

Fool

By John Morressy

When John Morressy died last March, we were fortunate to have a few stories by him in inventory. "Fool," sadly, is the last of them (though we're still hoping some gems will turn up in his papers). It's a poignant and potent fantasy narrated by one of our favorite characters to pass through these pages recently.

By the way, readers should know we have a fine appreciation of John Morressy's work on our Website. Dave Truesdale has begun writing "Off on a Tangent" for us every month. Check it out on the "Departments" page; the December column takes a long look at the Morressy legacy.

* * * *

"Niccolo comes!"

At the cry, revelers crammed with food and sodden with wine cease their gobbling and swilling. They forget their eager lusts and roar with delight when I hobble in, darting in sudden lunges from side to side, wheeling round and round to afford every guest a look at my form and my features and my lopsided gait. Niccolo the fool is the climax of every feast.

Mixed with the shrieks of laughter are cries of horror and disgust. A sensitive few shrink from the sight of me and avert their eyes. I have caused women to faint; and some men, as well, to the delight of their companions.

Such is my welcome, and I glory in it. I was born to be a fool, and I am a master of my calling. And I am something more. Oh, yes, I am much more.

Had I been a shade less hideous, just a trifle less misshapen and ill-made, the midwife would have seen to it that I did not survive to shame my family. But I was plucked from the womb so magnificently ugly, so repellent to the eye, that she held me up by my crooked legs and cried, "Here's gold!"

That old woman was wise in the world's ways. She knew that there were many who would pay well for a fool who so looked his part. I needed no shaping hand to suit me for the motley, no fortunate accident or contorting sickness. I was born fully malformed.

I offended not merely the eye, but the ear as well. When I gave my first cry, the first of many, all those in hearing winced and shuddered, covered their ears, and declared that the devil himself had stuck his snout into our hovel to announce

my birth. And perhaps he had. Perhaps he had.

My parents did not accept the midwife's estimate of my value. Whether they were too impatient, too needy, or simply eager to be free of the sight of me, I cannot say. Whatever the reason, they sold me while I was still a child, not for gold or even silver but for copper, and very little of that. I never saw my family again, to their great relief, I am sure. Certainly to mine.

My value has increased considerably since that day. I have refined my natural gifts and mastered a variety of useful skills. Now I am well rewarded for my work, and my work is varied. I am not always paid to amuse.

I remember little of my early years except the beatings. They were administered as guides to conduct and aids to my instruction, and served to me with greater regularity than my meals. My appearance and my clumsiness made me a handy object for the exercise of my first master's household, where I held a place below the lowliest servant. The beatings ended only when I was sold into the household of a bishop.

He was shocked to learn that I had never been baptized, and horrified when I told him the reason. My parents were simple pious folk who believed in a Heaven of eternal beauty and serenity. Such a place, they explained to my former master as they accepted his coins, could hold no room for such a thing as I, and so they never brought me to the baptismal font.

Or did they fear that I would taint the water?

I entered the bishop's palace on the feast of Saint Nicholas, and was christened with that good saint's name. The bishop was a godly man, severe toward himself but kindly to all others, a man too good for this rats' nest of a world men scabble in. He delivered me from a cruel master and strove to teach me a different way of life. In the bishop's residence I was not an animal to be beaten into docile obedience, worked to death, and then tossed on a dunghill. To the bishop, my outward form did not matter. I was not a possession but the good man's brother in Christ, a child of God with a soul to be saved. I believe he actually saw a kind of beauty in me—a feat achieved by only one person since that time, and that person mad. I have never attempted it myself.

In the bishop's palace I learned that "God" was a word to be spoken in reverence, not in rage. I learned to read and write, and how to conduct myself in the presence of my betters. The palace was a far more desirable place to live than the barnyard, and I strove to be a model pupil. The good bishop also taught me

the tenets of the faith and instructed me in morals. In those areas, though I was careful to give the required responses and display the expected piety in his presence, my progress was somewhat limited.

All in all, the bishop did his best to prepare me for the next world. Unknown to him, I was learning of the attractions of this one, and I was unwilling to depart from it without enjoying a goodly share of them.

In his palace, besides the scholars and the devout, the bishop had men and women with a wide range of worldly experience. He had in his employ some who had been thieves, prostitutes, and murderers. He was aware of their past transgressions, but believed them to be committed to a new life of repentance and atonement. In this he was deceived.

The bishop looked at men and women and saw them as they might be. I saw them as they were. The thieves, prostitutes, and murderers, too, became my teachers, and prepared me well for life this side of the grave. They taught me that we have always time to repent, should we be so inclined, but our time for pleasure and profit is short. We must make the most of our talents, and if opportunities do not come to us, we must create them.

