

THE LAST DAY OF ARETINO'S CAPRICIOUS
CONVERSATIONS, IN WHICH NANNA TELLS
ANTONIA ABOUT THE LIFE OF THE WHORES.

Day was just breaking when the two women got out of bed. They put some food prepared the night before in a large wicker hamper, set it on the maid's head, and sent her ahead, carrying in her hand a shaggy bottle of Corso wine. Antonia clutched under her arm a tablecloth and three napkins, so they could eat the food they were taking to the vineyard in the proper manner. When they got there, Antonia spread the cloth over a stone table that stood beneath a pergola with a well close by, and the good maid opened the hamper, first taking out the salt and setting it on the table, then laying out the napkins and the knives. When the Sun had revealed himself to everyone, to avoid having him eat together with them, they hurried to finish the meal, toying at the end with half a butt of mozzarella cheese. Then they let the maid stuff herself with the leftovers, even the wine and cheese, though beforehand Nanna ordered her to be sure to put everything away. The two women then sauntered twice around the vineyard, and after the stroll Nanna sat down with Antonia at the same spot where they had sat on the days before. After a slight pause Antonia said to Nanna: "As I dressed this morning I thought how splendid it would be if someone were to write down all your stories and tell the life of priests, monks, and laymen so that the women you mention could hear and laugh at them, in the same way these men laugh at us who, just to appear

...e, provide them with so many criticisms of ourselves. I swear that I can hear the stories right now—I don't know who's writing them down, but my ears are buzzing, so it must be true."

NANNA It's bound to be. But let's come to how my mother brought me to Rome.

ANTONIA Yes, let's.

NANNA If I remember rightly, we got to Rome on the eve of St. Peter's feast day, and God knows I enjoyed the illuminations and the fireworks shooting up from Castel Sant'Angelo, a regular bombardment. Then I heard them play the bagpipes and saw the great crowd packing the streets of the Ponte, Borgo, and Tranchi districts.

ANTONIA Where did you stay the first night?

NANNA In Torre di Nona, in a rented room all covered with drapes. We had been living there for eight days when the landlady, who was very fond of me because I looked so lovely, passed the word on to a courtier. The very next day you should have seen all the men who walked by, faltering like reined-in horses, staring at our building and cursing my mother, who wouldn't let them see me as they wished. I stood behind a shutter, and even when I opened it, peeping out for an instant, I would bang it closed immediately. Though I was certainly pretty, those lightning glimpses of my charms made me even more alluring; all this byplay only intensified their craving to see me. Soon the talk all over Rome was about this strange young woman who had just come to town; and since men always love new things, as you know, a whole procession of them rushed to get a look at me. They rapped at the door so often that the landlady never got a moment's rest. You can be sure that they promised her the moon if she would only hand me over to them, and that my wise mother (who taught me all I have done, all I am doing, and all I shall ever do in the future)

wouldn't listen to a word of it. "So you think I'm one of those women, do you?" she cried. "God would like to see my daughter ruined. I come from noble stock, I'll have you know, and even if we've had our bad times, we've got enough left, thank God, so we can still manage." Of course such remarks only served to increase my reputation as a beauty. Have you ever seen a sparrow perching at a window of a granary? He pecks up ten grains of wheat and flits off; then, after staying away for a while, he comes back to the booty with two more sparrows, flies off again, and returns with four, then ten, then thirty, and finally a huge flock. That's just how my panting suitors swarmed around my house, trying to poke their beaks into my granary, while all the time I, who couldn't get my fill of watching these courtiers, almost went blind squinting through the slits in the shutter, staring at the elegant spectacle of all those noblemen in their velvet and satin capes, gold chains around their necks, some mounted on horses that glistened like mirrors, gliding by as soft as silk with their servants at the stirrups, in which they put only the tips of their boots, holding their pocket Petrarchs and reciting verses with affected nods and grimaces.

Occasionally one of my suitors would halt in front of the window where I was peeping and say: "Lady, would you be so murderous as to allow so many of your servants to die?" At this I would push the shutter open a trifle and then let it fall back, give a loud snicker and run inside. And they'd shout: "I kiss your lady's hand," or: "I swear to God, you are terribly cruel!" and then they would leave.

ANTONIA Today I'm hearing lovely things.

NANNA Well, that's how matters stood when one day my sagacious mother decided to put me on display, though pretending that it was all by accident. She dressed me in a purple satin gown, neat and simple, without sleeves, and braided my hair in a circle around

my head so you would have sworn that it wasn't hair but a silken skein laced with threads of gold.

ANTONIA And why did she dress you without sleeves?

