

Day 4, Introduction

Voice: AUTHOR]

2] Dearest ladies, as well from what I heard in converse with the wise, as from matters that not seldom fell within my own observation and reading, I formed the opinion that the vehement and scorching blast of envy was apt to vent itself only upon lofty towers or the highest tree-tops: but therein I find that I misjudged;

3] for, whereas I ever sought and studied how best to elude the buffetings of that furious hurricane, and to that end kept a course not merely on the plain, but, by preference, in the depth of the valley; as should be abundantly clear to whoso looks at these little stories, written as they are not only in the vulgar Florentine, and in prose, and without dedicatory flourish, but also in as homely and simple a style as may be;

4] nevertheless all this has not stood me in such stead but that I have been shrewdly shaken, nay, all but uprooted by the blast, and altogether lacerated by the bite of this same envy. Whereby I may very well understand that 'tis true, what the sages aver, that only misery is exempt from envy in the present life.

5] Know then, discreet my ladies, that some there are, who, reading these little stories, have alleged that I am too fond of you, and that 'tis not a seemly thing that I should take so much pleasure in ministering to your gratification and solace; and some have found more fault with me for praising you as I do.

6] Others, affecting to deliver a more considered judgment, have said that it ill befits my time of life to ensue such matters, to wit, the discoursing of women, or endeavouring to pleasure them. And not a few, feigning a mighty tender regard to my fame, aver that I should do more wisely to keep ever with the Muses on Parnassus, than to forgather with you in such vain dalliance.

7] Those again there are, who, evincing less wisdom than despite, have told me 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; while certain others, in disparagement of my work, strive might and main to make it appear that the matters which I relate fell out otherwise than as I set them forth.

8] Such then, noble ladies, are the blasts, such the sharp and cruel fangs, by which, while I champion your cause, I am assailed, harassed and well-nigh pierced through and through.

9] Which censures I hear and mark, God knows, with equal mind: and, though to you belongs all my defence, yet I mean not to be niggard of my own powers, but rather, without dealing out to them the castigation they deserve, to give them such slight answer as may secure my ears some respite of their clamour; and that without delay;

10] seeing that, if already, though I have not completed the third part of my work, they are not a few and very presumptuous, I deem it possible, that before I have reached the end, should they receive no check, they may have grown so numerous, that 'twould scarce tax their powers to sink me; and that your forces, great though they be, would not suffice to withstand them.

11] However I am minded to answer none of them, until I have related in my behoof, not indeed an entire story, for I would not seem to foist my stories in among those of so honourable a company as that with which I have made you acquainted, but a part of one, that its very incompleteness may shew that it is not one of them: wherefore, addressing my assailants, I say:

12] That in our city there was in old time a citizen named Filippo Balducci, a man of quite low origin, but of good substance and well versed and expert in matters belonging to his condition, who had a wife that he most dearly loved, as did she him, so that their life passed in peace and concord, nor there was aught they studied so much as how to please each other perfectly.

13] Now it came to pass, as it does to every one, that the good lady departed this life, leaving Filippo nought of hers but an only son, that she had had by him, and who was then about two years old.

14] His wife's death left Filippo as disconsolate as ever was any man for the loss of a loved one: and sorely missing the companionship that was most dear to him, he resolved to have done with the world, and devote himself and his little son to the service of God.

15] Wherefore, having dedicated all his goods to charitable uses, he forthwith betook him to the summit of Monte Asinaio, where he installed himself with his son in a little cell, and living on alms, passed his days in fasting and prayer, being careful above all things to say nothing to the boy of any temporal matters, nor to let him see aught of the kind, lest they should distract his mind from his religious exercises, but discoursing with him continually of the glory of the life eternal and of God and the saints, and teaching him nought else but holy orisons: in which way of life he kept him not a few years, never suffering him to quit the cell or see aught but himself.

16] From time to time the worthy man would go Florence, where divers of the faithful would afford him relief according to his needs, and so he would return to his cell.

17] And thus it fell out that one day Filippo, now an aged man, being asked by the boy, who was about eighteen years old, whither he went, told him. Whereupon: "Father," said the boy, "you are now old, and scarce able to support fatigue; why take you me not with you for once to Florence, and give me to know devout friends of God and you, so that I, who am young and fitter for such exertion than you, may thereafter go to Florence for our supplies at your pleasure, and you remain here?"

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18] The worthy man, bethinking him that his son was now grown up, and so habituated to the service of God as hardly to be seduced by the things of the world, said to himself: "He says tell." And so, as he must needs go to Florence, he took the boy with him.

19] Where, seeing the palaces, the houses, the churches, and all matters else with which the city abounds, and of which he had no more recollection than if he had never seen them, the boy found all passing strange, and questioned his father of not a few of them, what they were and how they were named;

20] his curiosity being no sooner satisfied in one particular than he plied his father with a further question. And so it befell that, while son and father were thus occupied in asking and answering questions, they encountered a bevy of damsels, fair and richly arrayed, being on their return from a wedding; whom the young man no sooner saw, than he asked his father what they might be.

21] "My son," answered the father, "fix thy gaze on the ground, regard them not at all, for naughty things are they."

22] "Oh!" said the son, "and what is their name?"

