niccolò, was now first man in the realm. He was ripe, therefore, to have his biography written in a certain pleasing fashion by a good, indeed by the very best man of letters to be bought. It is about the only

use that successful business men and climbing politicians have for writers

Giovanni Boccaccio was not forgotten How could he be forgotten considering that he and Niccolò had been boys together, and that he had tried to choose Niccolò as his patron ! Moreover, Niccolò's secretary, Francesco Nelli, was a friend of his Both Seneschal and secretary united in urging Boccaccio to come to Naples, and he went Were not all his troubles over at last ? Never again would he need to accept with shame the offerings of his dearest friends ? Naples was one great pie into which he could stick his thumb, with the encouragement of the cook, and pull out a plum

He left Florence and took with him his half-brother Jacopo, then about twenty, to whom he had willed a house and all its rights forever He did not know that he was being invited, not to be made secure as a worthy man of letters by a discerning patron, but to be employed in the delicate and absorbing task of writing an encomium He thus manifested a blind spot to the nature of business men and climbing politicians which is not at all rare among writers Giovanni and Jacopo arrived after their twelve-day journey in November weather, when the air was thin, the streams frozen and the pestilence abroad They were welcomed by Niccolò who then promptly forgot all about them

He had many castles, palaces, villas and farmhouses, delightful, peaceful and private dwellings, and among these resplendent properties there was one hovel of a house, draped with spiders' webs, filthy with dust, foully smelling, and regarded as vile even by the riff-raff In this Giovanni Boccaccio and Jacopo were stabled Out of the depths of his disgust which was physical and mental, he found an apt name for it He called it a bilge-hole, a receptacle for offal The bed on which they tried to sleep on a stone loft had been but lately vacated by a muleteer, a person often undistinguishable by smell from a mule, and it was covered with tow as bedding, compressed and rolled by usage into little lumps, and with it a scanty stinking coverlet There was no bolster In the little room, open all night to the piercing north wind by reason of the many apertures in its walls, old, tired Giovanni and his half-brother took up the posture of repose He noted grimly that to

sleep on straw was a grand thing for a veteran He noted, too, that he need not have travelled to Naples to sleep in a sewer The whole night was a purgatory, what with the ascent of Stygian odours, and the discomfort of the bed, the myriad insects and the bedlam In a corner, a wick in a drop of oil burned feebly in a terracotta cup There was broken furniture and battered vessels This, he thought, was the kind of house that Cleopatra kept to welcome Antony !

And while he lay there, fatigued, his wrath sparkling with his cruel Tuscan wit, he was denied sleep by the uproar in the house. It seemed that gangs of rascals and rogues ran hither and thither, muleteers, boys, kitchen-wenches, hangers-on, scullions, gnawers of table-droppings, courtyard mongrels and house-rats, who filled the hovel with their cow-like bawlings, who clattered dishes and smashed jars and jugs of wine till the fragrance of the vinous muck their feet concocted on the floor pervaded all the air. Boccaccio vomited. The multiple odours, the sickly sweet and acrid vapours of burning rancid oil and tow, the sting of woodsmoke, the heady stench of spilled wine churned into the ordurous clay of the floor, the gorge-raising fust of drying fish, the sweaty rankness of the muleteers' bed,—all these combined and blended to form the magisterial *bouquet* of Niccolò Acciaiuoli's welcome for Giovanni Boccaccio

Next came the prefect of this royal house, his eyes weeping for the pungency of the smoke, and bearing a wisp of light in one hand and a stick in the other With beating stick and hoarse voice he bade those get to table who wished to dine. There was a rush on the food, a gobbling, slopping, spitting and choking over the viands which consisted of a few roast chestnuts, scraps, spratlings cooked in rancid oil and sour wine

"Is not a Patron, my Lord . . . ?" For two months Boccaccio suffered this wonderful Neapolitan holiday, and then was invited by the young gentleman, Mainardo Cavalcanti, a Florentine who would succeed Niccolò as Seneschal, to more comfortable quarters. Jacopo was placed in an inn But Niccolò was not yet done with behaving as he had not been expected to behave. He had a noble villa near Baia, and thither he invited Boccaccio, who went, probably expecting the munificence of remorse. Once more, the room was

small and the bed foul, and once more, after Niccolò had suddenly left, Boccaccio returned to Naples, to find himself again in the same abominable sewer He had materials, certainly, for such a life of his patron as he would have preferred to do without

There had to be an end He took the road to Venice, to his friend Petrarch, where wrath could be cooled by wisdom and courteous domestic solicitude He must have been a mounted alembic of acid as he rode the long highway north But it was not the end The blunderers were not satisfied Nelli wrote him a letter to upbraid him for departing from Naples so abruptly and for being so plaintive about a little discomfort Nelli called him "a man of glass"

A little discomfort ! A "man of glass" ! By the Lord !

Boccaccio replied "I had made up my mind," he wrote, "to remain silent, but you, with your biting letter, have moved me to words" His letter must be by far the longest, the most wrathful, and the most devastating letter ever written by a disappointed guest to a disappointing host The treatment he received—and even allowing for outrageous exaggeration on his part, it was bad enough—had transformed him into a bubbling geyser that only needed to be blocked with a carelessly tossed stone for a burst of scalding, steamy explosions The stone was tossed by Nelli, and it was the taunt, "a man of glass" Boccaccio blew up You, he said in effect to Nelli, you declare that your Maecenas, egregious hostel of the Muses, was shamed by my departure and that if only I had remained in good faith, I should have then departed with due honours and suitable gifts, let me, then, jog your memory Was I not invited to Naples by a letter written by the hand of Maecenas himself and promised a share in his happiness ? I went and I was received with friendly embraces and smiling words And I was ushered into a mansion, wasn't I ? A man of glass, am I ?