NANNA So I could show off my arms, which were white as snowflakes. After having made me wash in her own toilet water, which was rather pungent, yet taking good care not to smear my face with the slightest touch of cosmetics, she had me stand at the window just when the bulk of the courtiers was going by. When I appeared, you would have thought that the star had shone in the eyes of the Magi, every one of those men seemed so dazzled and delighted by the sight of me. They let their reins fall on their horses' necks and gazed at me with rapture, as prisoners gaze at a ray of sunlight. Lifting their heads and staring at me spell-bound, they all looked like those little beasts that come from the other end of the world and live on air.

ANTONIA You mean chameleons?

NANNA That's right. They impregnated me with their stares, precisely like those birds that look like sparrows but aren't impregnate the clouds with their feathers.

ANTONIA Nighthawks?

NANNA By heavens, you're right—nighthawks.

ANTONIA And while they were all ogling you, what were you doing?

NANNA I affected the modesty of a nun, stared straight at them with the self-confidence of a wife, and all the while made the gestures of a whore.

ANTONIA Marvelous!

NANNA After I had been on show for about three-quarters of an hour, just as they started cracking jokes and getting witty, my mother came to the window, let herself be seen for a moment as though to say: "This is my daughter," and made me leave. So they were left gaping and gasping like fish brought to shore by the scoop of a net, flopping about like barbels and

carp suddenly hauled out of the water. That very night we heard the door being knocked. The landlady went down, and my mother sneaked up behind her to hear what the man who knocked had to say. The man whose face was wrapped in his mantle, asked: "Who is the girl who stood at the window?" "The daughter of a noblewoman from another city," the landlady answered, "and from what I can gather, her father was killed in the wars between the Guelphs and Ghibellines. So the poor woman fled to Rome with the few things she could snatch up when she escaped." My mother had rehearsed her in advance in all these little fibs.

ANTONIA How clever!

NANNA On hearing this, the disguised man said: "Is it possible to speak to this noble lady?" "Absolutely not," the landlady retorted. "She refuses to talk to anyone." Then, in a whisper, he asked her whether I was a virgin. "A virgin to the marrow," she replied. "All she ever does is chew on Hail Marys." "She who chews Hail Marys will spit out Our Fathers," he retorted, and began presumptuously to mount the stairs. But she was quick to stop that. Then the courtier said: "Do me at least this kindness. Tell the lady that when she agrees to talk to a man, you will give her such a wonderful gift that she will bless you for the rest of her days." She assured him that she would and bid him goodnight. Then she went upstairs, though taking her good time about it, and finally came to see us. "You can bet on it," she said. "Nobody knows better than drunks where to find good red wine. It seems that they've picked up your daughter's scent; these courtier-setters flush out the quail right away. I tell you this because one of them has been here in person and asked me to arrange a meeting with you." "No, no!" my mother cried. "That's out." The landlady, who had a serpentine tongue, said: "The first mark of a prudent woman is knowing how to grab her good luck, whenever God happens to send it. He's a man who can load

you down with gold." Adding: "Think it over," she left. The next morning she gave her argument further force with the help of a well-laden table, and my mother, being a good buyer of advice and a shrewd husbander of her own interests, wound up by coming around to her point of view. So she promised to listen to our friend, who imagined that he was going to unpack pure French wool when he slept with me. He was sent for, and after swearing a thousand oaths and offering a thousand assurances, he put a down payment on my virginity, promising me everything from Rome to its opposite.

ANTONIA Wonderful!

NANNA Not to prolong the story, the agreed-upon night arrived. After finishing a supper which could have passed for a banquet and of which I tasted less than ten bites, chewing those with a prim, pursed mouth, and drinking only half a glass of watered-down wine in twenty dainty sips, without a word I allowed myself to be led to the landlady's bedroom, which she had let us use for the night in exchange for the glint of a ducat. I had scarcely stepped into it when the gentleman locked the door, not even wanting anyone to help him undress; in fact he quickly did it himself, jumped into bed, and tried to tame me with the sweetest line of gab in this world. "I shall do and give you so much," he kept saying, "that you won't have to envy the greatest courtesan in Rome." Finding it unbearable that I took so long to get into bed with him, he jumped out and yanked my stockings off my legs, though I put up a stiff fight. He got back into bed again; and when I did too, he turned to the wall so I wouldn't have the embarrassment of being seen in my shift. Then he shouted at me: "Don't do it! Don't do it!" but I doused the lamp anyway. When at last I was settled in bed, he swooped down on me with the avidity of a mother throwing herself on her son whom she has mistakenly mourned as dead. That's how he kissed me

