

**Nastagio degli Onesti,  
Boccaccio, The Decameron Fifth Day, eighth story**

(adapted from <http://www.fullbooks.com/The-Decameron-Vol-II-2.html>)

**Summary:**

Nastagio degli Onesti, loving a damsel of the Traversari family, by lavish expenditure gains not her love. At the instance of his kinsfolk he goes to Chiassi, where he sees a knight hunt a damsel and slay her and cause her to be devoured by two dogs. He bids his kinsfolk and the lady that he loves to breakfast. During the meal the said damsel is torn in pieces before the eyes of the lady, who, fearing a like fate, takes Nastagio as her husband.

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Lauretta was no sooner silent than thus at the queen's behest began Filomena:--Sweet ladies, as in us pity has ever its need of praise, even so Divine justice does not allow our cruelty to escape severe punishment. So to show you this, you, and thereby urge you utterly to banish such cruelty from your souls, I will tell you a story no less touching than delightful.

In Ravenna, that most ancient city of Romagna, there lived many noblemen and gentlemen, among whom was a young man, Nastagio degli Onesti by name, who by the death of his father and one of his uncles inherited immense wealth. Being without a wife, Nastagio, as is the way with young men, became enamored of a daughter of Messer Paolo Traversari, a damsel of much higher birth than his. He hoped to win her love by courting and gifts. The gifts were excellent and commendable, but not only did they do him no good, they seemed rather to have the contrary effect, so harsh and ruthless and unrelenting did the beloved damsel show herself towards him. No doubt this was due to her uncommon beauty or her noble lineage that puffed her up, so that she grew haughty and disdainful taking no pleasure in him or anything that pleased him.

Nastagio found this burden of disdain so hard to bear, that many a time, he longed to do away with himself. However he refrained from this, and resolved to give her up altogether, or, if he might, to despise her, as she did him. But it was all in vain, for it seemed as if, the more his hope dwindled, the greater grew his love. And, as thus he continued, loving and spending inordinately, certain of his kinsfolk and friends, being apprehensive lest he should waste both himself and his fortune, counseled and beseeched him to depart Ravenna, and go somewhere else for a time, that so he might both cool his ardor and reduce his expenses. For a long while Nastagio answered their admonitions with banter; but as they continued, he grew weary of saying no so often, and promised obedience.

Whereupon he equipped himself as if for a journey to France or Spain, or other distant parts, got on horseback and sallied forth from Ravenna, accompanied by not a few of his friends. At a place called Chiassi, about three miles from Ravenna, he halted, and having sent for tents and pavilions, told his companions that there he meant to stay, and they might go back to Ravenna. So Nastagio pitched his camp, and commenced to live after as fine and lordly a fashion as did ever any man, inviting some of his friends from time to time to eat with him, as he had often done before.

Now it so befell that about the beginning of May, the season being very fine, he was brooding on the cruelty of his mistress, and, that his meditations might be the less disturbed, he bade all his servants leave him, and sauntered slowly, wrapped in thought, as far as the pinewood. After a half-mile, just past the fifth hour of the day, thinking neither of food nor of anything else, he heard a woman wailing and uttering most piercing shrieks. The train of his sweet melancholy being broken, he raised his head to see what was happening, and was amazed to find himself in the pinewood; and saw, moreover, before him running through a grove, close set with underwood and brambles, towards the place where he was, a beautiful damsel, stark naked, her hair disheveled, and her flesh all torn by the briars and brambles, who wept and cried piteously for mercy; and at her flanks he saw two mastiffs, exceeding great and fierce, that ran hard upon her track, and bit her cruelly.

In the rear he saw, riding a black horse, a knight sad and very wrathful of appearance carrying a rapier in his hand, and with spiteful, blood-curdling words threatening her with death. Nastagio was at once amazed and appalled, and then filled with compassion for the hapless lady, whom he desired to deliver, if so he might, from such anguish and peril of death. Since he was unarmed, he ran and took in lieu of a cudgel a branch of a tree, with which he prepared to encounter the dogs and the knight, who called to him before he got close, saying:--"Hold off, Nastagio, leave the dogs and me alone to deal with this vile woman as she has deserved." And, even as he spoke, the dogs gripped the damsel so hard on either flank that they stopped her flight, and the knight dismounted. Nastagio approached, saying:--"I know not who you are, who seem to know me so well, but I will tell you this -- it is a gross outrage for an armed knight to go about to kill a naked woman, and set his dogs upon her as if she were a wild beast -- rest assured that I shall do all I can to protect her."

"Nastagio," replied the knight, "I was of the same city as you are, and you were still a little lad when I, Messer Guido degli Anastagi by name, was far more enamored of this damsel than you are now of the Traversari girl. By her haughtiness and cruelty I was brought to so woeful a situation that one day in a fit of despair I slew myself with this rapier which you see in my hand. For this cause I am condemned to the eternal pains. Nor was it long after my death that she, who was delighted by my death, also died. She had not repented of her cruelty and the joy she took in my sufferings, for which she did not at all blame herself. Therefore she was likewise condemned to the pains of hell.