It was from a chance remark of one of the thieves that I first learned of a chamber deep below the palace, a lead-lined vault locked and sealed and barricaded behind a wall of rubble. To it there existed only one key, and that key remained always in the bishop's possession. When I pressed the thief, he would say no more. I knew him to be a man of great daring, yet when I questioned him about the chamber he grew hesitant and evasive. He assured me that it was no more than an idle tale and urged me to dismiss it from my mind.

My curiosity was aroused. No one else in the household had ever made reference to this chamber. Only from an old servant, and at the cost of many tedious hours, did I draw out an account of the chamber and its contents.

Since long before the bishop's time, the vault had been a repository for books of an abominable nature, books so steeped in evil that they were beyond the power of man to destroy. To bury them in the ground would blight the earth; to drown them in the sea would poison the waters; the smoke of their burning would kill every living thing. All this the old servant told me, in fearful whispers.

I thought it wise to profess disbelief, and even to scoff at his tale. Inwardly I became obsessed by the thought of such power resting under my feet in this very palace. I had to possess it.

Thanks to the bishop's tutelage I had become as skilled a reader as any clerk. Now I had a purpose for that skill. Desire to find that chamber, to hold those forbidden books in my hands and glean their wisdom, overmastered me.

I revealed my intention to no one. I knew the value of stealth and patience, and my purpose demanded both in great measure. I knew the palace cellars well, and after much diligent searching I located the chamber. To the unsuspecting eye it was no more than a pile of rubble heaped against a wall, but when I dug, I unearthed a locked iron door, icy to my touch. The chamber was real.

Still I was forced to bide my time. I replaced the concealing rubble and waited. I observed the bishop closely, and eventually I learned where he concealed the key. One night when all the rest slept I entered the vault.

A dead and penetrating cold enveloped me the moment I entered, and a surge of fear nearly overcame me. But I could not turn back, not when those forbidden volumes lay within my reach. My hand trembled as I raised my lantern and scanned the shelves of that cold silent room. Those ancient volumes whispered a promise of power beyond imagining.

I saw books and scrolls of widely varied shapes and sizes. They numbered something more than a hundred. No two were alike. Some of the books were bound in plates of gold embedded with precious stones; others had simple leather covers free of all adornment. Some, I believe, were bound in human flesh. The scrolls too varied in size, from slim as a finger and scarcely longer to the length and thickness of a man's arm.

All these observations I made in great haste. I knew that I must act quickly. Time was limited and my courage was all but gone. I might never have the opportunity of a second visit, even if I dared it. The room grew ever colder, and my fear increased as the cold gripped my spirit. I had only the strength and will to snatch a few volumes and conceal them in some safe place where I might return to study them at leisure.

But many were too heavy to lift; others were sealed by intricate locks or were in languages I could not read. A few shrank from my touch like live things. Terror possessed me completely. I seized a single scroll and fled in panic from the chamber.

I have never again known such fear as I felt that night. In a cold sweat, trembling, my heart racing, I cowered in a far alcove until I had recovered. And

then a change came over me. As if burned out of me by the cold, all fear vanished forever. Never again would I fear anything on this Earth. I still could sense the fear in others, but I did not share it.

Emboldened, I returned to reseal the room and replace the stones that concealed the entrance. When all signs of my visit had been removed, I returned to my chamber and collapsed in utter exhaustion.

When I read the scroll, I found that I had chosen well. It contained a malediction that I might invoke three times to destroy my enemies.

Had I remained in the bishop's palace I might have revisited that chamber and learned much more, but like so many good men, the bishop died in the prime of life, his health broken by years of sacrifice and self-denial. The new bishop was a very different man. He found many of the household unsuitable, myself among them. When I left the palace, the scroll remained behind. Its contents had long been fixed in my memory. Whether it has yet begun to corrupt the soil around its place of concealment, I neither know nor care. I had learned enough.

* * * *

The old bishop admonished me repeatedly to speak only good of the dead. He also urged me to speak the truth. I am therefore in a dilemma about how to refer to my next master, a wealthy merchant. His home was a treasure vault and a prison. He was false to God and men, cruel without cause, and now he is dead.

His death was mysterious and to those who were present, terrifying. It was the first test of my knowledge from the vault; a squandering of power, perhaps—the malediction could now be used but twice more—but a reassuring proof of its efficacy.

It was the master's habit to lock the door of his sleeping chamber against thieves and enemies. His bodyguard, a giant mute named Orso who could kill a man with one blow, always slept before the door. On the night of the master's death, all in the household were awakened by his shrill cries and the sound of a violent struggle. Another voice could be heard within the room, and while none could agree on the language it spoke, all agreed on the terror it inspired in them. The door could not be opened, and resisted all Orso's efforts to break it down. Yet at dawn it swung wide, and those who entered saw a sight that sickened them. The master's blood spattered walls and floor, and his body lay torn and rent as if by the claws of a great beast. Little remained of his face but the eyes, which were fixed in a look of horror.