too, hugging me tightly in his arms. I had cupped my hands over my harp, which was already very well tuned, wriggling and squirming to show that I was yielding to him against my will; and though I even allowed him to touch my organ, when he tried to ram his spindle into my distaff I balked. "My soul, my hope," he begged, "don't move around so; lie still. If I hurt you, you can kill me." And that's how it went: I standing my ground, he begging and pleading, and as he did, giving me sly pokes with his instrument that always went wild, until he was exhausted, shattered. Finally, laying his weapon in my hand, he said: "Go ahead and put it in yourself. I won't move a muscle." Almost weeping, I shrieked: "What is this huge thing? Do other men have such enormous things? So you want to split me in half with it, do you?" After I got this off my chest, I lay still for a bit, and just when he was nearly inside of me, I jerked away and left him high and dry, all dripping with passion. Now he became desperate and his pleadings turned into threats, while he continued to jab it savagely at my middle. "I swear by my body," he gasped, "and by my blood, I'll split your throat, I'll strangle you." And he clutched my throat and squeezed, but gently. Then he began pleading again, and so fervently that I took the position he wanted me to; but just as he was thrusting his bread-shovel into my oven, I jolted him off again. That did it: he snatched his nightgown to put it on again and get out of bed; he was completely fed up. "Come," I cooed. "Come back." Hearing these words, his rage simmered down. He kissed me quite happily and said: "You won't feel it any more than the bite of a fly. You'll see how true it is. Watch how softly I do it." So at last I let him put a third of his bean into my pod; then I left him in the lurch. He went berserk, huddled at the side of the bed, pushing his head forward and his ass up in the air, bending his legs under him, and the lust which he had wanted me to satisfy he relieved with

his own hand. After doing to himself what he had wanted to do to me, he got up, dressed, and began pacing up and down the room until the night, which I had forced him to spend like sparrowhawk, came to an end, leaving him with a bitter look on his face. In fact he looked like a gambler who had lost all his money and his sleep besides. And cursing as only a man can curse who has been deserted by his mistress, he opened the window of the room and, leaning on the sill with his hand on his chin, gazed at the Tiber, which seemed to be laughing at him for the way he had pulled at his bat. All the time that he was brooding I was sleeping. When I opened my eyes and tried to get up, he suddenly jumped on me, and I doubt that necromancers have ever called demons to their aid with so many oaths and conjurations as he directed at me; but it was all as vain as the hopes of exiles. Finally he wanted to narrow it all down to a single kiss, and even that I refused him. And when I heard my mother talking with the landlady, I yelled to her. As she stepped into the room, he began shouting: "What kind of murder is this? They wouldn't have treated me worse in a den of thieves." He continued to shout and scream, and the landlady quieted and comforted him, saying: "Don't you know that it's a hell of a business, trying to do it with a virgin?" In the meantime I dressed and went to my room, leaving him to croak out his complaints to the landlady. The wretch had become as obstinate as a gambler who wants to revenge himself for his losses. He ran out of the house, and in about an hour a tailor sent by him appeared with a length of thin green silk. He took my measurements, cut the cloth, and made me a dress, his client convinced that the next night everything would go as he wished. I accepted the gift, but based myself on my mother's memories who, when she saw the dress, said: "His passion-hammer's pounding. Stand fast. He'll do everything you want: rent a house, buy you furniture, or die trying to get in."

Indeed even without her memories, I would have understood what I had to do. Just then I glanced through the window and saw him. I ran to meet him on the stairs, crying: "God only knows the sorrow you gave me when you left without even saying good-bye; but now I'm completely consoled, since you've come back. Even if I must die because of it, I shall do what you wish this very night." His mouth gaped and he hastened to kiss me for speaking in this way, and as he was ordering dinner we made peace and became quite gay. When night came (and I believe it seemed to him as slow in coming as the hour of an appointment given a man who has longed for it for ten years), he also ordered and paid for supper. Then the hour struck, and he went to bed with me again, in the very same bed; and finding me as compliant with his desires as a Jew is to lend money to a person without collateral, he got so angry he couldn't stop himself: he smacked me all over. And I bore it quietly, saying to myself: "You'll pay for this," and forced him to press out the verjuice, going through the same sort of preliminary contortions as the night before. He jumped up after and ran to where my mother was sleeping with the landlady and shouted and threatened for four hours, while she kept saying: "My dear sir, take my word for it, tomorrow night you shall get what you wish. Even if she dies, she'll satisfy you." Then she got out of bed and gave him a taffeta sash twice the usual length. "Take this," she told him, "and tie her hands with it." The blockhead took it, and after spending his good money again on dinner and supper, went to bed with me for the third time. When he saw that this time I was so stingy with myself that I wouldn't even let him touch me, he got so enraged that he was ready to stab me. I confess that by now I was a little scared, but I had enough presence of mind to turn my behind to him, holding it tightly against his belly. This appetizer redoubled his desire to eat a full meal, and he started to rummage around and probe at me,

but I lay firm and stiff, unmoved by his movements, until I felt him slip away. But when he became so presumptuous as to try to push it right inside, I cried: "I think it's time to get up," and sliding adroitly away from his belly, I swung around and looked him straight in the face. He turned me on my back again to count the beams in the ceiling, climbed on top of me, and pushed in less than half of it while I wailed: "It hurts, it hurts!" As he was maintaining this precarious position, he stretched out his hand, pulled out his purse, which he had flattened under the pillow, took out ten ducats and a lot of julios, and putting them in my hand, said: "Here, take them." "No, I won't," I moaned while at the same time I grabbed his tool in my fist and clenched it, permitting him to go no deeper than halfway; and not being able to go any farther, he spat out his soul.