When she descended to the infernal realm, it was ordained for her pain and mine, that she should flee before me, and that I, who so loved her, should pursue her, not as my beloved lady, but as my mortal enemy, and so, as often as I catch up with her, I slay her with this same rapier with which I slew myself, and having ripped her up by the back, I take out that hard and cold heart, to which neither love nor pity had ever access, and I also take out her other inward parts, as you shall shortly see, and cast them to these dogs to eat. And in no long time, as the just and mighty God decrees, she rises even as if she had not died, and recommences her sad flight, with me and the dogs pursuing her.

And it so falls out that every Friday about this hour I catch up with her here, and slaughter her as you will see; but we do not rest on other days; for there are other places in which I overtake her, places in which she used to plan her cruelty towards me. Thus changed as you see from her lover into her foe, I am to pursue her for years as many as the months during which she showed herself harsh to me. Therefore leave me to execute the decree of the Divine justice, and presume not to oppose that which you will not be able to prevent."

Frightened by the knight's words, so that all his hair stood on end, Nastagio shrank back, still gazing on the hapless damsel, and waited trembling to see what the knight would do. Nor had he long to wait; for the knight, as soon as he had done speaking, sprang, rapier in hand, like a mad dog upon the damsel, who, kneeling, while the two mastiffs gripped her tightly, cried for mercy; but the knight, thrusting with all his force, struck her between the breasts, and ran her clean through the body. Thus stricken, the damsel fell forthwith prone on the ground sobbing and shrieking: whereupon the knight drew forth a knife, and having therewith opened her in the back, took out the heart and all the circumjacent parts, and threw them to the two mastiffs, who, being famished, quickly devoured them. And in no long time the damsel, as if nothing had happened, started to her feet, and took to flight towards the sea, pursued, bitten, by the dogs, while the knight, having gotten on the horse again, followed as before, rapier in hand; and so fast sped they that they were quickly lost to Nastagio's sight.

For a long time he stood musing on what he had seen, divided between pity and terror, and then it occurred to him that, as this happened every Friday, it might be useful to him. So, having marked the place, he rejoined his servants, and in due time thereafter sent for some of his kinsfolk and friends, and said to them:--"It has been a long while that you have urged me to give up loving this lady that is no friend to me, and make an end of my extravagant way of living; and I am now ready so to do, provided you procure me one favor, that next Friday Messer Paolo Traversari, and his wife and daughter, and all the ladies, their kinswomen, and as many other ladies as you may be pleased to bid, come here to lunch with me: when you will see for yourselves the reason why I wish for this." This seemed an easy matter to them; and so, on their return to Ravenna, they lost no time in conveying Nastagio's message to his intended guests: and, although she was hardly persuaded, yet in the end the damsel that Nastagio loved came with the rest.

Nastagio caused a lordly lunch to be prepared, and had the tables set under the pines about the place where he had witnessed the slaughter of the cruel lady; and in ranging the ladies and gentlemen at table he so ordered it, that the damsel whom he loved was placed opposite the spot where it would be enacted. The last course was just served, when the despairing cries of the hunted damsel became audible to all, to their no small amazement; and each asking, and none knowing, what it might mean, they all stared intent to see what was happening; and saw the suffering damsel, and the knight and the dogs, who were quickly in their midst. They yelled at the dogs and knight, and not a few advanced to assist the damsel: but the words of the knight, which were the same as he had used to Nastagio, caused them to fall back, terror-stricken and lost in amazement. And when the knight proceeded to do as he had done before, all the ladies that were there, many of whom were of kin to the suffering damsel and to the knight, and called to mind his love and death, wept as bitterly as if it were their own case.

When it was all over, and the lady and the knight had disappeared, the strange scene set those that witnessed it pondering many things: but among them all none was so appalled as the cruel damsel that Nastagio loved, who, having clearly seen and heard all that had passed, and being aware that it touched her more nearly than any other by reason of the harshness that she had ever shown to Nastagio, felt that she was already fleeing from her angered lover, and with the mastiffs on her flanks. And so great was her terror that, lest a like fate should befall her, she converted her aversion into affection, and as soon as she could, which was that very night, sent a trusty chambermaid privately to Nastagio with a request that he would be pleased to come to her, for she was ready in all respects to pleasure him to the full. Nastagio made answer that he was greatly flattered, but that he intended with her consent to have his pleasure of her in an honorable way, by marrying her. The damsel, who knew that only she was to blame that she was not already Nastagio's wife, answered that she consented. Wherefore by her own mouth she acquainted her father and mother that she agreed to marry Nastagio; and, they heartily approved her choice,

Nastagio wedded her on the following Sunday, and lived happily with her many a year. Nor was it in her case alone that this terror was productive of good. On the contrary, it was effective among all the ladies of Ravenna, so that they all became, and have ever since been, much more compliant with men's desires than they had been before.