

Day 6, Story 10



Frate Cipolla promises a group of peasants that he will show them a feather belonging to the Angel Gabriel, but when he finds lumps of coal in its place, he declares that they were the ones used to roast Saint Lawrence.¹

Now that each member of the company had told a story, Dioneo knew that it was his turn to speak, and so, without waiting for a formal command, he imposed silence on those who were praising Guido's pithy retort and began as follows:

Charming ladies, although it is my privilege to speak about whatever I please, today I do not propose to depart from the topic that all of you have spoken about so very fittingly. On the contrary, following in your footsteps, I intend to show you how one of the friars of Saint Anthony, with a quick bit of thinking, found a clever way to avoid a humiliating trap laid for him by two young men. And if I speak at greater length in order to tell you the whole story as it should be told, you should not feel this is a burden, for if you take a look at the sun, you will see that it is still in mid-heaven.

Certaldo, as you may perhaps have heard, is a fortified town in the Val d'Elsa, located in our territory, and although it is small, the people living there were once noble and pretty well-to-do.² Because it offered him such rich pickings, one of the friars of Saint Anthony used to go to Certaldo once a year to collect the alms that all the people were simpleminded enough to donate to his order. His name was Frate Cipolla, and the people used to give him a warm welcome there perhaps as much for his name as for any pious sentiment they felt, since the soil in those parts produced onions that are famous all over

Tuscany.* Small of stature, this Frate Cipolla had red hair and a merry face, and was really the most sociable scoundrel in the world. What is more, although he was not learned, he was such a fine speaker and had such a ready wit that someone unacquainted with him would have concluded not just that he was a grand master of rhetoric; but that he was Cicero himself or maybe Quintilian.³ And there was almost no one in those parts who did not consider him a good buddy, a friend, or at least a nodding acquaintance.

As was his custom, he went there for one of his visits in the month of August, and on a Sunday morning, when all the good men and women from the surrounding villages had gathered in the parish church to hear Mass, he waited for a suitable moment and then came forward.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “it is, as you know, your yearly custom to send some of your wheat and oats to the poor of our Lord and Master Saint Anthony,⁴ some of you giving more and some of you less, according to your ability and your devotion, in exchange for which the Blessed Saint Anthony will keep your oxen, asses, pigs, and sheep from harm. It’s also customary, especially for those of you who are enrolled as members in our confraternity, to pay the small sum that constitutes your annual dues. Now, I’ve been sent to collect this money on behalf of my superior, that is, Messer Abbot. And so, with God’s blessing, I want you to come outside after nones, when you hear the bells ring, and assemble in front of the church where I will, as usual, preach my sermon and you will kiss the cross. What’s more, because I know how deeply devoted you all are to our Lord and Master Saint Anthony, I will, as an act of special grace, show you a beautiful and extremely sacred relic that I myself brought from the Holy Land across the sea, and that is nothing less than one of the Angel Gabriel’s feathers that was left behind in the Virgin Mary’s bedchamber when he came to Nazareth to perform the Annunciation.” And having said all this, he fell silent and then returned to celebrating the Mass.

*Frate Cipolla’s name means “Brother Onion,” a vegetable whose many layers with no real “center” and whose particular odor are quite suggestive when one considers what Frate Cipolla does in the story.

Among the large number of people present in the church while Frate Cipolla was speaking were two very clever young men, one of them named Giovanni del Bragoniera and the other, Biagio Pizzini.⁵ After having had a good laugh between themselves about Frate Cipolla's relic, they decided, even though they were very close friends and cronies of his, to make use of the feather in order to play a practical joke on him.

They knew that Frate Cipolla was going to dine that morning up in the citadel with one of his friends, and as soon as they knew he was at the table, they went down into the street and made their way to the inn where he was staying. Their plan was for Biagio to keep Frate Cipolla's servant occupied in conversation while Giovanni looked through the friar's belongings for the feather, or whatever it was, and stole it so that they could see later on how he was going to explain what had happened to the people.