I was pleased at these results. Now I knew the power of the malediction. Two uses remained, and I resolved to use them prudently.

I recount what I was told, for I was not present at the master's death. I had planned carefully. It occurred on a night when two other servants and I were away on an errand of some importance. My role in his death was never suspected.

The master's sudden passing caused great disorder in the household. Another servant and I took the opportunity to fill our pockets and set out on our own.

* * * *

My education now took a different turn. I already knew how difficult the world is for one whom others consider fair game for their sport. I had acquired a powerful defense, but could not employ it lightly.

Now I learned simpler ways that a man, though misshapen and lacking a protector, can be a match for the strong.

My companion Giulio and I lived for a time on our late master's ducats and when they were gone, by theft. We might have continued in this manner until we were hanged, but the unfortunate lad had a hot temper. He died in a foolish brawl. With him fell two others, one of them a member of a troupe of traveling players. I saw an opportunity. The very next day I joined their company.

The bishop had instructed me in rhetoric and logic, and trained my memory. I was skilled in dispute and ready in repartee. From fellow servants I had learned to juggle and become something of an acrobat. My talents improved with practice, and with my addition, the company prospered. My lot improved. I had no need to call upon my darker power. I knew how to use a weapon and had companions who would come to my aid. I had money in my purse, and could purchase meat and drink and the companionship of women who treated me, for a time, as a man like all others. But the world held more, and I meant to have my full share.

One night, at a taverna that welcomed players and charged them dearly for the privilege of drinking poor wine and eating worse food, a man in elegant but somber dress entered into conversation with me. I was wary, as one must always be of strangers, especially those who are clearly superior to the surrounding company; but he was well groomed and well spoken, and spent freely. I anticipated some profit in listening to him. We discussed commonplaces for a

time, and since I am aware that people do not speak to me out of kindness or fellow-feeling, I grew impatient for him to broach the subject that had brought him into my company. At last he asked, "Do you like the life of a traveler?"

"I have little choice," I replied.

"Life in a great household is more comfortable and rewarding."

"I am certain it is. And it is better to be rich than poor." He smiled and nodded, and when he did not speak, I went on, "What great household would welcome me, sir? Good men cross themselves at sight of me, and women miscarry. If I tend animals, they pine away. Put me in the kitchen and the milk will sour. Stand me by the fire and it burns blue and stinks of sulphur. I have heard all the jokes others make at my expense, sir, and require none from you."

His placid expression did not change. He lifted his palms in a pacifying gesture. "I do not joke. I offer a possibility."

"Offer it, then."

"You might be a powerful man's jester. You have the necessary skills."

"You are polite, sir. Whatever I do, I am already a jest to all who see me."

"Commoners and rabble," he said. "They toss you a few pennies and then curse themselves for spendthrifts. Your skills are wasted on them. A great man's fool eats good food and sleeps in a soft bed. He wears fine clothes. He has a protector. A good master can reward you generously if you please him."

"And where am I to find this benefactor?"

He smiled a tight, satisfied smile, like one who holds the answer to a child's riddle. "In the palazzo that lies not half an hour's walk from this inn, on the grand piazza of the city. My master's fool was killed in a quarrel among the servants, and he seeks a man to replace him."

"I have no wish to be stabbed by some angry kitchen boy," I said.

"The Count Ridolfo is a just man. He made an example of the murderer. Such an incident will not recur," said the stranger.

"And how will my lot improve?"

“Pour out that ditch water and try this,” he said, pushing before me a leather bottle from which he had been drinking.

I emptied my cup on the floor and refilled it with wine from his bottle. It was better than the best from the bishop’s cellar.

“The Count’s servants drink it at table. Their food is as good as their drink,” he said.

“And they sleep in soft beds under a dry roof. Tell me, do they dress in silks and furs?”

He looked my shabby false finery up and down and said, “Their livery is somewhat more pleasing to the eye than yours, and much cleaner.”

“Why do you offer me such good things, sir? Are you my guardian angel? My patron saint?”

“Not an angel, still less a saint,” he said, still smiling. “I am the *fattore* of Count Ridolfo. My duty is to keep the household running smoothly. We have lost a fool. I saw you perform and decided you would be an admirable replacement. Come to the palazzo in the morning, and say you come at Benedetto’s invitation.”