Then follows the lengthy account of life in a low Neapolitan doss-house, and with it, a portrait of Niccolò Acciaiuoli as a busy humbug sitting at stool among his courtesans, which is exceedingly crude, coarse, and incidentally unjust the sort of portrait which might emerge from the alcoholic sour-bellied reveries of disgruntled ruffians in just the doss-house that Boccaccio described For

Niccolò was intelligent, courageous, lettered, and magnificent in the way that the Medici would make their own

"Let him look out," Boccaccio wrote, "and let you, too, look out that you do not goad me into vituperation You will find that I am more expert at that job than you think With cold water you have washed me I have shaved you, not with a saw-edge razor as I should have But what has not been done will be done if you do not keep quiet May God protect you"

With this letter, Boccaccio wrote finis to his patron It is doubtful if the letter was ever sent to Nelli who was dead of the plague before September, 1363 In fact, it has been doubted whether Boccaccio wrote the letter at all, and the doubt is shared by Todeschini, Hortis and Hutton The chief ground of doubt appears to be this Boccaccio himself stated that he lived with Pilato in Florence for three years, and it is during those three years that the doubted visit to Naples is supposed to have taken place how could he have been in Naples, it is asked, if he himself said he was in Florence? The question may be questioned Are we to understand by Boccaccio's statement that he was living with Pilato every day of the three years? It is doubtful if he did mean that Could he not have abandoned the gorgeously attractive company of the Calabrian brute for a few months? And at any rate, the letter is accepted by Corazzini and Chubb, and it reads like Boccaccio, and it sounds like his fury,—that fury and coarseness which made the taut lines of the *Corbaccio* twang and vibrate and buzz

The letter was written in Venice whither he had gone to visit Petrarch, sometime between May and September, 1363 He was welcomed as though the house were his also They had much to talk about death and the dead monk's prophecies, death and the recurrent plague and the thinning out of friends that left them like two old, forlorn trees of a great wood, life and the misery of it and the desired country, letters and the joy of them, and the translation of Homer, patrons, perhaps, and their ways, and the preciousness of liberty. One wonders if they ever spoke about that unfulfilled side of Boccaccio's nature. his homelessness, the unwifed tenderness of paternal affection: the lack of a place he could cherish for repose. It was not that he lacked piety or patriotism but that the piety had never been focused as in, say, Du Bellay

longing for " the thin sad slates that cover up my home ", or in Petrarch himself who, despite the tendency of his mind to phantomise the things he loved, did love Vaucluse and the fountain of the Sorgues and his little house and garden

It was to Petrarch that Boccaccio could go, as to home How odd that was ! How odd when the need of Boccaccio's sensual imaginative nature was the strong, vivid image, or the physical reality ! But nowhere does he manifest the image of " the thin sad slates " Instead, he shows the pathetic and incurable restlessness of the perpetual exile His travels as a young man had been considerable, but for an ageing man in ill-health who ranged the roads as far north as Avignon and as far south as Rome, suffering all weathers and the discomforts of inns and the dangers of preying mercenary soldiers, his travels were astonishing

They give to any account of his last years a spirit of restlessness He travels, as it were, because he must, like a leaf blown, raised and flown far, deposited, unseated again and urged on, till only disintegration makes another scurry impossible We can chronicle four long journeys after the Naples-Venice trip with the conjecture that there may have been others, and with the certainty that we do not know how many times a year, even a month, he rode up and down between Florence and Certaldo It is not as the stout, grey-haired student, the writer poring over old books and manuscripts like a magician that we see him during those years, but as the traveller, grey with the summer dust, or spattered with winter mud to the hood of his mantle, spurring on a mule that grows wearier than he

The first of these journeys was to Avignon in 1365 He was sent by the Commune A decade had passed since his last mission, —and failure ; and the new task, he must have surmised, was on the face of it as unlikely to be a success Florence was trying to squirm out of trouble, just as usual

The new Pope, Urban V, was very different to what they had become accustomed to in Avignon Although a Frenchman, he had given the word that the Papacy would be restored to Rome and the prolonged Babylonian captivity broken, and in this he was backed and encouraged by the rhetoric of Petrarch, the giant devotion of Saint Catherine of Siena and the succour of the Emperor

Charles IV His presence was required in Rome for the sake of Italian peace

Through Cardinal Albornoz he had managed to quieten the Viscontis of Milan who tyrannised over Lombardy, and threatened the liberty of the free cities by intrigue and by arms It was the old story, still going on Of these free cities, Florence was one The hands on the money-bags trembled The Viscontis had made the northern trade-routes as safe as an alley in the plague War with the Pisans had meant the loss of a valuable port, and worse still, the Pisans, who were good fighters themselves, had been reinforced by German mercenaries considerately sent by the Viscontis, and also by those dubious auxiliaries, the English and Italian cut-throats led by the Essex-man, Sir John Hawkwood, a *condottiere* who did good business in blood, sweat and tears The entire Florentine country was at their mercy They might have been bought off, but the Florentines did not bid high enough Urban V intervened, and in 1364 peace was made

The political power of the Pope was something, therefore, to be reckoned with, and even feared It was no longer remote It was returning into the affairs of Italy Urban, Albornoz, and the Emperor were actualities for the Florentine politicians In August, 1365, Giovanni Boccaccio set out on the long road to Avignon, well provisioned with credentials which described him as a discreet man and an honourable citizen, but not with money which was a meagre two pounds a day for forty-five days The letters of instruction were the most detailed that he ever packed into a pouch He was to discover whether the Pope was really returning to Rome. He was to prevent the coming of the Emperor How? Impossible He was to assure his Holiness that Florence was ever devoted, that she had not done anything in fact against the Papal cause as some detractors affirmed, but on the contrary had given help on various occasions Could he possibly convince Urban of inflexible Florentine devotion? Improbable. He was indeed about to lie abroad for his country

He had something more to offer than his wit, such as it was He was to offer the Pope, in the event of the Papal return to Rome, the use of five fully provisioned galleys if the journey should be by sea, and of five hundred faithful soldiers under the banner of

the Republic, if by land, and, as well, the hospitality of the city At Genoa he halted for a while to pay his respects to the Doge of the city according to instructions, and to carry out a minor task He would have liked to cut across to Pavia, to Petrarch, who was disappointed that he did not, but business and the time-limit urged him on His friendship with Petrarch was as good as any official credentials, for at Avignon, a friend and admirer of Petrarch's, Filippo, the aged Patriarch of Jerusalem, astonished the Pope and Cardinals by embracing Boccaccio fervently and for long This was gratifying But it was not the kind of success the Commune desired The Pope refused to be convinced

Again, in 1367, Boccaccio was on the road, on this occasion to visit Petrarch In March he travelled from Certaldo to Florence in cold, wet weather Friends pointed anxiously to the grey lowering skies and recounted the dangers of the road as brought home by travellers from Bologna He could not go And so he delayed Then he heard that his friend had gone back from Venice to Pavia to be the guest of the Viscontis Disappointed, he was wondering whether he should not return to Certaldo, to the somnolence of the hearth and village peace, but desire to see Petrarch compelled him