ANTONIA Why didn't he tie you up with the sash?

NANNA How could a man who was tied up tie me?

ANTONIA You speak the Gospel truth.

NANNA Before we got up, his horse traveled four more times to the middle of life's journey.

ANTONIA Yes, that's what Petrarch says.

NANNA Not at all, Dante.

ANTONIA Wasn't it Petrarch?

NANNA No, Dante, Dante. Well, quite happy with what he had accomplished he got up, and I did too; and since he could not stay to eat with me, he sent out for food and returned that evening for supper, which he also paid for.

ANTONIA Hold on a minute. Didn't he notice that you hadn't bled?

NANNA Precisely. These courtiers are great judges of virgins and martyrs! I gave him to understand that my piss was pure blood; and anyway, so long as they can shove it in there, they don't ask for anything

more. Now, on the fourth night I let him go all the way, and when he felt *that*, the brave man almost keeled over in a faint right there on top of me. The next morning my mother came in the room laughing to see us in bed together, gave me her blessing, and greeting his lordship, to whom (as I covered him with the sweetest kisses in my repertory) she said: "Tomorrow I intend to leave Rome. I have just received a letter from my town, where I'm going to return to die among my own people. In any case, Rome is a town for lucky women, not for those who are unlucky. Certainly I would never leave if I could sell our possessions and at least buy a house here. I thought I could rent one, but the money hasn't come and I'm not the sort of woman who can live in other people's rooms." And stopping the words in her mouth, I cried: "Dear Mama, I shall die in two days if I am forced to leave my darling," and I gave him a loving kiss and shed two tiny tears. He sat up in bed at this and declared: "Can't I rent a house for you and furnish it from top to bottom? I swear I can, by your whore and mine!" And then he got my mother to hand him his clothes, skipped out of bed like a man in a great hurry, and rushed out of the house. He returned in the evening bringing a key and two porters loaded down with mattresses, blankets, and pillows, while two other porters carried beds and tables, and behind them came a flock of Jews with tapestries, bedsheets, dishes, pots, buckets, and other kitchen utensils. He looked like a man who was moving. Then he led my mother away with him, set in order a spruce little house on the other side of the Tiber, returned for me, paid the landlady's bill, loaded our belongings on a cart, and as night fell, took me to my new house. As long as we remained together, he spent his money like a lord, nobly and well, and I really mean well. Now when I no longer showed up at the window of the lodging house, the men soon discovered where I was, and swarms of my

suitors settled around me, like wasps at the gurgle of a basin or bees around flowers. I accepted one of them as a lover on sight, a man who claimed he was dying on my account. I played him along through a procuress of his, and when he gave me all that he possessed, I began to turn a cold shoulder to my first benefactor, who, having borrowed money on all sides and bought the things he gave me on credit, couldn't pay his debts and was excommunicated along with the devils, his name posted up for all to see, as is the Roman custom. And being by this time a hardened whore, I started to cut down my lovemaking as drastically as he had reduced his wealth. Soon after he began to find my door locked, and after bawling me out for all the good he had done me, he left like the ghost in Boccaccio's story, his tail as stiff as it had been at the start. And after I had emptied the second man's purse, I grabbed hold of a third. In brief, I gave myself to all those men who came with the cash, as Gonella says; rented a large house and two maids, and lived as luxuriously as a lady. Now don't think that in studying whoredom I was like one of those scholars who come to the university a gentleman and, at the end of seven years, return home stone broke. No, in three months—less, two or even one—I learned all that can be learned about torturing a man with passion, then making it up to him, then getting him to open his purse, then suddenly leaving him, and above all how to weep laughing and laugh weeping—as I shall explain in its proper place. And I sold my cherry many more times than one of these miserly priests sells his first Mass by putting up a poster in all the churches of town announcing that he's going to chant it. I shall tell you only a small part of the swindles and tricks (for in truth this is what they should be called) I have perpetrated on men. Those I tell are solely the stratagems of my own devising; so if you are a ready calculator, you can roughly tote them up.

ANTONIA I'm not a calculator, and I don't want to be one either. I believe in you as I do in the four Ember weeks—yes, even three times as much, if I must say so.