I had learned long ago not to trust anyone. But that night I gave his offer much thought. My occult learning was useful, but dangerous to use; the safety of a great household was desirable. I was weary of traveling, of the bickering of these players, of coaxing coins from peasants who were nearly as ugly as I and as dull as oxen. The life of a powerful man’s fool could be no worse. And thus I came to a new calling.

* * * *

As I walked to the palazzo of Count Ridolfo the following morning I heard no more than the usual taunts of street loafers and young idlers. The sight of my weapons discouraged anything more than catcalls from a safe distance. Benedetto’s name admitted me to the palazzo, and he saw to it that I was quickly installed in the household. By nightfall I had met most of the servants.

Only one incident marred my arrival, and I quickly turned it to my advantage. When I was introduced in the servants’ quarters a loud red-faced fellow whom I could see at once was the sort who was always eager to put a newcomer in his place looked up from where he sat and said to his fellows, “Here’s a beauty. What shall we call him? I say we christen him ‘Malfatto.’ What

say you?" When no one objected, he raised his cup and said, "Come, Malfatto, and receive your new name."

I laughed along with the others as I went to his side, my hand extended in friendship. The laughter stopped when I locked my fingers in his and bent back his hand until he slid from his seat to the floor, whimpering for release.

I let him plead for a time, and then I leant closer and said softly in his ear, "My name is Niccolo. Tell that to everyone. Say 'Malfatto' in my hearing again and it will be your dying word."

I gave him a hard kick in the ribs to impress my words on his memory and then helped him to his feet. He welcomed me by name.

The incident had the desired effect on my fellow servants. Unfortunately for my antagonist, he chose to discomfort me in other ways. I might have employed the power of the scroll to dispose of him, but it was not necessary. He died in a fall from the bell tower.

Before my first week's end I was measured for my livery. Soon I was wearing the finest outfit I had ever possessed, of excellent materials perfectly fitted to the contours of my body. For a full month I busied myself learning the ways of the household before I was admitted to Count Ridolfo's presence.

There had been much coming and going in the palazzo during those days, solemn faces and wary glances among the family, and among the servants much speculation about the cause of this tension. Rumors abounded, but no knowledge. As a newcomer, I was the least informed of all; and so I waited, made myself agreeable to everyone I met—it is a skill one acquires—and before many days learned the cause of all the stir.

Word had come from a trustworthy informant that a rival family planned an attack on the Count and his sons. I could learn no more, and did not seek to do so. It is best for the fool to play the fool until the proper moment.

I was summoned to Count Ridolfo's private chamber late one night. He was with four men, two of whom I recognized as his sons. This was my first sight of my master, and I found him formidable.

Count Ridolfo had a large leonine head with a great crown of white hair. His face was square, his mouth narrow, and his jaw prominent. His nose had been broken and inexpertly set, and a thin scar ran down his right cheek. That face, cold and hard as stone, was a silent warning. His displeasure was plain to see. This was

a man whom ordinary men might fear, with good reason. He would be very useful to me.

He bade me approach, stopping me a few paces away with a gesture. Count Ridolfo permitted no one to get close to him—a precaution he had adopted after a cousin gave him the scar on his cheek. He looked me over, hands on his hips. He circled me slowly, like a man studying a work of art.

“So you are my fool,” he said.

“No, my lord. I am your good angel,” I said, bowing and making my most hideous face.

He did not smile. “A fool and a liar. You will thrive in this city.”

One of the others, who stood apart, kept his gaze on the floor. No man spoke or looked at his companions. I could taste the fear in the room, and it made clear to me what I must do.

“Advise me, fool,” said the Count. “Your advice can be no worse than some I receive. I have enemies who plot to murder me and my sons. I know the identities of all those involved in the plot. What shall I do?”

“Act like a man. Kill them all, and have it whispered everywhere that your hand has done the deed,” I said.

“Have I another choice?”

“Yes. Do nothing, and there will be two fools in this household.”

He did not respond for a time. When he spoke at last, there was no anger in his voice. “You speak boldly.”

I spread my arms to display my livery. “I belong to a great house, not a nunnery. Why should I speak softly, and counsel meekness?” His sons exchanged an approving glance. One of the other men nodded. The fourth gave me a quick hateful glance.

“Some members of a great house would,” the Count said. “Tell me, is a man a fool to take a fool’s advice?”

“Sometimes a man is a fool to heed a wise man and sometimes he is wise to listen to a fool. It depends on the man, the fool, and the advice, my lord.”

He looked at me for a time in silence, then said, "Entertain us tomorrow at dinner. And now go, before you destroy our appetites." He dismissed me with a flick of his hand. I backed from his presence, bowing with exaggerated deference to all. I had been summoned to humiliate someone, that much was clear, and now had an enemy in the house. I hoped I had made the right one. The right enemy can be as useful as a dozen good friends. He keeps a man alert.