At last he travelled On the way he met Petrarch's son-in-law, Franceschino da Brossano, who was in business, and later he complimented Petrarch on the young man's fine form, face and speech At Venice he was greeted by a young Florentine, Francesco Allegri, who gave him bed and board But had he not set out to visit Petrarch's house in Venice? Why, then, did he not stay with Petrarch's daughter, Francesca, with whom welcome waited? The answer as given in a letter to Petrarch is as much a reflection on Boccaccio's time as on his own excessive prudence, learned in old age "And I tell you this in so many words," he wrote, "that I may excuse myself for not accepting this time what you offered me with wonderful generosity in your letter Even if none of my friends had been there to receive me—the stranger—I should have gone to a lodging house rather than stay near Francesca with her husband away Because while you know my settled attitude towards what is yours in this and many other things, it is not thus that others know it, and so to affirm my good faith—be it so that

my grey hair, my seasoned age, my fatness and my feeble body should free me of such suspicion—I decided to stay away so that false suspicions of the evil-minded could not observe a footprint where there was not even an impress Well you know how in these matters adverse false fame is valued more than the truth "

But he did go to see Francesca who offered him the house and the books, and he sat in the garden to talk, and he saw her daughter, Eletta, who reminded him of his own dear lost child There were gatherings of friends, too, about the dinner-table, and entertainments Franceschino da Brossano was ever solicitous, and at the same time as tactful as Petrarch himself One can admire the tact, the consideration for feelings, but tact could not hide the pity of Boccaccio's poverty "Knowing me poor," Boccaccio wrote, "he drew me aside into a corner of the house when, at a late hour, I was departing from Venice, and saying few words he gripped my poor small arms with his giant hands and pressed on me, despite my reluctance and blushes, a liberal sum of money, and then, as though escaping, and bidding me goodbye, he went off with himself, leaving me to condemn both myself and what I had permitted May God return it to him over and over" This self-portrait of a great artist as an old man is another monument to the spirit of the world

In the meantime, the Pope had set off for Rome, into which he was led on a white mule by the Emperor Charles IV, to the joy of Christendom Saint Catherine of Siena rejoiced to see part of her life's ambition fulfilled, but the rejoicings would be only momentary because the Pope would attempt to go back to Babylon, and die on the way Rome itself was a desolation with grass and weeds waving in the rubble The Romans exulted wildly Urban wept Noble Rome, mistress of the world, the most excellent of cities, to quote the praise of the pilgrim's song, had almost become a squalid mediaeval village squatting in the ruins, a shabby habitation for magisterial puissance Urban turned to restore what had fallen and what had been lost by the Babylonian absence, and the work of restoration involved all Italy

When Boccaccio returned from Venice, he was given another mission to the Pope, to whom he was to declare that Florence was ready to assist in the remaking of Italy, but that Florence would

like to be informed of his policy We know very little about this journey There were, of course, the miles of it to Rome, the jogging mounts, the inns, the change of faces and dialects, the dangers, the weather, and at the end, the city and its ruins and Urban crouched, as it were, to blow flames from an ember Boccaccio brought back the results of his mission by word of mouth, and the Pope wrote to the Priors of the Guilds and the Gonfaloniere of Justice "We have favourably received our beloved son, Giovanni Boccaccio, your ambassador, in consideration of the senders and of his own admired worth, and we have listened carefully to his skilful exposition of your affairs, and those things which in God's interest and for our own and the public welfare we believe should be carried out, under God, for the increase and reformation of Italy, we have told to him fully in our answer, accordingly, he can inform you by word of mouth"

This was Boccaccio's last embassy, but the journeying was not over He retired to Certaldo, to the quiet house where he had need of long repose His health was failing steadily, weakened perhaps by weariness of the roads of Italy But while sitting quietly could be endured for a few months, for a year maybe, it always became intolerable at last Naples beckoned him again, for his last journey

Naples lay like an enchanted kingdom, almost like the desired fatherland of Petrarch's phrase, across all his memories, and he had only to sit and remember and see himself there, a young man vowed to poetry, sharing in the gaieties of King Robert's reign the music that seemed part of the soft, luminous air, the waters glittering out to the looming indefinite islands, the coast around to Baia, young women wading with bared white thighs through transparent pools or singing under the trees, and the woman he had worshipped out of the temptations of the flesh into a sainted image There was nothing he could recover of those lost things.

But he had excuse for travel He was invited to visit the Certosa of San Stefano in Calabria by the Abbot himself, Niccolò da Montefalcone, who had praised the convent and its setting in a well-watered nook of the countryside. And he travelled On the way to Naples he visited, it is probable, the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino and toiled up the two thousand feet of the high

hill crowned with the fortress-like walls, cloisters, rose-gardens, and the famed library He had not chosen the most clement season of the year—it was the winter of 1370—and the skies rolled with rain-clouds from the Apennines There was always the guest-house for travellers such as he There was always the ordered round of the monastic day

But even in Monte Cassino there were signs of the ruin that had been crumbling Christendom "Being eager to see the library which, he had heard, was very noble," as Benvenuto da Imola, his disciple, related on the word of the master himself, "he besought one of the monks to do him the favour of opening it Pointing to a lofty stairway, the monk answered gruffly, 'Go up, it's already open' Boccaccio mounted the stairway with delight, only to find the treasure-house of learning without door or fastening of any kind, while the grass was growing on the window-sills and dust was reposing on the books and shelves Turning over the manuscripts, he found many rare and ancient works with whole sheets torn out or with the margins ruthlessly clipped As he left the room, he burst into tears, and on asking a monk whom he met in the cloister to explain the neglect, he was told that some of the inmates of the monastery, desiring to make a few *soldi*, used to erase the parchment and tear out handfuls of leaves which they made into psalters to sell to boys and cut into strips to make amulets for women"

The weather still harassed him as he turned, through winter rain, into Naples, but not before he had heard that the Abbot of San Stefano had left Calabria, to avoid his visit, as he suspected He took his pen, therefore, his only weapon but quite sufficient, and wrote a letter in February, 1371, that was in his familiar satirical style In the superscription, he doubted whether Niccolò da Montefalcone was really an abbot at all, or only a simple humbugging monk He observed that Niccolò had not learned decent behaviour or good manners with the coming of grey hairs, and he asked sarcastically for the return of a borrowed Tacitus lest it come to further harm

Naples was not all winter and disappointment. He was offered patronage and maintenance by Count Ugo di San Severino, and on his departure he was presented with gifts. He was also offered

patronage by Queen Giovanna's third husband and by the Queen herself His friend, Mainardo Cavalcanti, now Seneschal of the Kingdom, entertained him Altogether, the episode of the bilge-hole was being repented with glory, gold and magnificence, with more than he had ever hoped Here was the glory in the pride of his profession he had desired and such as Petrarch had obtained liberally in the cities of Christendom