NANNA I had one man among my lovers to whom I was under a rather heavy obligation, though a whore, who has no feelings for anything but cold cash, knows neither obligation nor disobligation. Her love is like a termite's: the more it gets to gnaw at, the more the thing becomes dear to it. When he's gone—the hell with him! As I say, I played the most bizarre tricks on this man, and I did so even more the less he was free with his money, though he still gave me something. I slept with him on Fridays, and after he got there my game was to scold him at dinner.

ANTONIA Why?

NANNA To give him a bellyache.

ANTONIA What cruelty!

NANNA Have it your way. Well, after gobbling down all of the food, I would dawdle around until one or two in the morning before heading for bed; then, when I did get into bed with him, I would give him something to chew on so ungraciously that he would roll off me, curse the day he was baptized, and refuse to do anything. But finally, compelled by his lust, he would sidle up to me, and I would lie there like a log. Then, shaking me furiously, with tears in his eyes, he called me the nastiest names; and when he wanted to mount me, I forced him to hand over all the money he had on him before I would agree to it.

ANTONIA You were a monster, a she-Nero.

NANNA As for these out-of-towners who came to stay in Rome for eight to ten days and then left, I resorted in their cases to the lowest thievery. I had a couple of ruffians who got me free of charge once out of every hundred times, and whom I used as plug-uglies in the manner I shall describe. Now these people who came to Rome usually wanted to visit not only the

antiquities but also the modernities, that is, the ladies, and to act the great lord with them. I was always the first lady visited by these bands, and the man who slept the night with me invariably left behind his clothes.

ANTONIA The devil you say—his clothes?

NANNA His clothes, as you shall hear. The maid would come into my room in the morning and take away the man's clothes with the excuse of wanting to clean them. She would hide them and then start yelling that they had been stolen. At this the valiant out-of-towner would leap out of bed in his nightshirt, demanding his property and threatening to smash all my furnishings to revenge himself for his loss. I would yell louder than he, screaming: "You'll bust my furnishings? You'll do me violence in my own house? You call me a thief?" When they heard this, my plug-uglies, who were hidden downstairs, would rush up waving their drawn swords and shouting: "What's the trouble, my lady?" They would clutch him by his shirt, and still being in his nightgown, he usually looked like a pilgrim on his way to keep a vow. He would immediately beg my pardon and plead with me to send for a friend or acquaintance of his from whom he could borrow a pair of pants, a surtout, cloak, doublet, and cap. Then he would go on his way, thinking that he had been lucky not to have tasted the "keep-quiet-you."

ANTONIA But how did your heart take it?

NANNA Very well. Because there is no cruelty, no treachery, and no thievery that can dismay a whore. When the fame of my true character spread about, these men from outside town stopped visiting my house or, if they did come, first took off their valuable clothes and gave them to a servant, who carried them to their lodgings and returned in the morning to dress them. Despite all this, none of them was so cunning as not to leave behind his gloves, belt, or nightcap, because a whore turns everything to her advantage: from a needle

to a toothpick, a filbert, a cherry, a tuft of fennel, or the peel of a pear!

ANTONIA Yet with all their cunning and craftiness, they can barely avoid ending up selling candles, and often the French pox acts as the avenger of all those bilked men. Ah yes, it's really a fine sight to see one of those whores when she's no longer able to hide her age behind paint and makeup, pungent toilet waters, ceruse, fine gowns, and broad fans, and must start pawning her necklaces, rings, silken gowns, and headdresses as well as all her other trappings, and has to enter one of the four minor orders, just like young boys who want to become priests.

NANNA What do you mean?

ANTONIA I mean that first they offer lodgings to the mob and transform their fleshly ornaments into beds; then, when they fail as tavernkeepers, they turn to the Epistle, that is, they become procuresses; after this they go on to the Gospel by taking up the washing of linen; and lastly they attend the Mass at San Rocco on Piazza del Popolo, begging on the steps of St. Peter's, at the Pace church, St. John of Lateran's, and the Consolation, branded with the mark that Job brands on the foreheads of his horses, not to mention some gash or slash made by those customers who lost their patience because of a betrayal of theirs—nor do I forget all those monkeys, parrots, and she-dwarfs that were wrested from their hands and over which they ruled like empresses.

NANNA I never behaved like such women. A whore without brains is the first to suffer from it. You've got to know how to handle yourself in this world, and not try to set yourself higher than a queen, opening your door only to monsignors and noblemen. There is no higher mountain than the one that's built up little by little and sedulously. Those women are cretins who say that an ox craps as much as a thousand flies; there are many more flies than oxen. And for one

great lord who enters your house, presenting you with a lovely gift, there are twenty dead-beats who pay you with promises; yet a thousand men who are not great lords will eventually fill your hands to overflowing. She who disdains those who do not wear velvet is weak in the head, because grand ducats hide under rough clothes, and I know quite well that the best fees are paid by tavernkeepers, cooks, chicken-pickers, water-carriers, middlemen, and Jews. I would place all these types at the head of the table, for they spend much more than they steal. Yes, indeed, we've got to rely on something more substantial than flashy doublets.