As it happens, my enemy did me neither harm nor good. He was seen no more in the palazzo after that night.

Count Ridolfo looked upon life as a serious matter. Even my most grotesque antics could not bring a smile to that cold face. He gave a nod of approval at my juggling and my tumbling, but encouraged no banter. For all he cared, I might as well have been mute. His sons were easier to amuse. Andrea, the eldest, emulated his father. He seldom smiled, but he often murmured, "Well said, well said," at a satiric observation. The younger ones laughed at my acrobatics and once the Count had left us, reveled in my bawdry.

There was no bawdry in the Count's presence, nor when the ladies were within hearing. The Contessa spent her waking moments in prayer. I believe she prayed even in her few hours of sleep.

Maddalena, the youngest child and only daughter, was the darling of the family. In her, the distinctive family features were gentled and softened. She smiled often, and though fully fifteen years old, was still capable of childlike enthusiasms and affections. Her cats, her dog, her monkey, the birds who came to her window and fed from her hand, all enjoyed her generous love. From the very first time she saw me she was capable of looking at me without shrinking. Unlike the rest of her family, she was fond of my songs and tales of love and chivalry, sometimes stopping outside the kitchen to listen as attentively as any ignorant kitchen wench whenever I chose to entertain the servants of an evening.

She attended Mass every morning, accompanied by a few servants and one or more of her brothers. I was sometimes made part of the company. While the brothers ogled the ladies and exchanged with their friends accounts of their previous night's escapades, Maddalena knelt with bowed head, praying for us all. Once we left those cool echoing spaces and the church doors closed behind us, she became a carefree young lady once again. She was an angel, but human, fully human.

Her marriage to the son of a leading family was to take place in the spring.

Like all marriages of wealth and power in this city, it was first and foremost an alliance, arranged with the scrupulous care one might give to a treaty between great powers. In truth, that is what it was. The family of her betrothed, landowners and bankers, were wealthier than that of Count Ridolfo, but did not enjoy his stature and his influence. My master had three times been a Lord Prior; his brother had been elected once to the Signory and served as one of the Twelve.

Jacopo, the betrothed, was a splendid-looking animal, tall and well-formed, with regular features and deep brown hair that curled at his shoulders. His voice was pleasing to the ear. He smiled easily and often, and his wit coaxed smiles and laughter from every company. I amused myself with the conceit that the Creator, having introduced me to the household, now wished to restore balance in our little universe by adding one who was my opposite—at least in appearance.

Jacopo was in truth a beautiful beast, and Maddalena was enchanted by him. She cooed and moaned and sighed over his smile, his voice, his hair, and his eyes, repeated his most banal pleasantries as if they were Holy Writ, and recited over and over the clumsy verses he sent her until the entire household knew them by heart. She wearied everyone with her incessant praise of her Jacopo.

I dutifully echoed her, but set my bounds: I would not praise his eyes. They held a warning of danger to come. Deep within them was the glint of hunger. This youth whose person might have obtained for him whatever he desired, or, that failing, whose wealth enabled him to purchase what he could not seize outright, had the avaricious gaze of the peasant who wants a thing because it exists, because another enjoys it, simply because it is not his.

I would have given Jacopo a family crest more fitting than the one he boasted. I would have a gaping mouth and two outstretched hands gules on a field sable, the motto the single word *desidero* thrice repeated. Jacopo had the face of an angel and the soul of a greedy ape.

I had no part in the wedding celebrations. I was lent for a time to Count Sigonio, a friend of my master's who had expressed admiration for my talents and was at the time in want of a fool. I believe, too, that both families feared that the sight of my face at the wedding would assure that the first child of this union would be a monster.

I had once seen the fool of Count Sigonio, a zany dwarf. He was known as Fratellino for his custom of donning a miniature friar's habit and delivering blasphemous sermons to entertain the company. He was a gifted mimic who could perfectly ape the manners and speech of anyone he met, to the delight of

the onlookers. Alas for Fratellino, not everyone appreciated his gifts. His body was found one morning on the riverbank. It was said that he fell from a bridge and drowned during a drunken revel. Believe what you will.

In my stay with Count Sigonio I confined my mockery to my own appearance, and was much praised and generously rewarded. I also observed and listened, and returned to my master with useful information.

Count Ridolfo's enemies, the Forzos, had been guests at Maddalena's wedding and had presented the couple with a richly ornamented gold and silver bowl, the work of one of the city's leading artisans. They had not abandoned their plan to murder the Count and his sons, merely postponed it to a more suitable moment, and in the meantime they pretended friendship. My master responded in kind, playing the gracious host, the grateful parent, the friend; in their eyes, the dupe. He bided his time. He had his own plans, and in these I was able to serve him well.