He could have ended his days in lush comfort in the Naples where he had begun, he could be a belaurelled grey-headed old man attended with reverence because he was the poet, the writer, as he had always intended to be He could have sat at noble tables, a companionable corpulent old fellow, merry, well-spoken, a teller of innumerable tales about men and women of the high and low worlds between Provence and Calabria, somewhat scandalous when wine loosened his tongue but pious and inclined to moralise tediously He could talk all night about his friend, his special friend, Petrarch, naming him with Dante as the man who brought poetry back from exile to her ancient throne, and modestly not daring to join his name to theirs as the centuries would join them in a creative trinity But even Naples could not hold him with glory, nor with gold, nor magnificence It was not those empty things he wanted now when all was vanity For the last time with a long road before him, he mounted stiffly and heavily and jogged back to high windy Certaldo which, with its red-tiled roofs warm on the hill, a man could see from afar Tuscany was claiming him forever

V

In la sua volontate e nostra pace
ella e quel mare, al qual tutto si move
cio ch'ella crea e che natura face

And in His Will is our peace, it is that sea to which
moves all that it creates and that nature fashions

Paradiso, III, 85–87

GLORY OF THE SORT PROVIDED BY KINGS, QUEENS AND LORDS would have meant dependence He would have none of it

He was grown too old for change Thus he wrote to one nobleman, Niccolò Orsini, Count Palatine and Count of Nola who invited him in the summer of 1371 to end his days on a fine estate between Tuscany and Rome He thanked, promised he would not forget the invitation if he should ever change his mind, and stayed He had the small land left him by his father in Certaldo He had bread, at least he had bread And he had the attention of his old woman-servant, Bruna Nearby was the church for Mass, for prayer, and for burial among his ancestors

He had come to think that the grave was ready for him He was sure he was near death, never surer than in the illness which seized him to the torturing of his whole body A long letter to Mainardo Cavalcanti, written by a hand that still trembled with weakness, is sober with resignation to the approach of death His body was rebelling in all its members the flesh, smelling of the clay, was betraying itself in its infinite and just need for the transfiguration of immortality There was no part of his body, heavy as lead, that did not suffer some affliction, some separate agony His skin was affected with the continual itching of dry inflamed scabs which he tore for relief with his nails day and night His stomach was sluggish, his spleen swollen, his kidneys pained, and burning bile rose in his throat A cough almost suffocated him and his head ached He could not sleep His appetite for food was gone He tottered about, shivering, too sick even to look up at the sky, and within the house, comfort was even less The books and the writing which he had always loved were become abhorrent He

found it difficult to remember, difficult to think The strength of the spirit was flickering and guttering in the befouled, burdensome body

During the autumn of 1372, after a brief respite, he was attacked once more, as though mortally This seemed death One evening about sunset as he lay weak, hardly able to move his limbs, a burning fever ran through his veins and he was convinced he was done The old woman, Bruna, watched and tended while the fever increased The neighbours knew, and they considered that the night would be his last When darkness fell and the lamps were lit, the fever tongued him and lapped him with flame and his head throbbed, so that he groaned softly, and turned this way and that to escape the shrouding heat He was quite conscious, he heard his own groans with some surprise The Judgment, he thought then, was before him, and for all the sins that would be scrutinised he fell into a great fear, trembled and wept though he was ashamed of the weeping

His crying alarmed Bruna and she also began to cry, begging him to keep up his courage Something in her excited manner, something in her gestures and tones, touched the springs of laughter in him, and now he laughed before death in the house in Certaldo His courage mounted, and calmed, he lay there waiting Such was the night until the sky began to brighten over the mountains, and Bruna ran out into the misty autumnal morning to call the neighbours for good news They hurried, wondering that he was still alive, and they came to give advice, and the advice was that he should summon a doctor Now, he hated doctors and had often made fun of them, especially if they were from Bologna, but lest the neighbours should think him miserly rather than reluctant, he let a doctor be fetched, a pleasant sensible man who had spent his time ministering to country folk with crude remedies The diagnosis was made and an ordeal as dreadful as the fever itself was offered him if he wished to get rid of the superfluous and harmful humours and live for more than four days He assented The furnace, the cauterising iron and the instruments were carried in and prepared, and his scabby flesh was then burnt deeply, incised, and the wounds peered into for whatever the doctor expected to find It was all pain He was told that with the flow of blood the

deadly poison had come forth "Now," said the doctor, "you are cured" And it was true for the moment Boccaccio at last slept, and his astounding recovery began

Mainardo Cavalcanti sent him from Naples the gift of two vases full of gold, and this new lifting of poverty from among his worries helped him, we may be sure, to be eager for good health

The recovery continued His flesh filled out He must have had a return of his life-long zest for his books because, in the next year, he began to offer his final and most arduous act of piety to Dante Alighieri But it was an act which required energy, industry and nervous strain really beyond his diminished resources

Seventy-one years had passed since the decree of exile The communal mind of Florence had changed, and he, Boccaccio, had played a major part in bringing about the change All those various acts of piety towards the memory and achievement of the Poet which had absorbed so much of his generous devotion, were having public effect In a lifetime he had filled men's minds by spoken and written word with an image of greatness that made ancient enmities unworthy of remembrance "Divers citizens" were influenced they became active In the summer of 1373, the Signoria of Florence was petitioned—the translation of the document is Toynbee's—"to provide and formally to determine, that a worthy and learned man, well versed in the knowledge of the poem aforesaid (*The Divine Comedy*), shall be by you elected, for such term as you may appoint, being not longer than one year, to read the book which is commonly called *el Dante* in the city of Florence, to all such as shall be desirous of hearing him, on consecutive days, not being holidays, and in consecutive lectures, as is customary in like cases, and with such salary as you may determine, not exceeding the sum of one hundred gold florins for the said year, and in such manner and under such conditions as may seem proper to you, and further that the said salary be paid to the said lecturer from the funds of the Commonwealth in two terminal payments, to wit, one moiety about the end of the month of December, and the other moiety about the end of the month of April, such sum to be free of all deduction of taxes whatsoever . . ."

