

**The Decameron
of
Giovanni Boccaccio**

VOLUME I

Faithfully Translated

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with illustrations by Louis Chalon

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INTRODUCTION

PROEM

- FIRST DAY -

NOVEL I. - Ser Ciappelletto cheats a holy friar by a false confession, and dies; and, having lived as a very bad man, is, on his death, reputed a saint, and called San Ciappelletto.

NOVEL II. - Abraham, a Jew, at the instance of Jehannot de Chevigny, goes to the court of Rome, and having marked the evil life of clergy, returns to Paris, and becomes a Christian.

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- SECOND DAY -

NOVEL I. - Martellino pretends to be a paralytic, and makes it appear as if he were cured by being placed upon the body of St. Arrigo. His trick is detected; he is beaten and arrested, and is in peril of hanging, but finally escapes.

NOVEL II. - Rinaldo d'Asti is robbed, arrives at Castel Guglielmo, and is entertained by a widow lady; his property is restored to him, and he returns home safe and sound.

NOVEL III. - Three young men squander their substance and are reduced to poverty. Their nephew, returning home a desperate man, falls in with an abbot, in whom he discovers the daughter of the King of England. She marries him, and he retrieves the losses and re-establishes the fortune of his uncles.

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NOVEL V. - Andreuccio da Perugia comes to Naples to buy horses, meets with three serious adventures in one night, comes safe out of them all, and returns home with a ruby.

NOVEL VI. - Madam Beritola loses two sons, is found with two kids on an island, goes thence to Lunigiana, where one of her sons takes service with her master, and lies with his daughter, for which he is put in prison. Sicily rebels against King Charles, the son is recognized by the mother, marries the master's daughter, and, his brother being discovered, is reinstated in great honour.

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NOVEL VIII. - The Count of Antwerp, labouring under a false accusation, goes into exile. He leaves his two children in different places in England, and takes service in Ireland. Returning to England an unknown man, he finds his sons prosperous. He serves as a groom in the army of the King of France; his innocence is established, and he is restored to his former honours.

NOVEL IX. - Bernabo of Genoa, deceived by Ambrogiuolo, loses his money and commands his innocent wife to be put to death. She escapes, habits herself as a man, and serves the Soldan. She discovers the deceiver, and brings Bernabo to Alexandria, where the deceiver is punished. She then resumes the garb of a woman, and with her husband returns wealthy to Genoa.

NOVEL X. - Paganino da Monaco carries off the wife of Messer Ricciardo di Chinzica, who, having learned where she is, goes to Paganino and in a friendly manner asks him to restore her. He consents, provided she be willing. She refuses to go back with her husband. Messer Ricciardo dies, and she marries Paganino.

- THIRD DAY -

NOVEL I. - Masetto da Lamporecchio feigns to be dumb, and obtains a gardener's place at a convent of women, who with one accord make haste to lie with him.

NOVEL II. - A groom lies with the wife of King Agilulf, who learns the fact, keeps his own counsel, finds out the groom and shears him. The shorn shears all his fellows, and so comes safe out of the scrape.

NOVEL III. - Under cloak of confession and a most spotless conscience, a lady, enamoured of a young man, induces a booby friar unwittingly to provide a means to the entire gratification of her passion.

NOVEL IV. - Dom Felice instructs Fra Puccio how to attain blessedness by doing a penance. Fra Puccio does the penance, and meanwhile Dom Felice has a good time with Fra Puccio's wife.

NOVEL V. - Zima gives a palfrey to Messer Francesco Vergellesi, who in return suffers him to speak with his wife. She keeping silence, he answers in her stead, and the sequel is in accordance with his answer.

NOVEL VI. - Ricciardo Minutolo loves the wife of Filippello Fighinolfi, and knowing her to be jealous, makes her believe that his own wife is to meet Filippello at a bagnio on the ensuing day; whereby she is induced to go thither, where, thinking to have been with her husband, she discovers that she has tarried with Ricciardo.