It was clear that the Forzos must die if my master and his family were to live safely and prosper in the city. But when they were gone, other enemies equally powerful would remain. The solution to this problem was obvious to me, though it did not occur to others; if it did, they were hesitant to offer it. I was fortunate to possess a resource that others did not enjoy, and this was the proper time to make use of it.

I now had freer access to Count Ridolfo, and when the moment seemed propitious, I suggested to him that it would be well to dispose of as many of his enemies as possible at a single stroke. His stony face came very close to a smile at my suggestion.

"What does my fool advise?" he asked.

I looked at the others in the room and said, "First of all, secrecy."

He dismissed all but Andrea, and they left the chamber without a word. "You trust no one," he said when the door closed behind the last man.

"Caution is the strongest armor," I said.

"Your advice."

"A great banquet, the Forzos as honored guests. It must be held the Monday after next."

“And why then?” he asked.

“Because two days following, they dine with their friends and allies the Dati.”

The Count and his son exchanged a quick glance. This alliance was unknown to them.

I quickly went on, “The Forzos will die before they reach home that night, and all will say—with a little encouragement—that they have been poisoned by the treachery of the Dati. The Dati will be punished for their crime. You will see to that. And you will be rid of both enemies.”

“Can you do this?” the Count asked.

“They will be poisoned on the night they dine with us, as will you and I and all who sit at table. But I will administer the antidote to those you select.”

“So the Forzos die, and the Dati are accused. An admirable plan.” He reflected for a time, then said, “You would have me trust you with my life.”

“As I trust you with mine. I will take the poison too, my lord. A double dose, for your double assurance.”

Again he reflected, but this time only briefly. Then with a sharp bark of mirthless laughter he said, “It will be so.”

And so it was—though not precisely as I had described it. The feast was splendid, the celebration long and hearty. Every member of both our houses attended. I kept the company in an uproar with my quips and antics, and all were merry.

When every belly had been filled to repletion and the last kisses and embraces and vows of everlasting friendship had been sworn, the doors were closed and locked behind our departing guests and every shutter firmly secured. All merriment ceased and we hastened to purge ourselves.

For all in our household, purging was unnecessary; no one had been poisoned. I intended to dispose of our enemies by means of my darker knowledge. But it was essential for my safety that all believed themselves poisoned. I had no wish to die at the stake. The Count would protect an assassin, but even he would not defend a practitioner of the black arts.

I conscientiously made certain that all those who had sat at table gagged and retched and heaved their sides to disgorge the sumptuous meats, the excellent wines, the fruits and the sweets and the sauces. When we all had emptied our bellies, I personally administered an unpleasant-tasting mixture which I presented as the antidote, and watched them gulp it down eagerly. Their grimaces made a most amusing spectacle, well worth the brief discomfort I was forced to undergo with them.

The servants had been kept in ignorance of the plot. As always, they snatched what choice bits they could from the platters and ate heartily of what remained, and so I made sure to season their next day's meals with my antidote, and to do so in Andrea's presence.

Next day the city talked of nothing but the friendship between our house and the Forzos. Two days after, when that family were found dead and bloated in their palazzo, swollen tongues bulging from their mouths, all were busy babbling of the treachery of the Dati.

My master led the cry for justice and saw that it was administered swiftly and sternly. He commissioned a magnificent memorial to his murdered friends. All in all, the Forzo affair was a great victory for him. For me, the second use of my power was a triumph. I, the Count's fool, became his trusted advisor.

* * * *

For two years and more, I was called upon to do little more than entertain his guests and from time to time, visit a friend's house. I did my work to the satisfaction of all, and needed no exercise of my special knowledge, which pleased me. Only one malediction remained, and I had no wish to use it prematurely.

Life was easy and pleasant. So easy was it that I began to grow bored.

On the occasion of their third anniversary, Maddalena and her husband came to the Count's palazzo for a prolonged visit, bringing their little son, Leonardo. He was a healthy, vigorous child with his father's features and his mother's nature. He attached himself to me at once, to his mother's delight and his father's disgust, but even Jacopo smiled at our joint antics—more, I suspect, to display his even white teeth than to express his pleasure.

Maddalena was already great with their second child, and Jacopo played the role of solicitous husband on every occasion, keeping always by her side, whispering to her, taking her arm, gazing on her fondly in company. They seemed

a happy couple.

She came to my chamber in the dead of night. I awoke at the sound of someone at the door, but it was so faint a sound that at first I thought it a cat or a rat brushing against the door as it passed. Then came a soft rhythmic tapping.