This was a consummation more generous than anything Boccaccio can have ever expected When, on August 9, the petition was put to the vote of the assembly *in palatio populi Florentie*—under the soaring tower and the formidable square battlements—there were one hundred and eighty-six black beans cast for acceptance and nineteen white against Did anyone make the obvious joke about the Blacks carrying the day against the Whites so that the memory of an exiled White might be rehabilitated ? Or did anyone wonder at the irony of things whereby the Poet would be raised for reverence by a descendant of one of the farmyard folk whom he had despised ? On August 25, Messer Giovanni Boccaccio was appointed lecturer on the book of *el Dante* for the year beginning on October 18 and on the terms of the petition

In the most ancient part of the city, near the site of the primitive walls which had enclosed the vanished, austere Florence which Dante had lamented, there stood the Church of San Stefano della Badia, attached to a Benedictine Abbey Its delicate campanile was a landmark, its bells were noted for their certainty and regularity in tolling the hours To the sound of its bells the craftsmen of the guilds and the masters went to and from their work, ate and prayed Arnolfo di Cambio had rebuilt it, in the days when Florence was beginning its commercial and political ascendancy, and on its walls were frescoes by Dante's friend, Giotto But it had fallen into neglect and disrepair, and here, in this Church which shared with the Baptistery and San Miniato the honour of being the only Florentine churches named in the *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio commenced his lectures on Sunday, October 23, 1373 It was the beginning of the infinite stream of public words about Dante that have never ceased to flow All around were tombs of families that belonged to the dying Middle Ages

Boccaccio, venerated, came up from Certaldo, an old trembling man, white-headed, just recovered from what had seemed, from what would really be, a mortal illness He had woven worship into his life, the pattern was being completed He was ready for the task He was, perhaps, the only man in Europe who could have carried out the task well We have what he delivered of his lectures, or rather, the elaborate notes which stop suddenly at the seventeenth line of the seventeenth canto of the *Inferno*, when he

could do no more His life had been, in a way, a preparation for this he had argued, studied, scorned, pleaded and expounded that men might listen They were listening now Benvenuto da Imola travelled from Bologna to hear him

He sought for help humbly from God "However much our humanity may be ennobled," he began, "by the many gifts of our Creator, it is, nonetheless, so weak of its nature that nothing, however small, can be done either well or perfectly without divine grace" Therefore, both the old worthies and the new called on God for help He, too, would invoke "And if Plato confessed that he, more than anybody else, had need of divine aid, dare I presume on myself, knowing as I do my slow mind, small talent, and unreliable memory? Especially since I submit my shoulders to a burden far heavier than they are accustomed to, that is, by expounding the artful text, the numerous stories, and the sublime meanings hidden beneath the poetic veil of our Dante's comedy, and this, moreover, to men of such high understanding and wonderful acuteness as you, gentlemen of Florence, are universally reputed to be I, it is certain beyond all human consideration, ought to be regarded as in need of divine help Therefore, so that what I have to say may be to the honour and glory of the Most Holy Name of God and to the consolation and benefit of listeners, I intend before going any further to hasten as humbly as I can and invoke His help, having more faith in His benignity than in any merit of my own Since we must speak of poetry, I poetically invoke Him with the Trojan, Anchises, repeating those verses that Virgil wrote in the second book of the *Aeneid*

> Almighty Jove, if you are moved by any prayers,
> Look down on us, only that we ask, and if by piety we merit it,
> Give then your help, O Father."

After the prayer he proceeded with the intellectual courtesy of his time to expound his method of study Before examining the text of the *Divine Comedy*, three things had to be considered first to show what and which were the causes of the book, next, what was the title of the book; and thirdly, to which branch of philosophy the book must be referred. The method was scholastic,

thorough, ingenious but often tedious in application He said 'The causes of the book are four material, formal, efficient, and final The material cause of the present work is twofold, just as the subject, which is the same thing as the material cause, is twofold, wherefore, the literal sense is one thing, and the allegorical sense another, which are both to be found in the present work as will appear in due course Therefore, I take the subject according to the literal sense to be simply the condition of souls after the death of the bodies "

Did he pause, his breath caught momentarily by the fear that had been his as he lay in the sick room at Certaldo while Bruna wrung her hands? "The subject," he continued, "according to the allegorical sense, is that man rising or falling by his free will, is by justice destined for recompense or punishment Similarly, the formal cause is twofold, since it consists in the form of the maker and in the form of the thing made The form of the thing made is divided into three parts, following the triple division of the book The first division is that by which the entire work is divided, that is, into three *cantiche* The second division is that by which each of the three *cantiche* is divided into cantos The third division is that by which every canto is divided into rhymes The form, or rather the mode of the maker, is poetic, fictive, selective, and both digressive and progressive, and with this, definitive, inventive, demonstrative, rejective, and dispositive with images The efficient cause is the author himself, Dante Alighieri, of whom we shall speak at length shortly when we discuss the title of the book The final cause of the present work is to move those who live in this world from a state of misery to a state of happiness "

Boccaccio is away To whom was he speaking? Men of letters and scholars were present, but so also were the snobs, we must assume, who considered the lectures fashionable, the merchants and the money-makers who wished to observe the bargain made by the Signoria for one hundred gold florins, and these, we may imagine correctly, became restless, twitched, coughed, stared at the roof, the floor, the tombs and the frescoes of San Stefano, or dozed unconcernedly The lectures, it must be admitted, were not entertaining The strict scholastic method removed the sessions from the realm of mystery plays, pageants, street games, and practical

jokes Boccaccio drove on, uncompromising, expounding the poem line by line, word by word, with encyclopaedic knowledge drawn from myths, theology, medicine, geography, astrology and what not, with separate discourses for the allegorical meanings Was he being contemptuous when he informed his audience that an anchor is an iron instrument which has grapples at one end, and a ring at the other by which it is attached to a rope ? Or when he gave other bits of information known to the children on the streets ? Was he boasting happily when he referred, as he did often, to his excellent master, Messer Francesco Petrarca, living at Valchiusa, " a place remote from every human usage " ?

Was it to forestall a possible question from his audience—from some of the hardheaded men who had found the *Divine Comedy* not quite as straightforward as a nursery rhyme, a bawdy joke or a bill of lading—that he explained why Dante had hidden " the mellifluous and celestial flavour beneath a veil of fabulous description " and had not given his teaching freely, openly and immediately ? Boccaccio gave a threefold answer First, it was the general custom for a discreet man not to put his most cherished possessions out in the public places, but under the strongest locks he had in his house—as the Holy Ghost had hidden high secrets in the figures of the Old Testament, in the visions of the Prophets and in the Apocalypse Next, that which is acquired with difficulty pleases more and is guarded better than that which is got without any or little labour,—" and this is shown to be true by the fate of the great inheritances left to our young citizens " Lastly, just as God hid the secrets of the universe, so do poets hide theirs that men by free will and inclination may discover what best suits them So Dante was, then, a *nascondítore*

Since this detailed commentary of Boccaccio's cannot be summarised, it were best to give examples of his observations There was the leopard, for instance, which Dante met on the mountainside The animal is, for Boccaccio who understood the art of the *nascondítore*, the vice of lust, with which his acquaintance may not have been entirely academic He had often met the leopard. His life may be epitomised as a series of attempts to come to terms with the beast, soft-footed, agile, incalculable and destructive " This dishonourable appetite," he comments, " is swift to change

itself, and to run promptly from one thing to another a movement of the eyes, a caressing gesture, a smile, a soft stare, a little passionate word and flattery, transport love from one person to another as the wind a leaf" He had known the blandishments of fashionable and passionate women Ultimately, they had brought him to fear and to hate, and although he is old now, he still hates