ANTONIA Why? What's the reason?

NANNA The reason is that those silken clothes are lined with corroding debts. The majority of courtiers are like snails; they carry their houses on their backs and have nothing else to their names. What little cash they have goes for oil to slick down their beards and to wash their heads, or to buy a new pair of shoes, though for the one new pair they flaunt they have a thousand that are down on their uppers. And I laugh when I see the miracles they bring to pass with their finery, for all that apparel soon turns into threadbare velvet.

ANTONIA You're used to seeing these skinflints of today. In my time the men were made of altogether different stuff, because the stinginess of the servants comes from the dishonesty of their masters. But let's get back to your story.

NANNA I knew one man who preened himself on his practical know-how and said (knowing the sort of woman I was): "I shall make her work for me without paying her for it." He came to visit me; he charmed me with the most pleasant flattery imaginable; he played up to me, praised me, waited on me hand and foot. If something slipped out of my hands, he would pick it up with his hat in his hand, kiss it, and give it back to me with such a perfumed bow that I can barely

describe it. One day while he was chatting with me, he suddenly said: "Why can't I get a favor from your ladyship, my mistress, and then die?" I replied: "I am ready to do it; just ask me." "I beg you," he said, "to come and sleep with me tonight, and I want your ladyship to take over a little room of mine, which I am sure will please her." I promised him that I would do so, but only after supper, since a friend was dining with me. He was very happy about this, for he felt that he could brag afterward that he hadn't even paid for my supper. When the time came, I went and slept with him; but afterward I remained awake, and along about dawn he fell asleep and started to snore. Then I left my woman's shift in exchange for his blouse, which I put on: I had already figured out a month before which of his gold jewelry I wanted most. Then my maid arrived and I left the room, and seeing in a corner a pile of all of his linen which he had prepared for the laundress, I set it on my maid's head and returned home with the loot. And when he awoke, you can well imagine what he said.

ANTONIA He had it coming to him.

NANNA He got up and saw my shift stitched on all sides and at first thought that I had taken his by mistake; but when he couldn't find the pile of dirty linen, he had me charged by the Savella court and they sent him packing like a nitwit. And so I laughed at him, who had wanted to laugh at me.

ANTONIA His hard luck.

NANNA Listen to this. There was a certain merchant in love with me, a good fellow who didn't merely love me but positively adored me. Of course he supported me; and I of course fondled and caressed him, though I could hardly say that I was mad about him. And if anyone ever tells you: "Such-and-such a whore died for so-and-so," you can tell him that it's not true. Every once in a while we may get a yen for a big prick, wanting to taste it two or three times, but these whims

last as long as the sun in winter and the rain in summer. The truth is, it is impossible for a woman who submits to everyone to fall in love with anyone.

ANTONIA I know this, too.

NANNA Now this merchant slept with me whenever he wanted to. So to give myself a reputation, a name, and to really get him burning hot, I adroitly went about making him jealous, while he kept on boasting that he wasn't at all.

ANTONIA And how did you go about it, Nanna?

NANNA I bought two pair of partridges and a pheasant, and having trained my porter, who was a born crook, though nobody knew him, I got him to knock at my door at dinner time, the merchant being there to dine with me, and then told the maid to open the door. The porter entered with a "Good day to your ladyship," adding: "The Ambassador of Spain begs you to deign to eat this game for his sake; and when it will be convenient for you, he should very much like to say about twenty-five words to you." And I rebuked him and shouted: "Who cares about this ambassador or non-ambassador? Take it away. I don't want it, and don't talk to me about any ambassador. All I want to hear is about this man, who is doing me more good than I merit." Then I kissed the simpleton and turned to the porter, threatening him if he didn't get out at once. "Take them, you fool," the merchant urged me. "You ought to take everything you can." After this he said to the porter: "She will dine on them for his sake"; and then he guffawed a few times; but they weren't heartfelt belly laughs, and afterward he sat there brooding. Giving him a shake, I said: "What are you thinking about? Not even the Emperor himself, much less his ambassador, could wheedle a kiss out of me, and anyway, I have more esteem for your boots than for a hundred thousand ducats." He thanked me wholeheartedly for this and left to attend to some business of his. In the meantime I told my plug-uglies