I armed myself and moved silently to the door. There I waited. Again came the soft tapping and then my name, in a whisper.

I knew the voice at once. For an instant I was too astonished to respond. She had come to me in the night, to my chamber.

Then she whispered my name again, "Niccolo, Niccolo, help me."

I opened the door and she slipped in as if in flight. She fell to her knees, sobbing, and I stooped to lift her. She threw her arms around me and pulled herself close. I drew away and quickly shut the door. If she were found here it could mean death for us both.

"My lady, is there some danger?"

"He is a beast. A monster from Hell!"

"Do you speak of your husband?"

She clutched my hand in both of hers. "Jacopo is a monster. I have married a monster."

"The fairest man in the city, and you call him a monster? I am the monster, my lady."

She pressed her head against my chest. Sobbing, she said, "No, Niccolo, you are good. Within, you are good, and kind. I have always seen that. His ugliness is deep inside him, hidden from all eyes. Only those closest to him know of it, and they can tell no one, for no one will believe them. Even my own family see only the surface."

"What would you have me do?"

"Help me. Please, Niccolo, help me! He will never change. He has beaten me, and I fear what he will do to our son."

Her bare white arms and her face bore no signs of abuse. "My lady, I see no

marks.”

“When we learned that I am again with child, he stopped striking me, but he is as cruel as ever in other ways, every way he can be. Help me, Niccolo, I beg you.”

“Your father, your brothers—will they do nothing?”

“My father will not listen, and I cannot tell my brothers the things he has done to me. I am too ashamed. My mother would only tell me to be a better wife. You are the only one I can trust. You must help me. I will do anything you ask, only help me.”

I was astonished. I knew that not even sorcery could make a woman look on me with favor, but I truly believe I might have had Maddalena then and there, in my own bed.

I did not yield to the temptation. Even the pleasure of cuckolding the strutting Jacopo was not worth this risk. And I trusted no one with my life, not even the gentle Maddalena.

“Return to your chamber,” I said. “I will help you. You must give me time.”

She embraced me. “You are an angel. My faithful angel.”

I lay awake for much of the night, pondering her words. My thoughts were not angelic. *You are good and kind, Niccolo. Within, you are good.* Though the matter was grave, her innocence was almost comical.

Ridding her of Jacopo posed no problem. I had often entertained myself with fantasies of his murder. I knew I must move with care. Maddalena could be given no reason to suspect my hand in his death. I believe that even had she proof, she would hesitate to betray me, instead condemning herself for inciting me to the deed. Such was her nature. But that innocent and pious nature might undo us both. In time, she might come to regret her rash words. She might even forgive Jacopo, and recant her plea to me. And what if she should confess the revelation to him?

The danger was equally great whether I chose to act on my promise or to ignore it, so my decision was easily made.

Jacopo would die, soon, and by my own hand. My remaining malediction would not be thrown away on a jackal. The deed would give me as much pleasure

as it gave relief to Maddalena.

Their child was a second son as beautiful as the first. So everyone agreed, and I must accept their assessment. I am a poor judge of beauty. I saw Maddalena one day about a month after the birth, and she had the expression of a hunted creature. Others seemed not to notice.

Jacopo died during carnival. His body was found in a narrow passage near the brothels. He was apparently the victim of a quarrel or a robbery. His face had been disfigured with particular savagery.

I had planned it carefully. On the evening of his death I was entertaining the Count's guests at a banquet that lasted well into the morning hours. I had moved freely among the guests, joking and laughing, making sure that every guest was befuddled by wine and unaware of the hour, but conscious of my constant presence. Jacopo occupied me for no more than a quarter of an hour, and no one was aware of my brief absence. All who had been present agreed that I was particularly amusing that evening.

Our city is not shocked easily, but the violence of this murder was the topic of every conversation for some time. My master saw to that. Who could have perpetrated so vicious an attack on handsome, jovial Jacopo, adoring young husband and loving father of two fine sons, was the subject for much speculation and some fear. The severest and most searching inquiries were demanded by Count Ridolfo, who vowed to seek out the murderer of his beloved son-in-law. He did not succeed.

My master judged it wise, for her safety and the care of her sons, that Maddalena return to the family's palazzo. Jacopo's family dared make no objection, and soon she was among us once again. I became the guardian and playmate of Leonardo and his younger brother, and saw Maddalena daily, but our nighttime conversation was never mentioned.

My master summoned me one day to discuss a dinner to be given in honor of certain city officials. When we had settled the details, he said, "Are you content in my service?"

Such a question came unexpectedly from Count Ridolfo, to whom the contentment of others was a matter of small importance. But I did not hesitate. "I am very content. I hope I have been useful."