He cries against women once more, for their painting, beautifying, combing, washing, mirror-gazing, plumping and straitening, singing, dancing and prodigal spending It is not because of actual things that he cries thus but because his memory—the amoral faculty that can still present old and potent temptations—was like a torture chamber where he could see himself frustrate with age among those girls, those women, ripe for wanton reaping "Aptly, then," he said, "this beast may be called lust of the flesh which, with all the mortal charms it bears, seductive even to death, so conspires with human sensuality as to work with no small power in holding the soul captive whenever the soul tries to escape and turn to holy things, and, as it were, it recalls those persons once loved, all those gestures, those words which once pleased, evokes movingly the tears, the sworn faith, the broken promises, and persuades with false show that this chastity, this resolution, belong but to old age and that what may never be had again should not now be lost" The grave and stately poetry of these analytic words, the suavity of the experienced voice, do not belong to an angry man such as wrote the *Corbaccio* but to the resigned, repentant, though regretful gallant who can still remember the artful impulses and conspiracies of the flesh That is one sample of his commentary

Let us take another How, for instance, does he deal with those arrogant words of Dante in the fourth canto in which the Poet describes himself as being accepted as the sixth in the fellowship of the mighty poets, Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and, of course, Virgil?

The five with whom Dante chose to associate without gentlemanly deference to the judgment of posterity may appear to us—posterity itself and heirs of all the ages, by the hokey!—to be unequal in greatness, but to quote Professor Anderson, "To Dante, Greek literature was either unknown, or known through references and fragments in the Latin writers, or from Arabian

sources Of the Greek tragic or comic poets he appears to have known nothing But if his literary horizon was contracted, he cultivated it to the utmost verge" The men whom Dante chose were, in a word, the sun, moon and stars of his firmament But was he boasting when he added himself to make the half-dozen? Was he betraying a too urgent taste for immortality? Listen to Boccaccio

He says, perhaps with his tongue in his cheek, that Dante does not specifically call himself a poet—as if he left it to be understood that he was a chestnut-hawker from the Old Market!—"because that would seem too proud a saying" This commendation of Dante's verbal restraint is quite comic after Dante has already belaurelled himself among the mighty! Boccaccio continues "Many, all the same, charge the author with bragging for those words (*Inferno* IV, 100–3), saying it is not right or proper for any man to commend himself, which is true Nevertheless, it would be injurious for a person to silence the truth about himself on every occasion, and therefore it is necessary for a man to commend his own praiseworthy merit on some occasion This is well made manifest by Virgil in the first book of the *Aeneid* in which he describes how Aeneas, having been carried by stormy seas to the African coast, where, not knowing the place and discovering the Mother in the form of a huntress in a wood, replied to her inquiry as to who he was 'I am pious Aeneas, renowned by fame beyond the skies' Are we to say that Virgil, a man full of foresight—Aeneas himself being a very prudent man in all his deeds—intentionally made Aeneas reply contrary to good custom? Indeed, it is not to be believed that he did that without great cause

"What then are we to say? We are to say that considering the plight in which Aeneas was, he was obliged in reply to commend himself, because if he had withheld the truth about himself then, great trouble would have come upon him, in so far as nobody would have had much regard for him who, as a shipwrecked man, needed the help of the natives It is not to be doubted that by telling the truth about himself,—that he was not a pirate or of vile condition but a godfearing man already well-known by fame,—he was better served than by keeping silent And since divine examples help to prove the truth, I should like to produce decisively

what we read in the Gospel, that is, how Christ, Son of God, after washing the feet of His disciples on the day of His Last Supper on earth, said these words among others uttered by Him for their instruction 'You call me Master and Lord And you say well, for so I am' Are we to say of this that Christ sinned, or that he went against good custom? Certainly not So then, it is sometimes necessary to speak well of oneself without falling into the indecent sin of boasting Thus it can be said that this is what the author (Dante) did here It was declared earlier in the explanation of the general title of the present work that one must recognise and know who was the author of any book in order to discern whether the things said by him should be credited, which depend greatly on his authority For which reason the author, faced with the task of writing poetically about the condition of souls after temporal death, professed of necessity for the sake of being credited that he was accounted a Poet by Poets"

The argument is ingenious For Boccaccio's audience it must have been compelling But did anyone inquire who it was that had made the Poets declare that Dante was a Poet among them? The answer would bring the argument back to where it started, which is a fate that often overtakes the best of lecturers

Before leaving the *Comento* and its stuffed sackful of learning, of odds and ends, treasures and junk, and before saying farewell to its audience of scholars, poets and stout citizens, let us turn to a love-story which even the most desultory of Dante students cherish It is that famous passage in the fifth canto of the *Inferno* in which Dante, with music and tenderness even in his strict moral approach, tells of Francesca da Rimini who one day read of love with her lover, and read no more that day

The commentary on this famous passage is also a commentary on Boccaccio himself For all his worship of the Poet, he manifests independence of judgment, he is prepared to rap Dante on the knuckles The commentary shows, too, that this lecturer who had glorified the body in prose and verse, had become judicial, a bit old-maidish, and sharply critical of any of the disorders which had heated his youth with fever.

He first tells the story of the two lovers, and he tells it briefly and well, but it is not Dante's story

Francesca, he tells, was daughter of old Messer Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna and of Cervia After a long and disastrous war between him and the Malatesti Lords of Rimini, peace was made and established between them by certain mediators To establish the peace more firmly, it pleased both parties to draw strength from a marriage relationship The match agreed upon was that the aforesaid Messer Guido should give his only and beautiful daughter, Madonna Francesca, as wife to Gianciotto, son of Messer Malatesta When this was made known to some friends of Messer Guido, one of them said " Watch what you're doing ! If you're not careful about the parties in this match, you may run into trouble You know as well as anyone what your daughter is like and how independent she is If she sees Gianciotto before the marriage is fixed, then neither yourself nor anybody else will ever make her want him as a husband So then, whatever it seems right to you, you must go about it carefully in this way don't let Gianciotto come here for the betrothal, but let some one of his brothers come to us who, as his proxy, will betroth her in the name of Gianciotto "

Gianciotto, a man of much understanding who hoped to become Lord after his father's death, was indifferent in appearance and deformed, nevertheless, Messer Guido desired him as a son-in-law before any of his brothers, and seeing that what his friend maintained must needs be, he arranged secretly that it should be done as proposed

At the appointed time, Gianciotto's brother, Paolo, came to Ravenna with full warranty to espouse Madonna Francesca Paolo was a handsome, charming man, and very polished. When he was passing with other gentlemen through the courtyard of Messer Guido's house, he was pointed out through a hole in a window from within to Madonna Francesca by one of the housemaids who knew him, with the words " That's he who's to be your husband ' Right away, Madonna Francesca set her heart and her mind on him completely. When the bond of marriage was cunningly tied and the lady had gone to Rimini, she did not discover the deception till the first honeymoon morning as Gianciotto rose from beside her It should be credited, adds Boccaccio, that on perceiving the deception, she disdained him and did not banish from her heart the love that was already turned to Paolo.