to come to my house at about ten o'clock, for that was when we usually dined together. They scared up a lewd, nasty fellow, put him wise, and with a candlestick in his hand, while the others, all masked, lurked behind him, they had him knock at the street door. Coming upstairs, he greeted me most Spanishly, saying: "Lady, my master, the Ambassador, is coming now to do reverence to your highness." And I replied: "The Ambassador must forgive me, but I am obliged to this ambassador, whom you can see"; and as I said this, I put my hand on my man's shoulder. The youth went out, hung around for a while, then knocked again; and when I refused to open, we heard him cry: "If you do not open the door, my lord shall have it smashed to the ground." At this I planted myself in front of the window and shrieked: "Your lord can murder me, burn me, and ruin me as he wishes; but I love a man who, through his great kindness, has made me what I am, and I am ready, if so it must be, to die for him." In a flash my Pharisees were at the door, and though they were only five or six, they sounded like a thousand. One of them thundered in an imperial voice: "You'll regret this, you old whore! And we'll slaughter that wet hen that's scratching your back, I swear to *Diós* we shall." "Do what you wish," I retorted, "but that is not the act of a lord—to try and force himself on someone." As I was getting ready to say something more, my sap tugged at my placket and whispered: "Shh! Don't say another word. Do you want to get me hacked to pieces by these Spaniards?" He pulled me inside and showed me more gratitude for the esteem which I had pretended to show him than prisoners being freed from jail show the guards who release them for the mid-August festival. The very next morning he had a magnificent orange satin gown made for me. And he was so frightened of the Spaniards and so worried over whether the Ambassador was planning to have a brand put on his face, you couldn't have caught him out on

the streets after the *Ave Maria* had tolled, no, not even if you offered him a kingdom. Whatever people were talking about he was sure to blurt out: "I can tell you that my girl knows how to handle these ambassadors!"

ANTONIA Why did he say that?

NANNA Because I let him believe that I had left nine of them in the lurch under the stairs in the middle of January, making them stay there waiting for me till dawn. "On such-and-such a night," I swore to him, "when you were sleeping with me, so-and-so was down in the cellar playing with himself. Besides, on another night there was another man who wooed the well in the courtyard." Naturally he was overjoyed. In order to be sure that I wouldn't have any reason to become the Ambadress, he doubled his presents and told everybody: "I'm in her debt, and that's the whole story."

ANTONIA A beautiful swindle.

NANNA Here's an even better one. I often slept with a certain banner-shaker, a captain who, whenever a person would say to him: "Don't trust that woman," would immediately get up on his high horse and reply: "You're talking to me? I had some fun with them when I was in the guardroom in Siena, Genoa, and Piacenza, but my money is not for whores. No, by God, not a cent!" And as he was bragging in this way, I caught sight of ten crown pieces in his purse. I could have snatched them there and then and replaced them with bits of coal, but I got them out in another way, as you shall hear. One day he was in my house, completely soured by the pounding of his passion-hammer, for I had let him think that I had fallen in love with another man. When I saw the state he was in, I walked up to him, put my hands on his beard, and giving it two gentle tugs, whispered: "Who is your little angel?" Saying this, I plumped down on his lap, clasped my arms around his neck, and pushing his thighs apart with my knee, I rubbed it against him so that he felt everything and got even more passionately excited.

Then I kissed him all over the face until he became so aroused that he moaned: "So be it!" Then he fell silent, letting loose so long a sigh that I was brushed by its breeze, and I hugged and caressed him so adeptly that he felt quite cheerful again. And as I was saying to him: "I wish we could sleep together tonight," somebody who had been primed to do it rapped on my door. The maid hastened to the window and returned, saying: "My lady, it's the artisan." "Tell him to come up," I answered. When he appeared he asked me for ten crowns, which I still owed him for a bed curtain, and besides, he begged me to be quick about it since he had work to do. I told the maid: "Here, use this key; take the coins from the chest and give him ten crowns." She went off to open it, leaving me to smooth the tiger's tail, who thought, being a man of the world, that he was superior to all possible swindles. I started bewitching him—in fact I already had him utterly enchanted—but the artisan was hurrying me, and I had already yelled a number of times to my maid: "Get a move on, nitwit," when I heard her muttering and grumbling. I got up and went to see what was troubling her, and found her bustling about the chest, which she couldn't open because, just as the artisan who came for the money was a fake, so the key wasn't made for that lock. I pretended that she had damaged the lock and swarmed all over her with more shouts than blows. Then I urged her to break it open, but a hammer could not be found. So then I turned to my sly fellow and said: "Please, sir, if you happen to have ten crowns on you, give them to him. Later I shall unlock this chest or smash it—either way, you'll get your money back."

ANTONIA I notice you spoke to him quite formally when it came to matters of importance. Ha ha ha!