NOVEL VII. - Tedaldo, being in disfavour with his lady, departs from Florence. He returns thither after a while in the guise of a pilgrim, has speech of his lady, and makes her sensible of her fault. Her husband, convicted of slaying him, he delivers from peril of death, reconciles him with his brothers, and thereafter discreetly enjoys his lady.

NOVEL VIII. Ferondo, having taken a certain powder, is interred for dead; is disinterred by the abbot, who enjoys his wife; is put in prison and taught to believe that he is in purgatory; is then resuscitated, and rears as his own a boy begotten by the abbot upon his wife.

NOVEL IX. - Gillette of Narbonne cures the King of France of a fistula, craves for spouse Bertrand de Roussillon, who marries her against his will, and hies him in despite to Florence, where, as he courts a young woman, Gillette lies with him in her stead, and has two sons by him; for which cause he afterwards takes her into favour and entreats her as his wife.

NOVEL X. - Alibech turns hermit, and is taught by Rustico, a monk, how the Devil is put in hell. She is afterwards conveyed thence, and becomes the wife of Neerbale.

- FOURTH DAY -

NOVEL I. - Tancred, Prince of Salerno, slays his daughter's lover, and sends her his heart in a golden cup: she pours upon it a poisonous distillation, which she drinks and dies.

NOVEL II. - Fra Alberto gives a lady to understand that she is beloved of the Angel Gabriel, in whose shape he lies with her sundry times; afterward, for fear of her kinsmen, he flings himself forth of her house, and finds shelter in the house of a poor man, who on the morrow leads him in the guise of a wild man into the piazza, where, being recognized, he is apprehended by his brethren and imprisoned.

NOVEL III. - Three young men love three sisters, and flee with them to Crete. The eldest of the sisters slays her lover for jealousy. The second saves the life of the first by yielding herself to the Duke of Crete. Her lover slays her, and makes off with the first: the third sister and her lover are charged with the murder, are arrested and confess the crime. They escape death by bribing the guards, flee destitute to Rhodes, and there in destitution die.

NOVEL IV. - Gerbino, in breach of the plighted faith of his grandfather, King Guglielmo, attacks a ship of the King of Tunis to rescue thence his daughter. She being slain by those aboard the ship, he slays them, and afterwards he is beheaded.

NOVEL V. - Lisabetta's brothers slay her lover: he appears to her in a dream, and shews her where he is buried: she privily disinters the head, and sets it in a pot of basil, whereon she daily weeps a great while. The pot being taken from her by her brothers, she dies not long after.

NOVEL VI. - Andreuola loves Gabriotto: she tells him a dream that she has had; he tells her a dream of his own, and dies suddenly in her arms.

While she and her maid are carrying his corpse to his house, they are taken by the Signory. She tells how the matter stands, is threatened with violence by the Podesta, but will not brook it. Her father hears how she is bested, and, her innocence being established, causes her to be set at large; but she, being minded to tarry no longer in the world, becomes a nun.

NOVEL VII. - Simona loves Pasquino; they are together in a garden, Pasquino rubs a leaf of sage against his teeth, and dies; Simona is arrested, and, with intent to shew the judge how Pasquino died, rubs one of the leaves of the same plant against her teeth, and likewise dies.

NOVEL VIII. - Girolamo loves Salvestra: yielding to his mother's prayers he goes to Paris; he returns to find Salvestra married; he enters her house by stealth, lays himself by her side, and dies; he is borne to the church, where Salvestra lays herself by his side, and dies.

Nova IX. - Sieur Guillaume de Roussillon slays his wife's paramour, Sieur Guillaume de Cabestaing, and gives her his heart to eat. She, coming to wit thereof, throws herself from a high window to the ground, and dies, and is buried with her lover.

NOVEL X. - The wife of a leech, deeming her lover, who has taken an opiate, to be dead, puts him in a chest, which, with him therein, two usurers carry off to their house. He comes to himself, and is taken for a thief; but, the lady's maid giving the Signory to understand that she had put him in the chest which the usurers stole, he escapes the gallows, and the usurers are mulcted in moneys for the theft of the chest.

ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE DECAMERON

VOLUME I.

The lady and the friar (third day, third story) - Frontispiece

The three rings (first day, third story)

The dinner of hens (first day, fifth story)

Rinaldo D'Asti and the widow lady (second day, second story)

Alatiel dancing (second day, seventh story)

The wedding party (fourth day, introduction)

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Simona and Pasquino (fourth day, seventh story)

INTRODUCTION

Son of a merchant, Boccaccio di Chellino di Buonaiuto, of Certaldo in Val d'Elsa, a little town about midway between Empoli and Siena, but within the Florentine "contado," Giovanni Boccaccio was born, most probably at Paris, in the year 1313. His mother, at any rate, was a Frenchwoman, whom his father seduced during a sojourn at Paris, and afterwards deserted. So much as this Boccaccio has himself told us, under a transparent veil of allegory, in his *Ameto*. Of his mother we would fain know more, for his wit has in it a quality, especially noticeable in the Tenth Novel of the Sixth Day of the *Decameron*, which marks him out as the forerunner of Rabelais, and prompts us to ask how much more his genius may have owed to his French ancestry. His father was of sufficient standing in Florence to be chosen Prior in 1321; but this brief term of office—but two months—was his last, as well as his first experience of public life. Of Boccaccio's early years we know nothing more than that his first preceptor was the Florentine grammarian, Giovanni da Strada, father of the poet Zanobi da Strada, and that, when he was about ten years old, he was bound apprentice to a merchant, with whom he spent the next six years at Paris, whence he returned to Florence with an inveterate repugnance to commerce. His father then proposed to make a canonist of him; but the study of Gratian proved hardly more congenial than the routine of the counting-house to the lad, who had already evinced a taste for letters; and a sojourn at Naples, where under the regime of the enlightened King Robert there were coteries of learned men, and even Greek was not altogether unknown, decided his future career. According to Filippo Villani his choice was finally fixed by a visit to the tomb of Vergil on the Via Puteolana, and, though the modern critical spirit is apt to discount such stories, there can be no doubt that such a pilgrimage would be apt to make a deep, and perhaps enduring, impression upon a nature ardent and sensitive, and already conscious of extraordinary powers. His stay at Naples was also in another respect a turning point in his life; for it

was there that, as we gather from the *Filocolo*, he first saw the blonde beauty, Maria, natural daughter of King Robert, whom he has immortalized as Fiammetta. The place was the church of San Lorenzo, the day the 26th of March, 1334. Boccaccio's admiring gaze was observed by the lady, who, though married, proved no Laura, and forthwith returned his love in equal measure. Their liaison lasted several years, during which Boccaccio recorded the various phases of their passion with exemplary assiduity in verse and prose. Besides paying her due and discreet homage in sonnet and canzone, he associated her in one way or another, not only with the *Filocolo* (his prose romance of Florio and Biancofiore, which he professes to have written to please her), but with the *Ameto*, the *Amorosa Visione*, the *Teseide*, and the *Filostrato*; and in *L'Amorosa Fiammetta* he wove out of their relations a romance in which her lover, who is there called Pamfilo, plays Aeneas to her Dido, though with somewhat less tragic consequences. The Proem to the *Decameron* shews us the after-glow of his passion; the lady herself appears as one of the "honourable company," and her portrait, as in the act of receiving the laurel wreath at the close of the Fourth Day, is a masterpiece of tender and delicate delineation.