Frate Cipolla had a servant whom some called Guccio the Whale, others Guccio the Slob, and yet others Guccio the Pig.⁶ He was such a bad character that Lippo the Mouse never came close to being his match. When chatting with his cronies, Frate Cipolla would often make jokes about him.

"My servant," he would say, "has nine failings, and if any one of them had been found in Solomon or Aristotle or Seneca, it would have been sufficient to ruin all the ingenuity, all the wisdom, and all the sanctity they possessed. So, just think what sort of man he must be, who not only lacks these three qualities, but has nine failings altogether!"

On occasion, someone asked him what the nine were, and he would respond with a rhyme he had made up.

"I'll tell you," he would say. "He's slothful, untruthful, and crude; neglectful, disrespectful, and lewd; careless and witless and rude.⁷ Apart from this, he has some other little black marks it would be better not to talk about. But the funniest thing about him is that wherever he goes, he's always looking to find a wife and rent a house, and since he has a big, black, greasy beard, he thinks he's very handsome and attractive, and that every woman who sees him is in love with him. In fact, if you let him have his way, he'd be chasing after all of them so hard that he wouldn't even notice it when his pants fell down. Truth

to tell, though, he's very helpful to me because whenever anyone wants to impart something in secret to me, he always wants to hear his share of it, and if I'm ever asked a question, he's so afraid I won't be able to answer it that he immediately replies yes or no, just as he sees fit."

When Frate Cipolla had left his servant at the inn, he had been told that on no account was anyone to be allowed to touch any of his master's belongings, and especially his saddlebags, which contained the sacred objects. But Guccio the Slob was fonder of the kitchen than any nightingale is of the green branches, especially if he smelled out some serving girl there, and he had indeed caught sight of one about the inn. She was fat and coarse, short and deformed, with a pair of boobs that looked like two big dung baskets and a face like one of the Baronci's, all sweaty and greasy and covered with soot.⁸ And so, Guccio did not bother to lock the door behind him, but left Frate Cipolla's room and all of his things to take care of themselves, and like a vulture pouncing on carrion, swooped down on the kitchen. Even though it was August, he took a seat next to the fire and struck up a conversation with the girl, whose name was Nuta, telling her he was a gentleman by proxy, that he had more than a gazillion and nine florins, not counting those he owed others, which were greater in number, and that he knew how to say and do more stuff than his master could.⁹

Despite the fact that his cowl was covered with so much grease it would have served as seasoning for the soup caldron of Altopascio, and that his doublet was torn and patched, glazed with filth around the neck and under the armpits, and stained in more colors than cloth from Tartary or India, and that his shoes were falling apart and his stockings all in tatters—despite all this, he told her, as though he were the Lord of Châtillon, that he wanted to buy her some new clothes, set her up properly, release her from this servitude of always waiting on others, and while she would not have much of her own, put her in hope of a better fortune.¹⁰ Nevertheless, although he said all this, and much more besides, with great emotion, everything turned out to be as insubstantial as the wind, and like most of his undertakings, it came to nothing.

Upon discovering Guccio the Pig thus occupied with Nuta, the two

young men were quite pleased because it meant that half their work was done for them. With no one to get in their way, they entered Frate Cipolla's room, which had been left open, and the first thing they came upon in their search was the saddlebag containing the feather. When they opened it, they found a tiny casket inside wrapped up in many folds of taffeta, and when they opened that in turn, they found one of the tail feathers of a parrot inside, which they concluded had to be the one he had promised to show the people of Certaldo.

And without a doubt, in those days he could have easily made them believe what he said about it, because the luxuries of Egypt had only just begun to make their way into Tuscany, as they have since done in great quantities everywhere, to the ruin of the whole of Italy. And if such things were little known elsewhere, in that town the people were not acquainted with them at all. In fact, since the rough, honest ways of their forefathers were still followed there, the vast majority had never seen a parrot, let alone heard people mention one.