NANNA He immediately pulled out his purse and threw him the crown pieces, saying: "Take them, master, and Godspeed." I was kicking the chest and

trying to shatter it, but he said to me: "Send for a locksmith and get him to open it. We're not in a hurry." (Now he used the informal mode of address. He felt that, since he had loaned me some money, I was one of his men.)

ANTONIA The snot-nose!

NANNA When I quit my kicking, I threw myself into bed with him, but my plan was not to go to the end and give him a full peck at me. In fact as soon as he clutched me in his arms we heard a noisy knocking at the door. And that's all I was waiting for to leave him in the lurch. I jumped up, though he kept tugging at me, pleading with me not to go and see who was knocking at my door. After rushing to the window blind, I saw a little monsignor, a hat on his head and all wrapped up in a cape, sitting astride a mule. He called me down and offered to let me sit behind him on the mule's haunches. I accepted, snatching the cape from my manservant's back, for in all other ways I was dressed like a boy (I almost always dressed like that), and went off with him. So my bilker and beater of whores, not just men, in revenge slashed my portrait which hung in the room and walked out of my house like a gambler who, after being marked down as a bad loss, skulks out of the casino. Oh, I forgot to tell you one thing. He was just about to smash the chest to get back his money, but my maid started screaming at the window: "Thieves! Thieves!" and he left with his plume bedraggled, not only because of all the people who came running but also because of the chest, which he opened, only to find it full of ointments and pomades for any accidents that might occur. When I tell you my adventures I feel like a woman who has sinned and wants to make a full confession and tell everything she ever did; yet just as she falls at the friar's feet, she can only remember half of it.

ANTONIA Tell me the stories you can remember, for by them I can measure what you've forgotten.

NANNA That's what I shall do. Well, a certain cheerful blockhead, having amassed about a hundred ducats from his vineyard, which was all that he owned in the world, somehow got the idea that he wanted me for a wife and mentioned this to my barber, who passed the news on to me. I also heard about the cold cash he had on him, and so I pumped the slob full of such great expectations that, certain he would get me, he showed up in my house. I lavished all sorts of caresses on him, and in one month's time, using those hundred ducats of his, he supplied me with beds, stocked my kitchen, and furnished my entire house with all that it required. I had let him have a nibble of it once or twice, but nothing more, and after that I picked a fight with him over some nonsense, calling him all sorts of names—"clown," "horse's ass," "rogue," "cheapskate," "filthy wretch," "idiot," "ignoramus"—and then to top it all off, slammed the door in his face. Realizing the mistake he had made, the wretched man turned twisted-neck monk, and I was happy.

ANTONIA But why?

NANNA Because a whore's stock goes up when she can boast of having driven men to despair, ruin, or insanity.

ANTONIA Without envy.

NANNA Oh, how much money I have earned by swindling this man or that! Many men often used to dine in my house, and after dinner the cards would appear on the table. "Come on," I would say, "let's play for two julios' worth of candy. The man who gets the King of Cups will have to pay." When the candies were lost and paid for, those who had cards in their hands could no more stop playing than a whore can stop screwing. So they pulled out their money and began gambling in earnest. Then two of my shills walked in, men who looked like simpletons, and they let themselves be coaxed for a while and finally picked

up cards that were phonier than doubloons minted with lead; and then, still acting like dullards, they pocketed all the guests' money. All the while I was telling them by dumb show what cards the others held in their hands, for I didn't put much faith in the fake cards.

ANTONIA Now these are hoaxes!

NANNA For two ducats I informed a man that his worst enemy was coming two hours before dawn all by himself to sleep with me. So he had the place watched and the poor devil was hacked apart.

ANTONIA Just a wasp sting. But, tell me, why did he come two hours before dawn?

NANNA Because at that hour another man was leaving my house, since he couldn't stay any longer. But do you think that if I slept with one lover, he was the only one to rub it around in me? Why I used to rise a thousand times from the merchant's side with the excuse that I had a bellyache or the runs, and rush down to satisfy this man or that who had hidden in my house. I would put the blame on the heat and go out in my nightgown, pace up and down the hall for a while, prop myself on my elbows at the window to converse with the moon, stars, and heavens; and in the meantime I would let two of them climb on my back for the price of one.

ANTONIA If you leave anything behind, it's lost for good.

NANNA No doubt. Now sink your teeth into this one: after I'd strangled ten or twelve of my lovers who no longer could supply me with gifts since I'd milked them dry, I decided to wipe them out entirely.

ANTONIA What trick did you use for that?

NANNA I was giving my apples and fennel to a druggist and a doctor, two men I could trust. So I said to them: "I want to play sick so that the dandies in my house can all cure me. You, the doctor, as soon as I'm put to bed, must say I'm done for and prescribe expensive medicines, which you, the druggist, will