

# **A Story of Ravenna**

Giovanni Boccaccio



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RAVENNA being a very ancient city in Romagna, there dwelt sometime a great number of worthy gentlemen, among whom I am to speak of one more especially, named Anastasio, descended from the family of Onesti, who by the death of his father, and an uncle of his, was left extraordinarily abounding in riches and growing to years fitting for marriage. As young gallants are easily apt enough to do, he became enamoured of a very beautiful gentlewoman, who was daughter of Messer Paolo Traversario, one of the most ancient and noble families in all the country. Nor made he any doubt, by his means and industrious endeavour, to derive affection from her again, for he carried himself like a brave-minded gentleman, liberal in his expenses, honest and affable in all his actions, which commonly are the true notes of a good nature, and highly to be commended in any man. But, howsoever, fortune became his enemy; these laudable parts of manhood did not any way friend him, but rather appeared hurtful to himself, so cruel, unkind, and almost merely savage did she show herself to him, perhaps in pride of her singular beauty or presuming on her nobility by birth, both which are rather blemishes than ornaments in a woman when they be especially abused. The harsh and uncivil usage in her grew very distasteful to Anastasio, and so insufferable that after a long time of fruitless service, requited still with nothing but coy disdain, desperate resolutions entered into his brain, and often he was minded to kill himself. But better thoughts supplanting those furious passions, he abstained from such a violent act, and governed by more manly consideration, determined that as she hated him, he would requite her with the like, if he could, wherein he became altogether deceived, because as his hopes grew to a daily decaying, yet his love enlarged itself more and more.

Thus Anastasio persevering still in his bootless affection, and his expenses not limited within any compass, it appeared in the judgment of his kindred and friends that he was fallen into a mighty consumption, both of his body and means. In which respects many times they advised him to leave the city of Ravenna, and live in some other place for such a while as might set a more moderate stint upon his spendings, and bridle the indiscreet course of his love, the only fuel which fed his furious fire.

Anastasio held out thus a long time, without lending an ear to such friendly counsel; but in the end he was so closely followed by them, as being no longer able to deny them, he promised to accomplish their request. Whereupon making such extraordinary preparation as if he were to set out thence for France or Spain, or else into some further country, he mounted on horseback, and accompanied with some few of his familiar friends, departed from Ravenna, and rode to a country dwelling-house of his own, about three or four miles distant from the city, at a place called Chiassi; and there upon a very good green erecting divers tents and pavilions, such as great persons make use of in the time of progress, he said to his friends which came with him thither that there he determined to make his abiding, they all returning back unto Ravenna, and coming to visit him again so often as they pleased.

Now it came to pass that about the beginning of May, it being then a very mild and serene season, and he leading there a much more magnificent life than ever he had done before, inviting divers to dine with him this day and as many to-morrow, and not to leave him till after supper, upon a sudden falling into remembrance of his cruel mistress, he commanded all his servants to forbear his company, and suffer him to walk alone by himself a while, because he had occasion of private meditations, wherein he would not by any means be troubled. It was then about the ninth hour of the day, and he walking on solitary all alone, having gone some half a mile distance from the tents, entered into a grove of pinetrees, never minding dinner-time or anything else, but only the unkind requital of his love.

Suddenly he heard the voice of a woman seeming to make most mournful complaints, which breaking off his silent considerations, made him to lift up his head to know the reason of this noise. When he saw himself so far entered into the grove before he could imagine where he was, he looked amazedly round about him, and out of a little thicket of bushes and briars round engirt with spreading trees, he espied a young damsel come running towards him, naked from the middle upward, her hair lying on her shoulders, and her fair skin rent and torn with

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the briars and brambles, so that the blood ran trickling down mainly, she weeping, wringing her hands, and crying out for mercy so loud as she could. Two fierce bloodhounds also followed swiftly after, and where their teeth took hold did most cruelly bite her. Last of all, mounted on a lusty black courser, came galloping a knight, with a very stern and angry countenance, holding a drawn short sword in his hand, giving her very dreadful speeches, and threatening every minute to kill her.