Boccaccio appears to have been recalled to Florence by his father in 1341; and it was probably in that year that he wrote *L'Amorosa Fiammetta* and the allegorical prose pastoral (with songs interspersed) which he entitled *Ameto*, and in which Fiammetta masquerades in green as one of the nymphs. The *Amorosa Visione*, written about the same time, is not only an allegory but an acrostic, the initial letters of its fifteen hundred triplets composing two sonnets and a ballade in honour of Fiammetta, whom he here for once ventures to call by her true name. Later came the *Teseide*, or romance of Palamon and Arcite, the first extant rendering of the story, in twelve books, and the *Filostrato*, nine books of the loves and woes of Troilus and Cressida. Both these poems are in ottava rima, a metre which, if Boccaccio did not invent it, he was the first to apply to such a purpose. Both works were dedicated to Fiammetta. A graceful idyll in the same metre, *Ninfale Fiesolano*, was written later, probably at Naples in

1345. King Robert was then dead, but Boccaccio enjoyed the favour of Queen Joan, of somewhat doubtful memory, at whose instance he hints in one of his later letters that he wrote the Decameron. Without impugning Boccaccio's veracity we can hardly but think that the Decameron would have seen the light, though Queen Joan had withheld her encouragement. He had probably been long meditating it, and gathering materials for it, and we may well suppose that the outbreak of the plague in 1348, by furnishing him with a sombre background to heighten the effect of his motley pageant, had far more to do with accelerating the composition than aught that Queen Joan may have said.

That Boccaccio was not at Florence during the pestilence is certain; but we need not therefore doubt the substantial accuracy of his marvellous description of the state of the stricken city, for the course and consequences of the terrible visitation must have been much the same in all parts of Italy, and as to Florence in particular, Boccaccio could have no difficulty in obtaining detailed and abundant information from credible eye-witnesses. The introduction of Fiammetta, who was in all probability at Naples at the time, and in any case was not a Florentine, shews, however, that he is by no means to be taken literally, and renders it extremely probable that the facetious, irrepressible, and privileged Dioneo is no other than himself. At the same time we cannot deem it either impossible, or very unlikely, that in the general relaxation of morale, which the plague brought in its train, refuge from care and fear was sought in the diversions which he describes by some of those who had country-seats to which to withdraw, and whether the "contado" was that of Florence or that of Naples is a matter of no considerable importance. (1) It is probable that Boccaccio's father was one of the victims of the pestilence; for he was dead in 1350, when his son returned to Florence to live thenceforth on the modest patrimony which he inherited. It must have been about this time that he formed an intimacy with Petrarch, which, notwithstanding marked diversity of temperament, character and pursuits, was destined to be broken only by death. Despite his complaints of the malevolence of his critics in the Proem to the Fourth Day of the Decameron, he had no lack of

appreciation on the part of his fellow-citizens, and was employed by the Republic on several missions; to Bologna, probably with the view of averting the submission of that city to the Visconti in 1350; to Petrarch at Padua in March 1351, with a letter from the Priors announcing his restitution to citizenship, and inviting him to return to Florence, and assume the rectorship of the newly founded university; to Ludwig of Brandenburg with overtures for an alliance against the Visconti in December of the same year; and in the spring of 1354 to Pope Innocent VI. at Avignon in reference to the approaching visit of the Emperor Charles IV. to Italy. About this time, 1354-5, he threw off, in striking contrast to his earlier works, an invective against women, entitled *Laberinto d'Amore*, otherwise *Corbaccio*, a coarse performance occasioned by resentment at what he deemed capricious treatment by a lady to whom he had made advances. To the same period, though the date cannot be precisely fixed, belongs his *Life of Dante*, a work of but mediocre merit. Somewhat later, it would seem, he began the study of Greek under one Leontius Pilatus, a Calabrian, who possessed some knowledge of that language, and sought to pass himself off as a Greek by birth.

Leontius was of coarse manners and uncertain temper, but Boccaccio was his host and pupil for some years, and eventually procured him the chair of Greek in the university of Florence. How much Greek Boccaccio learned from him, and how far he may have been beholden to him in the compilation of his elaborate Latin treatise *De Genealogia Deorum*, in which he essayed with very curious results to expound the inner meaning of mythology, it is impossible to say. In 1361 he seems to have had serious thoughts of devoting himself to religion, being prodigiously impressed by the menaces, monitions and revelations of a dying Carthusian of Siena. One of the revelations concerned a matter which Boccaccio had supposed to be known only to Petrarch and himself. He accordingly confided his anxiety to Petrarch, who persuaded him to amend his life without renouncing the world. In 1362 he revisited Naples, and in the following year spent three months with Petrarch at Venice. In 1365 he was sent by the Republic of Florence on a mission of conciliation