Delighted to have found the feather, the young men took it out, and to avoid leaving the casket empty, filled it with some lumps of coal they saw in a corner of the room. Then they shut the lid, and after arranging everything the way it had been, went off gleefully with the feather, unnoticed by anyone, after which they waited to see what Frate Cipolla was going to say when he found the coals in its place.

The simple men and women who were in the church, hearing that they were going to see one of the Angel Gabriel's feathers after nones, returned home when Mass was over and spread the news from friend to friend and neighbor to neighbor.¹¹ Then, once they had all finished eating, they thronged the citadel in such numbers that it could scarcely hold them, men and women both, every last one of them desperate to see that feather.

Having had a good dinner and taken a short nap, Frate Cipolla arose a little after nones. When he learned that a huge crowd of peasants had come to see the feather, he ordered Guccio the Slob to come up to him and to bring the bells and the saddlebags with him. Tearing himself away from the kitchen and from Nuta with difficulty, Guccio struggled up with the things he was asked to bring. His body was so bloated from

all the water he had drunk that when he arrived, he was completely out of breath. Still, at Frate Cipolla's command, he went to the church door and began vigorously ringing the bells.

Once all of the people were assembled, Frate Cipolla began his sermon and said a great deal to serve his own purposes, never noticing that any of his things had been tampered with. As he was approaching the moment to show them the Angel Gabriel's feather, first he recited the *Confiteor* with great solemnity and had two large candles lit.* Then, having thrown back his cowl, he slowly unfolded the taffeta wrapping, brought out the casket, and after reciting a short, laudatory speech in praise of the Angel Gabriel and his relic, proceeded to open it. When he saw it was filled with lumps of coal, he did not suspect that Guccio the Whale had done this to him, because he did not think the man capable of rising to such heights, nor did he blame him for having done a bad job of preventing others from playing such a trick. Instead, he silently cursed himself for having trusted Guccio to safeguard his belongings since he knew the man was neglectful, disrespectful, careless, and witless. Without changing color, however, he raised his hands and his eyes to heaven and said in a voice that all could hear, "O God, blessed be Thy power forever and ever." Then he closed the casket and turned to the people.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I want you to know that when I was still quite young, I was sent by my superior into those parts of the world where the sun rises, and at his express command I was charged to seek out the Privileges of the Porcellana, which, although they cost nothing to seal, are much more useful to others than to us.¹² I set out on my journey to find them, departing from Venice and going through Greekgurg, after which, riding from there through the Kingdom of Algarve and Baghdad, I arrived in Parione, from which I made it to Sardinia after a while, though not without suffering great thirst.

"But why should I go through every particular country I visited? After having passed the Straits of Saint George, I came to Conland and Clownland, which are populous countries inhabited by a great many

*The *Confiteor* ("I confess") is a prayer recited at the beginning of the Mass.

people, and from there I went to Liarland, where I found a large number of friars, including many who belonged to our own order, all of whom were bent on forsaking a life of discomfort for the love of God, and cared little about others' troubles wherever they saw they could pursue their own advantage.¹³ And in all of those countries I only spent money that had not been minted. Next I came to the Land of Abruzzi, where men and women climb up the mountains in clogs and clothe pigs in their own guts, and a little farther on I found a people who carry bread on sticks and wine in a sack, after which I arrived at the Basqueworm Mountains where all the water flows downhill.¹⁴ In short, I went so far in those parts that I even reached India Parsinippia where I swear to you by the habit I'm wearing that I saw pruningbills fly, which is quite unbelievable if you haven't seen it—and Maso del Saggio will second me on this, for I met him there and he's a great merchant who cracks nuts and sells their shells retail.¹⁵

“But because I couldn't find what I was sent for, and because from that point on you have to go by water, I turned back and came to the Holy Land where in summertime cold bread costs you four pennies, but when it's hot, it doesn't cost you a thing. There I met with the Reverend Father Messer Dontblameme Ifyouplease, the most worshipful Patriarch of Jerusalem, who, out of respect for the habit of our Lord and Master Saint Anthony, which I've always worn, wanted me to see all the relics he had about him.¹⁶ They were so numerous that if I tried to count them all, it would take me miles till I got to the end. Still, since I don't want to disappoint the ladies, I'll tell you about a few of them.