How she joined herself to Paolo, I have never heard told, save what the author writes here (Boccaccio doubts Dante) It is possible that it happened like that but I think it rather a fiction built on what was possible rather than on anything the author knew as having occurred Paolo and Madonna Francesca continued the intimacy in secret, and when Gianciotto went to a nearby district as mayor, they began to frequent each other without caution A special servant of Gianciotto's saw the thing and told him all he knew, guaranteeing that he could let him catch them out at any time At this, Gianciotto was wildly excited and hastened back to Rimini, and by this servant who had seen Paolo go into Madonna Francesca's room, he was led to the door He was unable to enter because it was locked inside He called his wife out and hammered on the door As soon as Paolo and Madonna Francesca perceived this, Paolo tried to flee by way of a *cateratta* (an opening in the wall that led down to other rooms) and he cast himself down, urging the woman that she should go and open the door

But it did not happen as he had planned For, as he threw himself down, a clasp of his cuirass caught on a nail that was in the timber of the *cateratta* When the lady opened to Gianciotto, she imagined that he would apologise for not having found Paolo, but Gianciotto saw how things were, and with a rapier in his hand, he rushed at Paolo to kill him Francesca ran and placed herself between them Gianciotto put all his weight in the thrust What happened was not as he had wished the rapier passed through her breast before touching Paolo, but he withdrew the blade, thrust again at Paolo, and killed him Thus leaving the couple dead, he departed instantly and returned to his business The following morning, the two lovers were buried with much weeping and in the selfsame grave

That is the story as told by Boccaccio It is different to Dante's It is different to the kind of story that Boccaccio himself would have made of it forty years earlier It is cold, mundane, even coarse. More than that, it leads to a vinegarish reprimand. Dante had written. *Amor che a nullo amato amar perdona*—Love that denial takes from none beloved Boccaccio chides him. "This," says he, superciliously, "with due respect to the author, does not necessarily happen with this sort of love, but it does happen

truly with chaste love" He was allowing what ought to be to obscure his vision of what is or what may be And when Dante allows Francesca in Hell to be a little proud and consoled in Paolo's presence there with her, Boccaccio enunciates primly "According to the Catholic Faith, one should not believe this For the Divine Justice does not permit that any of the damned should or could have anything that agrees with his desires, or find consolation or any pleasure, and it would be clearly against this if the lady, as the author wishes to show by his words, found any pleasure in being left in the company of her love"

Boccaccio was becoming expert in the ruthless usages of Hell as the fate of poor lovers

Word by word with the *Comedy*, line by line, the commentary was continued till the seventeenth line of the seventeenth canto It was the passage in which Dante begins to describe the savage beast, Fraud, or Graft, that passes through mountains, breaks through walls and weapons and pollutes the whole world, a beast with the face of a just man and a reptile's body with arms hairy to the armpits, the torso painted with a design of knots and circlets

> con piu color, sommesse e soprapposte
> non fer mai drappo Tartari nè Turchi

(never did Tartars or Turks make cloth with more colours, groundwork and broidery)

Boccaccio had written that the Tartars and the Turks were the best masters of such textiles and then he wrote no more The *Comento* ceased, a fragment

It was a massive fragment, a quarry of materials for Dante commentators through the centuries some men not acknowledging but pilfering outrageously; some revering, like Benvenuto da Imola, or like Gelli in the sixteenth century They might well revere He had unveiled the substance beneath the shadows and the colours which the cunning *nasconditore* had laid on with the wide as well as the minute solicitude of genius. But for that unveiling he was not altogether praised He was upbraided

Had he not revealed secrets to the vulgar crowd ? Was this what Dante had wished ?

In a sonnet Boccaccio rather pitifully defended himself

Se Dante piange, dove ch'el si sia,
Che li concetti del suo alto ingegno
Aperti sieno stati al vulgo indegno,
Come tu di' della Lettura mia,
Ciò mi dispiace molto, ne mai fia
Ch'io non ne porti verso me disdegno,
Come che alquanto pur me ne ritegno,
Perche d'altrui, non mia, fu tal follia
Vana speranza, a vera povertate,
E l'abbagliato senno degli amici,
E gli loro preghi ciò mi fecer fare
Ma non godevan guar di tal derrate
Questi ingrati meccanici, nimici
D'ogni leggiadro e caro adoperare

The translation is by Rossetti whose version, good though it be, misses the pointed satire of the last two lines which scorn the rude mechanicals, enemy of high things

If Dante mourns, there wheresoe'er he be,
That such high fancies of a soul so proud
Should be laid open to the vulgar crowd,
(As, touching my Discourse, I'm told by thee,)
This were my grievous pain, and certainly
My proper blame should not be disavow'd,
Though hereof somewhat, I declare aloud
Were due to others, not alone to me
False hopes, true poverty, and therewithal
The blinded judgment of a host of friends,
And their entreaties, made that I did thus
But of all this there is no gain at all
Unto the thankless souls with whose base ends
Nothing agrees that's great or generous

Though the work was in a way thankless, it was also its own reward Boccaccio was the origin He was the first He had no

help such as a commentator could command today in abundance, that is, if we except the help that living Florence must have been to him, surviving contemporaries of the Poet, memories, legends, the living philosophy in which Dante had believed, and the deeply and widely held Faith This last above all he would have considered necessary to a proper understanding of the *Comedy* the Faith Had he been enabled to see his audience, rude mechanicals included, transformed into the host of commentators that would flock and fly and creep to the tall singing tree of Dante's poem, had he foreseen the commentaries that would be cultivated with patient, ingenious and largely obscuring scholarship in a shattered Christendom by German Lutherans, French sceptical cranks, Protestants of old England and New England puritans, not to speak of Italian atheists, all more or less trying to argue Dante out of his religion and into another or none at all, or straining to dismiss it as a defect of superstition on the poetry, or skirting it cautiously to dig themselves into astrology, archaeology, topography, demonology, and to scuffle up cartloads of footnotes, shoulder-notes, variants, redactions, emendations and interpretations, he surely would not have sighed but laughed, as he laughed when he lay dying and saw the old woman, Bruna, raising a pother to awaken the dead !