to Pope Urban V. at Avignon. He was employed on a like errand on the Pope's return to Rome in 1367. In 1368 he revisited Venice, and in 1371 Naples; but in May 1372 he returned to Florence, where on 25th August 1373 he was appointed lecturer on the Divina Commedia, with a yearly stipend of 100 fiorini d'oro. His lectures, of which the first was delivered in the church of San Stefano near the Ponte Vecchio, were discontinued owing to ill health, doubtless aggravated by the distress which the death of Petrarch (20th July 1374) could not but cause him, when he had got no farther than the seventeenth Canto of the Inferno. His commentary is still occasionally quoted. He died, perhaps in the odour of sanctity, for in later life he was a diligent collector of relics, at Certaldo on 21st December 1375, and was buried in the parish church. His tomb was desecrated, and his remains were dispersed, owing, it is said, to a misunderstanding, towards the close of the eighteenth century. His library, which by his direction was placed in the Convent of Santo Spirito at Florence, was destroyed by fire about a century after his death.

Besides the *De Genealogia Deorum* Boccaccio wrote other treatises in Latin, which need not here be specified, and sixteen Eclogues in the same language, of which he was by no means a master. As for his minor works in the vernacular, the earlier of them shew that he had not as yet wrought himself free from the conventionalism which the polite literature of Italy inherited from the Sicilians. It is therefore inevitable that the twentieth century should find the *Filocopo*, *Ameto*, and *Amorosa Visione* tedious reading. The *Teseide* determined the form in which Pulci, Boiardo, Bello, Ariosto, Tasso, and, with a slight modification, our own Spenser were to write, but its readers are now few, and are not likely ever again to be numerous. Chaucer drew upon it for the *Knight's Tale*, but it is at any rate arguable that his retrenchment of its perhaps inordinate length was judicious, and that what he gave was better than what he borrowed. Still, that it had such a redactor as Chaucer is no small testimony to its merit; nor was it only in the *Knight's Tale* that he was indebted to it: the description of the Temple of Love in the *Parlement of Foules* is taken almost word for word from it. Even more considerable and conspicuous is

Chaucer's obligation to Boccaccio in the *Troilus and Criseyde*, about a third of which is borrowed from the *Filostrato*. Nor is it a little remarkable that the same man, that in the *Teseide* and *Filostrato* founded the chivalrous epic, should also and in the same period of his literary activity, have written the first and not the least powerful and artistic of psychological romances, for even such is *L'Amorosa Fiammetta*.

But whatever may be the final verdict of criticism upon these minor works of Boccaccio, it is impossible to imagine an age in which the *Decameron* will fail of general recognition as, in point alike of invention as of style, one of the most notable creations of human genius. Of few books are the sources so recondite, insomuch that it seems to be certain that in the main they must have been merely oral tradition, and few have exercised so wide and mighty an influence. The profound, many-sided and intimate knowledge of human nature which it evinces, its vast variety of incident, its wealth of tears and laughter, its copious and felicitous diction, inevitably apt for every occasion, and, notwithstanding the frequent harshness, and occasional obscurity of its at times tangled, at times laboured periods, its sustained energy and animation of style must ever ensure for this human comedy unchallenged rank among the literary masterpieces that are truly immortal.