“First of all, he showed me the finger of the Holy Spirit, as whole and sound as it ever was; then the forelock of the seraphim who appeared to Saint Francis; and one of the fingernails of the cherubims; and one of the ribs of the Word-made-flesh-go-right-out-the-window; and the vestments of the Holy Catholic Faith; and some of the rays from the star that appeared to the three Magi in the East; and a vial of Saint Michael's sweat from when he fought with the Devil; and the jawbone of the Death of Saint Lazarus; and lots of others as well.¹⁷

And because I freely gave him *The Dingle of Mount Morello* in the vernacular and several chapters from the *Oldgoatius*, which he had long

been seeking, he made me a part-sharer in his holy relics. He gave me one of the teeth of the Holy Cross, and in a little vial a bit of the sound of the bells from the temple of Solomon, and the feather of the Angel Gabriel, which I've already told you about, and one of the clogs of Saint Gherardo da Villamagna, which a little while ago I gave to Gherardo di Bonsi in Florence, who is particularly devoted to the saint.¹⁸ Finally, he let me have some of the coals on which the most blessed martyr Saint Lawrence was roasted. With the greatest devotion, I brought these things back from over there, and I still have them all in my possession.

"True, my superior has never allowed me to display them until such time as they were verified as authentic, or not, but now that this has been established to his satisfaction by means of certain miracles they have wrought, and by letters sent to us from the Patriarch, he's given me permission to show them. But I'm afraid to entrust them to anyone else and always keep them with me.

"Now, as a matter of fact, I carry the Angel Gabriel's feather in one casket to prevent it from being damaged, and I have the coals on which Saint Lawrence was roasted in another. The two caskets are so much alike that I often mistake one for the other, and that's what happened to me today, for although I thought I was bringing you the casket with the feather, I actually brought the one with the coals.

"I don't think this was a mistake, however. On the contrary, it's clear to me that it was the will of God and that He Himself placed the casket containing the coals in my hands, for I've only now remembered that the Feast of Saint Lawrence is just two days away.* And since God wanted me to show you the coals on which the saint was roasted and thus rekindle the devotion you should feel for him in your hearts, He had me bring here, not the feather I intended to take, but those blessed coals, which were extinguished by the humors that came from the saint's most sacred body.† Therefore, my blessed children, you should take off your caps, and then you may, with reverence, come

*The Feast of Saint Lawrence takes place on August 10. Tradition has it that he was martyred by being burned to death on a gridiron, which served as his symbol throughout the Middle Ages.

† Humors: fluids, such as blood or sweat.

forward to behold them. But first, I want you to know that whoever is marked with the sign of the cross by these coals may rest assured that for an entire year he won't be burned by fire he doesn't feel."

When Frate Cipolla was finished speaking, he chanted a hymn in praise of Saint Lawrence, opened the casket, and displayed the coals. For a little while, the foolish multitude gazed at them in reverent wonder, after which they all pressed forward in a huge crowd around Frate Cipolla, and giving him much better offerings than usual, begged him to touch each one of them with the coals. Accordingly, Frate Cipolla picked up the coals with his hand and began making the largest crosses he could manage on their white smocks and doublets and on the women's veils, declaring that, as he had seen it happen many times, no matter how much the coals were worn away from making those crosses, they would grow to their former size again in the casket.

Thus, thanks to his quick-wittedness, Frate Cipolla not only profited enormously by scrawling crosses on the people of Certaldo, but made fools of those who thought they had made a fool of him. The two young men had attended his sermon, and as they had listened to the ingenious and truly far-fetched verbal display he used to turn the situation to his advantage, they had laughed so hard they thought their jaws would break. Then, after the crowd had dispersed, they went up to him, as merry as could be, and revealed what they had done, after which they gave him back his feather, which proved no less lucrative to him the following year than the coals had been that day.