He would have laughed, that is, if, towards the end of that year of victory, 1373, he had any strength left for laughter He had begun to lecture after an illness that had seemed mortal He thought he had recovered And as he lectured daily in San Stefano, his newly found energy ebbed, and he was a prey again It is easy to see him as he neared the winter's day after Christmas when he collapsed—his voice more tired than a whisper, the paper rustling in his trembling hands, his eyes heavy, and then the final hesitancy and the silence

They brought him down to Certaldo, to his house, along the road he would never travel again He was familiar with every rise and turn of it under every weather the rounded hills, the farms and vineyards on the slopes, the forests that climbed the distant mountains. Then the doctors were upon him, the charlatans, as he called them; and all through the spring of 1374 till the summer, they tinkered with his poor body They dieted him severely and

filled him with potions and concoctions, brews of herbs and roots that were professional mysteries The little flesh he had regained since his last illness fell from him, and his colour changed till he was a different man weak, quavering on his limbs, his sight dulled Half-dead, he waited only on God to heal him

Then, in the bright Tuscan summer, he heard rumours that Petrarch was dead The rumours were true

Petrarch had died in his house half-way up the slope to Arquà, in the Euganean Hills, in the *contado* of Padua, on July 18, a day short of seventy, his head bent and supported on his arms in his study where his servants found him at morning as if he slept after working through the night over Boccaccio's copy of the translation of Homer

Grief held Boccaccio for days, deep grief that can be measured only by the profundity of the friendship He wept for himself forlorn of the man he had loved above all men, and not for Petrarch, now in the desired country He wished to travel the long road north to the grave, but weakness bound him to the house in Certaldo Petrarch had gone He, too, would go On August 28, while he had yet received no written word of his friend's death, he made his Will, for there was nothing more certain than death and nothing as uncertain as its hour

Since it was great labour to write, the lawyers dressed up his words He commended his soul to Omnipotent God and Blessed Mary ever glorious Virgin, and the sepulture of his body to the Church of the Hermits of Saint Augustine if he should die in Florence, or to the Church of San Jacopo in Certaldo if it was there he should die To Santa Reparata in Florence, to the construction of the city walls, to San Jacopo and to a religious society, he left small sums of money, each not exceeding ten *soldi* Those bequests would mean prayers and Masses and civic gratitude

Now, there was Bruna who had tended him and wept for him, and to her he left " the bed in which she used to sleep in the house in Certaldo ", the wooden bedstead, feather tick, feather bolster, white coverlet, the pair of sheets, and " the stool that used to stand beside the bed " She would also have the little walnut dining-table and the two table cloths, the two table napkins and the small wine-cask, and the dress lined with purple silk, a skirt, a long

cloak, and a hood, and she would be paid whatever was owed her of her wages Next, there were all his creditors, and he had not forgotten them A list of them would be found in his account-book, carefully marked, and they were to be paid, as well as any persons who claimed him as a debtor, out of the moneys got by selling the little farm of grain-fields and vineyard and all his other goods and chattels But the books? No! Not the books They had been his life, the toil of the nights, the prizes of innumerable journeys They would be preserved all together They would go to that friend, Fra Martino da Signa of the convent of the Hermits of Saint Augustine on the south bank of the Arno in Florence, all of them except the Breviary, and they were to be used at his discretion by whomsoever wished to consult them, on condition that the soul of the testator be remembered in prayers (He bequeathed wisely The convent became a centre for scholars during the next generation, chief among whom was Coluccio Salutati, and the books, as related in the memoirs of the fifteenth century Florentine bookseller, Vespasiano da Bisticci, would be kept in chests in Santo Spirito till a lettered merchant would have a library built for them, " for their reception and preservation, and for the honour of Messer Giovanni ") Then, there were the relics that he had got here and there on his travels, and these he left to the Monastery of Mary of the Holy Sepulchre that the friars might sometimes pray God for him

There was not much more to leave except the alabaster tablet of Our Lady, the vestments, the pewter stoup for holy water, and a small cloak of yellow silk and cloth, which would go to San Jacopo for the service of the church and for prayers towards the good of his soul, and the diptych that depicted Our Lady and the Child on one side, and a death's head on the other, would become the property of a Madonna Sandra Finally, his heirs would be the children of his half-brother, Jacopo, now married, all of whom were living then or who would be born, both male and female, legitimate and illegitimate, but for the present, the fruits of his goods were to go to the support of Jacopo's household He desired that of his estate nothing should be pledged, sold or alienated, directly or indirectly by his heirs until they should reach the age of thirty and then had the consent of their father, Jacopo, if he were

alive, and in the meantime, if any of their sisters wished to marry, the dowry could be paid by selling or pledging Above all he enjoined that his house in Certaldo should never be sold or alienated as long as there lived any male descendant, legitimate or illegitimate, either of his father or of Jacopo He had not forgotten how he himself had been born !

He completed the Will He filled three pages There was nothing more to do except to totter out by the walls and to sit blinking his bleared eyes against the sun that was ripening the grapes on the vines and the corn on the slopes

On the last day of October he was brought a letter from Petrarch's son-in-law, that tall young man who had so pitied his poverty, and he read of how Petrarch had died Grief was an abyss again He sat and took his pen, and for nearly three whole days he tried with intervals for rest to say what he wished to say how he wept for himself and not for Petrarch who sat among the just, how illness prevented him from travelling across the Apennines to the grave, how Arquà would be honoured forever by all nations, and how happy he was to know that a tomb would be raised, though Petrarch's true monument was his writings, and he noted that friendship had followed him even after death, for Petrarch had bequeathed him fifty gold florins to buy a warm cloak for the long winter nights of study

He was gone beyond those nights of study when the village and countryside lay quiet around the house, and there was only the shifting of the wood embers on the hearth to disturb him or a cry of a bird in the darkness or Bruna's snoring The carefully copied pages had become dim, barred with indecipherable lines, the evenings brought weariness and the fitful restless slumber of the old He had time and enough for prayers and for the haphazard remembering which, for a little while, could make him oblivious to the unalterable course of the sun and the desert watches of the night, but all remembering led inevitably to the same dread descent, to Fiammetta and the plague, which had changed the world more than he knew and his father and innumerable friends and Petrarch, and that little daughter whose face, recalled, could scald his with tears It had all been a long, confused and ill-directed journey in which a man mistook the lights of human habitations

for guiding stars and lost the sunlight in wild forests and climbed desperately from valleys odorous with rankly ripe fruit to the barren crags, all the time missing, and feeling in torment that he was losing, the track of the fortunate pilgrims it was there, and a man came to it, labouring and cold with the agony and sweat of death, murmuring and crying on Christ and His Mother to the sea towards which all things moved the Will in which is our peace

He lingered for a year, and on December 21, 1375, he died They buried him in San Jacopo among his people as he had desired

IL FINE

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