This strange and uncouth sight bred in him no mean admiration, as also kind compassion to the unfortunate woman, out of which compassion sprung an earnest desire to deliver her, if he could, from a death so full of anguish and horror; but seeing himself to be without arms, he ran and plucked up the plant of a tree, which handling as if it had been a staff, he opposed himself against the dogs and the knight, who seeing him coming, cried out in this manner to him: "Anastasio, put not thyself in any opposition, but refer to my hounds and me to punish this wicked woman as she hath justly deserved." And in speaking these words, the hounds took fast hold on her body, so staying her until the knight was come nearer to her, and alighted from his horse, when Anastasio, after some other angry speeches, spake thus to him: "I cannot tell what or who thou art, albeit thou takest such knowledge of me, yet I must say it is mere cowardice in a knight, being armed as thou art, to offer to kill a naked woman, and make thy dogs thus to seize on her, as if she were a savage beast; therefore, believe me, I will defend her so far as I am able."

"Anastasio," answered the knight, "I am of the same city as thou art, and do well remember that thou wast a little lad when I, who was then named Guido Anastasio, and thine uncle, became as entirely in love with this woman as now thou art with Paolo Traversario's daughter. But through her coy disdain and cruelty, such was my heavy fate that desperately I slew myself with this short sword which thou beholdest in mine hand; for which rash sinful deed I was and am condemned to eternal punishment. This wicked woman, rejoicing immeasurably in mine unhappy death, remained no long time alive after me, and for her merciless sin of cruelty, and taking pleasure in my oppressing torments, dying unrepentant, and in pride of her scorn, she had the like sentence of condemnation pronounced on her, and was sent to the same place where I was condemned.

"There the three impartial judges imposed this further infliction on us both—namely, that she should fly in this manner before me, and I, who loved her so dearly while I lived, must pursue her as my deadly enemy, not like a woman that had a taste of love in her. And so often as I can overtake her, I am to kill her with this sword, the same weapon wherewith I slew myself. Then am I enjoined therewith to open her accursed body, and tear out her heart, with her other inwards, as now thou seest me do, which I give to my hounds to feed on. Afterward—such is the appointment of the supreme powers—that she re-assumeth life again, even as if she had not been dead at all, and falling to the same kind of flight, I with my hounds am still to follow her, without any respite or intermission. Every Friday, and just at this hour, our course is this way, where she suffereth the just punishment inflicted on her. Nor do we rest any of the other days, but are appointed unto other places, where she cruelly executed her malice against me, who am now, of her dear affectionate friend, ordained to be her endless enemy, and to pursue her in this manner for so many years as she exercised months of cruelty towards me. Hinder me not, then, in being the executioner of Divine justice, for all thy interposition is but in vain in seeking to cross the appointment of supreme powers."

Anastasio having heard all this discourse, his hair stood upright, like porcupines' quills, and his soul was so shaken with the terror, that he stepped back to suffer the knight to do what he was enjoined, looking yet with mild commiseration on the poor woman, who kneeling most humbly before the knight, and sternly seized on by the two bloodhounds, he opened her breast with his weapon, drawing forth her heart and bowels, which instantly he threw to the dogs, and they devoured them very greedily. Soon after the damsel, as if none of this punishment had been inflicted on her, started up suddenly, running amain towards the seashore, and the hounds swiftly following her, as the knight did the like, after he had taken his sword and was mounted on horseback, so that Anastasio had soon lost all sight of them, and could not guess what could become of them.

After he had heard and observed all these things, he stood a while as confounded with fear and pity, like a simple silly man, hoodwinked with his own passions, not knowing the subtle enemy's cunning illusions in offering false suggestions to the sight, to work his own ends thereby, and increase the number of his deceived servants. Forthwith he persuaded himself that he might make good use of this woman's tormenting, so justly imposed on the knight to prosecute, if thus it should continue still every Friday. Wherefore setting a good note or mark upon the place, he returned back to his own people, and at such times as he thought convenient, sent for

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divers of his kindred and friends from Ravenna, who being present with him, thus he spake to them:

"Dear kinsmen and friends, ye have long while importuned me to discontinue my over-doating love to her whom you all think, and I find to be my mortal enemy; as also to give over my lavish expenses, wherein I confess myself too prodigal; both which requests of yours I will condescend to, provided that you will perform one gracious favour for me—namely, that on Friday next, Messer Paolo Traversario, his wife, daughter, with all other women linked in lineage to them, and such beside only as you shall please to appoint, will vouchsafe to accept a dinner here with me. As for the reason thereto moving me, you shall then more at large be acquainted withal." This appeared no difficult matter for them to accomplish. Wherefore being returned to Ravenna, and as they found the time answerable to their purpose, they invited such as Anastasio had appointed them. And although they found it somewhat a hard matter to gain her company whom he had so dearly affected, yet notwithstanding, the other women won her along with them.

A most magnificent dinner had Anastasio provided, and the tables were covered under the pine-trees, where he saw the cruel lady so pursued and slain; directing the guests so in their seating that the young gentlewoman, his unkind mistress, sate with her face opposite unto the place where the dismal spectacle was to be seen. About the closing up of dinner, they began to hear the noise of the poor persecuted woman, which drove them all to much admiration, desiring to know what it was, and no one resolving them they rose from the tables, and looking directly as the noise came to them, they espied the woful woman, the dogs eagerly pursuing her; the knight galloping after them with his drawn weapon, and came very near unto the company, who cried out with loud exclams against the dogs, and the knights stepped forth in assistance of the injured woman.

The knight spake unto them as formerly he had done to Anastasio, which made them draw back possessed with fear and admiration, while he acted the same cruelty as he did the Friday before, not differing in the least degree. Most of the gentlewomen there present, being near allied to the unfortunate woman, and likewise to the knight, remembering well both his love and death, did shed tears as plentifully as if it had been to the very persons themselves in usual performance of the action indeed. Which tragical scene being passed over, and the woman and knight gone out of their sight, all that had seen this strange accident fell into diversity of confused opinions, yet not daring to disclose them, as doubting some further danger to ensue thereon.

But beyond all the rest, none could compare in fear and astonishment with the cruel young maid affected by Anastasio, who both saw and observed all with a more inward apprehension, knowing very well that the moral of this dismal spectacle carried a much nearer application to her than any other in the company. For now she could call to mind how unkind and cruel she had shown herself to Anastasio, even as the other gentlewoman formerly did to her lover, still flying from him in great contempt and scorn, for which she thought the bloodhounds also pursued her at the heels already, and a sword of vengeance to mangle her body. This fear grew so powerful upon her, that to prevent the like heavy doom from falling on her, she studied, and therein bestowed all the night season, how to change her hatred into kind love, which at the length she fully obtained, and then purposed to procure in this manner: Secretly she sent a faithful chambermaid of her own to greet Anastasio on her behalf, humbly entreating him to come see her, because now she was absolutely determined to give him satisfaction in all which, with honour, he could request of her. Whereto Anastasio answered that he accepted her message thankfully, and desired no other favour at her hand but that which stood with her own offer, namely, to be his wife in honourable marriage. The maid knowing sufficiently that he could not be more desirous of the match than her mistress showed herself to be, made answer in her name that this motion would be most welcome to her.

Hereupon the gentlewoman herself became the solicitor to her father and mother, telling them plainly that she was willing to be the wife of Anastasio; which news did so highly content them, that upon the Sunday next following the marriage was very worthily solemnised, and they lived and loved together very kindly. Thus the Divine bounty, out of the malignant enemy's secret machinations, can cause good effects to arise and succeed. For from this conceit of fearful imagination in her, not only happened this long-desired conversion of a maid so obstinately scornful and proud, but likewise all the women of Ravenna, being admonished by her example, grew afterward more tractable to men's honest motions than ever they showed themselves before. And let me make some use hereof, fair ladies, to you not to stand over-nicely conceited of your beauty and good parts when men solicit you with their best services. Remember then this disdainful gentlewoman, but more especially her, who being the death of so kind a lover was therefore condemned to perpetual punishment, and he made the minister thereof whom she had cast off with coy disdain, from which I wish your minds to be free, as mine is ready to do

you any acceptable service.