"I suspect you have been useful in some ways I do not know, and do not

care to know.” He paused, and I did not respond. Before I could speak he went on, “You never ask for money. Have you no needs, or do you steal all you require?”

“I serve a great family. I am well fed, comfortably housed, and richly dressed. I live in a grand palazzo and have servants of my own. Everyone in the household is generous to me, as are your friends in the homes I visit. What more could I want?”

“Such contentment is a blessing. But a loyal servant deserves a reward.” He pushed a purse across the table. “Be ready when I require future service.”

In the years that followed I have had no need of my occult knowledge. On every occasion I proved myself worthy of Count Ridolfo’s trust and generosity by my wits alone. The time came when he had great need of a faithful servant, for a series of heavy blows fell upon him. His youngest son, Paolo, was killed in a street brawl. Paolo was an idle, foolish fellow, too quick to perceive an insult where none existed, and he paid dearly for his pride. Within the year the two older sons were swept to their deaths in an avalanche while on a mission to France. All his sons had died childless.

Of all his children, only Maddalena remained, and she was no longer the carefree child who had left to marry Jacopo. Now a woman of twenty-two at the height of her beauty, she had not yet remarried. The death of that posturer haunted her. She blotted his cruelty from her memory and persuaded herself that they had had a loving marriage. Her smiles were seen no more. She became as pious as her mother, surpassing even that gaunt and spectral old woman in her devotions.

More and more, Count Ridolfo placed his hope in his grandsons and his trust in me, I became their accepted guardian and teacher.

I should have been wary when Maddalena began to seek my advice about “our” children. When one day she addressed me in private as “Jacopo,” I let it pass as a lapse of thought or a slip of the tongue. But when she came to my room that night, slipped into my bed, called me husband and coaxed me to her side with fond names, I lost my wits.

I was powerless. My strength, my cunning, my dark power were all useless to me. I did not know what to do. My life was in her hands. If I turned her away, what wild accusations might she make? She need do no more than reveal our conversation on that night so many years ago to destroy me. And yet if I played

the role she had cast for me, the consequences could only lead to disaster.

But she was beautiful, so beautiful. She gave herself to me eagerly. And the flesh—even a fool's misshapen flesh—is weak.

After that night she came to me regularly, and in our moments together she always called me her Jacopo, praised my beauty and spoke lovingly of our years of married happiness. Yet before others she behaved toward me as to a servant.

She knew the truth but could not admit her guilt to herself. Her mind had divided itself in two. One part denied Jacopo's death, telling her that her husband lived, that she was a loyal and loving wife, innocent of all wrongdoing. But the other part knew all that had happened as clearly as if she had witnessed the deed.

On the night when she whispered to me that she was to have our third child, I knew that the masquerade could not continue. I had known the love of a woman, a mad, beautiful woman who looked at me and saw the ghost of the handsome husband whose death she had bought about. Now it must end.

* * * *

I used a simple poison in a goblet of wine. Maddalena was discovered kneeling at her prie-dieu, her face buried in her hands, as one in meditation or prayer. She showed no sign of suffering. Her eyes were closed as if in peaceful sleep, and her face bore a faint smile. She had always been too good, too innocent for this world. I felt a certain satisfaction to know that I had ushered her gently into a world where she would be welcomed. I had sent others to a worse place.

This last blow fell heavily on Count Ridolfo and left its mark. The deaths of his sons had hardened him; Maddalena's death seemed to melt away his manhood in a day. His audacity in conception, his decisiveness in action, his pride in everything left him, and he became suddenly an old man, a fearful prisoner in a world of prowling dangers. But he is useful to me still, and I serve him well.

Since the Contessa's death, not a year following her daughter's, I have been his sole companion and adviser, always at his side, and with us the two grandsons, the only heirs to this great house. Leonardo thrives, and his grandfather dotes on him. He resembles his father in many ways. Giorgio is a frail and sickly boy, but clever, very clever. He will survive. I still play the fool for them, and from time to time I am called upon to amuse my master and his guests, for his banquets are as lavish as ever, though less frequent and more selective. Even now, broken and brought low within, he is too important a man to withdraw from

the world completely and give himself up to solitude and sorrow, still too proud to show feeling.

He has his wealth and power and influence, and he has his grandsons, and his faithful Niccolo to watch over them when he is no longer able. They are safely in my hands.

As for me, my needs are few, and the Count is generous, most generous. He serves me well.

Even now, he is a strong protector. I fear no enemy. I know that no man in this world is ever truly safe from betrayal, injury, and the assassin's hand; but I know too that the man who harms me will be punished in ways beyond imagining. I husband my final malediction carefully.

For the present, I am content. As for the future, who can say what may be?

Only a fool would dare.