The *Decameron* was among the earliest of printed books, Venice leading the way with a folio edition in 1471, Mantua following suit in 1472, and Vicenza in 1478. A folio edition, adorned, with most graceful wood-engravings, was published at Venice in 1492. Notwithstanding the freedom with which in divers passages Boccaccio reflected on the morals of the clergy, the Roman Curia spared the book, which the austere Savonarola condemned to the flames. The tradition that the *Decameron* was among the pile of "vanities" burned by Savonarola in the Piazza della Signoria on the last day of the Carnival of 1497, little more than a year before he was himself burned there, is so intrinsically probable—and accords so well with the extreme paucity of early copies of the work—that it would be the very perversity of scepticism to doubt it. It is by no means

to the credit of our country that, except to scholars, it long remained in England, an almost entirely closed book. (2) Indeed the first nominally complete English translation, a sadly mutilated and garbled rendering of the French version by Antoine Le Macon, did not appear till 1620, and though successive redactions brought it nearer to the original, it remained at the best but a sorry *faute de mieux*. Such as it was, however, our forefathers were perforce fain to be content with it.

The first Englishman to render the whole Decameron direct from the Italian was Mr. John Payne; but his work, printed for the Villon Society in 1886, was only for private circulation, and those least inclined to disparage its merits may deem its style somewhat too archaic and stilted adequately to render the vigour and vivacity of the original. Accordingly in the present version an attempt has been made to hit the mean between archaism and modernism, and to secure as much freedom and spirit as is compatible with substantial accuracy.

(1) As to the palaces in which the scene is laid, Manni (*Istoria del Decamerone*, Par. ii. cap. ii.) identifies the first with a villa near Fiesole, which can be no other than the Villa Palmieri, and the second (*ib.* cap. lxxvi.) with the Podere della Fonte, or so-called Villa del Boccaccio, near Camerata. Baldelli's theory, adopted by Mrs. Janet Ann Ross (*Florentine Villas*, 1901), that the Villa di Poggio Gherardi was the first, and the Villa Palmieri the second, retreat is not to be reconciled with Boccaccio's descriptions. The Villa Palmieri is not remote enough for the second and more sequestered retreat, nor is it, as that is said to have been, situate on a low hill amid a plain, but on the lower Fiesolean slope. The most rational supposition would seem to be that Boccaccio, who had seen many a luxurious villa, freely combined his experiences in the description of his palaces and pleasaunces, and never expected to be taken *au pied de la lettre*.

(2) Nevertheless Shakespeare derived indirectly the plot of *All's Well that Ends Well* from the Ninth Novel of the Third Day, and an element in the plot of *Cymbeline* from the Ninth Novel of the Second Day.

— Beginneth here the book called Decameron, otherwise Prince Galeotto, wherein are contained one hundred novels told in ten days by seven ladies and three young men. —

PROEM

'Tis humane to have compassion on the afflicted and as it shews well in all, so it is especially demanded of those who have had need of comfort and have found it in others: among whom, if any had ever need thereof or found it precious or delectable, I may be numbered; seeing that from my early youth even to the present I was beyond measure aflame with a most aspiring and noble love (1) more perhaps than, were I to enlarge upon it, would seem to accord with my lowly condition. Whereby, among people of discernment to whose knowledge it had come, I had much praise and high esteem, but nevertheless extreme discomfort and suffering not indeed by reason of cruelty on the part of the beloved lady, but through superabundant ardour engendered in the soul by ill-bridled desire; the which, as it allowed me no reasonable period of quiescence, frequently occasioned me an inordinate distress. In which distress so much relief was afforded me by the delectable discourse of a friend and his commendable consolations, that I entertain a very solid conviction that to them I owe it that I am not dead. But, as it pleased Him, who, being infinite, has assigned by immutable law an end to all things mundane, my love, beyond all other fervent, and neither to be broken nor bent by any force of determination, or counsel of prudence, or fear of manifest shame or ensuing danger, did nevertheless in course of time me abate of its own accord, in such wise that it has now left nought of itself in my mind but that pleasure which it is wont to afford to him who does not adventure too far out in navigating its deep seas; so that, whereas it was used to be grievous, now, all discomfort being done away, I find that which remains to be delightful. But the cessation of the pain has not banished the memory of the kind offices done me by those who shared by sympathy the burden of my griefs; nor will it ever, I believe, pass from me except by death. And as among the virtues, gratitude is in my judgment most especially to be commended, and ingratitude in equal measure to be censured, therefore, that I show myself not ungrateful, I have resolved, now that I may call

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