23] The father, fearing to awaken some mischievous craving of concupiscence in the young man, would not denote them truly, to wit, as women, but said: "They are called goslings."

24] Whereupon, wonderful to tell! the lad who had never before set eyes on any woman, thought no more of the palaces, the oxen, the horses, the asses, the money, or aught else that he had seen, but exclaimed: "Prithee, father, let me have one of those goslings."

25] "Alas, my son," replied the father, "speak not of them; they are naughty things."

26] "Oh!" questioned the son; "but are naughty things made like that?"

27] "Ay," returned the father.

28] Whereupon the son: "I know not," he said, "what you say, nor why they should be naughty things: for my part I have as yet seen nought that seemed to me so fair and delectable. They are fairer than the painted angels that you have so often shewn me. Oh! if you love me, do but let us take one of these goslings up there, and I will see that she have whereon to bill."

29] "Nay," said the father, "that will not I. Thou knowest not whereon they bill;" and straightway, being ware that nature was more potent than his art, he repented him that he had brought the boy to Florence.

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30] But enough of this story: 'tis time for me to cut it short, and return to those, for whose instruction 'tis told. They say then, some of these my censors, that I am too fond of you, young ladies, and am at too great pains to pleasure you. Now that I am fond of you, and am at pains to pleasure you,

31] 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 comminglings, 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?

32] 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 dedicate 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? Of a truth whoso taxes me thus must be one that, feeling, knowing nought of the pleasure and power of natural affection, loves you not, nor craves your love; and such an one I hold in light esteem.

33] And as for those that go about to find ground of exception in my age, they do but shew that they ill understand that the leek, albeit its head is white, has a green tail. But jesting apart, thus I answer them, that never to the end of my life shall I deem it shameful to me to pleasure those to whom Guido Cavalcanti and Dante Alighieri in their

old age, and Messer Cino da Pistoia in extreme old age, accounted it an honour and found it a delight to minister gratification.

34] And but that 'twere a deviation from the use and wont of discourse, I would call history to my aid, and shew it to abound with stories of noble men of old time, who in their ripest age studied above all things else to pleasure the ladies; whereof if they be ignorant, go they and get them to school.

35] To keep with the Muses on Parnassus is counsel I approve; but tarry with them always we cannot, nor they with us, nor is a man blameworthy, if, when he happen to part from them, he find his delight in those that resemble them. The Muses are ladies, and albeit ladies are not the peers of the Muses, yet they have their outward semblance; for which cause, if for no other, 'tis reasonable that I should be fond of them. Besides which, ladies have been to me the occasion of composing some thousand verses, but of never a verse that I made were the Muses the occasion.

36] Howbeit 'twas with their aid, 'twas under their influence that I composed those thousand verses, and perchance they have sometimes visited me to encourage me in my present task, humble indeed though it be, doing honour and paying, as it were, tribute, to the likeness which the ladies have to them; wherefore, while I weave these stories, I stray not so far from Mount Parnassus and the Muses as not a few perchance suppose.

37] But what shall we say to those, in whom my hunger excites such commiseration that they bid me get me bread? Verily I know not, save this: Suppose that in my need I were to beg bread of them, what would be their answer? I doubt not they would say: "Go seek it among the fables."

38] And in sooth the poets have found more bread among their fables than many rich men among their treasures. And many that have gone after fables have crowned their days with splendour, while, on the other hand, not a few, in the endeavour to get them more bread than they needed, have perished miserably. But why waste more words on them? Let them send me packing, when I ask bread of them; not that, thank God, I have yet need of it, and should I ever come to be in need of it, I know, like the Apostle, how to abound and to be in want, and so am minded to be beholden to none but myself.

39] As for those who say that these matters fell out otherwise than as I relate them, I should account it no small favour, if they would produce the originals, and should what I write not accord with them, I would acknowledge the justice of their censure, and study to amend my ways; but, until better evidence is forthcoming than their words, I shall adhere to my own opinion without seeking to deprive them of theirs, and give them tit for tat.

40] And being minded that for this while this answer suffice, I say that with God and you, in whom I trust, most gentle ladies, to aid and protect me, and patience for my stay, I shall go forward with my work, turning my back on this tempest, however it may rage; for I see not that I can fare worse than the fine dust, which the blast of the whirlwind either leaves where it lies, or bears aloft, not seldom over the heads of men, over the crowns of kings, of emperors, and sometimes suffers to settle on the roofs of lofty palaces, and the summits of the tallest towers, whence if it fall, it cannot sink lower than the level from which it was raised.

41] And if I ever devoted myself and all my powers to minister in any wise to your gratification, I am now minded more than ever so to do, because I know that there is nought that any can justly say in regard thereof, but that I, and others who love you, follow the promptings of nature, whose laws whoso would withstand, has need of powers

pre-eminent, and, even so, will oft-times labour not merely in vain but to his own most grievous disadvantage.

42] Such powers I own that I neither have, nor, to such end, desire to have; and had I them, I would rather leave them to another than use them myself. Wherefore let my detractors hold their peace, and if they cannot get heat, why, let them shiver their life away; and, while they remain addicted to their delights, or rather corrupt tastes, let them leave me to follow my own bent during the brief life that is accorded us.

43] But this has been a long digression, fair ladies, and 'tis time to retrace our steps to the