

The Ungrateful Man



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A didactic fiction of the Middle Ages

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VITALIS, A NOBLE VENETIAN, one day, at a hunting party, fell into a pit, which had been dug to catch wild animals. He passed a whole night and day there, and I will leave you to imagine his dread and his agony. The pit was dark. Vitalis ran from the one side of it to the other, in the hope of finding some branch or root by which he might climb its sides, and get out of his dungeon; but he heard such confused and extraordinary noises, growlings, hissings, and plaintive cries, that he became half dead with terror, and crouched in a corner motionless, awaiting death with the most horrid dismay. On the morning of the second day he heard someone passing near the pit, and then raising his voice, he cried out with the most dolorous accent —

“Help, help! draw me out of this! I am perishing!”

A peasant crossing the forest heard his cry. At first he was frightened; but after a moment or two, taking courage, he approached the pit, and asked who had called.

“A poor huntsman,” answered Vitalis, “who has passed a long night and day here. Help me out, for the love of God. Help me out, and I will recompense you handsomely.”

“I will do what I can,” replied the peasant.

Then Massaccio (for such was the name of the peasant) took a hedge-bill which hung at his girdle, and cutting a branch of a tree strong enough to bear a man —

“Listen, huntsman,” said he, “to what I am going to say to you. I will let down this branch into the pit. I will fasten it against the sides, and hold it with my hands; and by pulling yourself out by it you may get free from your prison.”

“Good,” answered Vitalis; “ask me anything you will, and it shall be granted.”

“I ask for nothing,” said the peasant; “but I am going to be married, and you may give what you like to my bride.”

So saying, Massaccio let down the branch; he soon felt it heavy, and a moment after a monkey leapt merrily out of the pit. He had fallen like Vitalis, and had seized quickly on the branch of Massaccio.

“It was the devil surely which spoke to me from the pit,” said Massaccio, running away in affright.

“Do you abandon me, then?” cried Vitalis, in a lamentable accent; “My friend, my dear friend, for the love of the Lord, for the love of your mistress, draw me out of this; I beg, I implore you! I will give her wedding-gifts, I will enrich you! I am the lord Vitalis, a rich Venetian; do not let me die of hunger in this horrible pit!”

Massaccio was touched by these prayers. He returned to the pit, let down another branch, and a lion jumped out, making the woods echo with a roar of delight.

“Oh certainly, certainly, it was the devil I heard,” said Massaccio, and fled away again; but stopping short, after a few paces, he heard again the piercing cries of Vitalis.

“Oh God, oh God,” cried he, to die of hunger in a pit! Will no one, then, come to my help? Whoever you may be, I implore you return; let me not die, when you can save me. I will give you a house, and field, and cows, and gold, all that you can ask for; save me, save me only.!”

Massaccio, thus implored, could not help returning. He let down the branch, and a serpent, hissing joyously, sprang out of the pit. Massaccio fell on his knees, half dead with fear, and repeated all the prayers he could think of to drive away the demon. He was only brought to himself by hearing the cries of despair which Vitalis uttered.

“Will no one help me?” said he. “Ah, then, I must die! Oh God, oh God! and he wept and sobbed in a heart-breaking manner.

“It is certainly the voice of a man for all that,” said Massaccio.

“Oh, if you are still there,” said Vitalis, “in the name of all that is dear to you, save me, that I may die at least at home, and not in this horrible pit. I can say no more; my voice is exhausted. Shall I give you my palace at Venice, my possessions, my honours? I give them all; and may I die here if I forfeit my word. Life, life only; save only my life.”

Massaccio could not resist such prayers, mingled with such promises. He let down the branch again.

“Ah! here you are at last,” said he, seeing Vitalis come up.

“Yes,” said he, and uttering a cry of joy, he fainted in the arms of Massaccio.

Massaccio sustained, assisted him, and brought him to himself; then, giving him his arm, “Let us,” said he, “quit this forest;” but Vitalis could hardly walk: he was exhausted with hunger.

“Eat this piece of bread,” said Massaccio, and he gave him some, which he took out of his wallet.

“My benefactor, my saviour, my good angel!,” said Vitalis, “how can I ever sufficiently recompense you?”

“You have promised me a marriage portion for my bride, and your palace at Venice for myself,” said Massaccio. But Vitalis now began to regain his strength.

“Yes, certainly, I will give a portion to your wife, my dear Massaccio; and I will make you the richest peasant of your village. Where do you live?”

“At Capalatta in the forest: but I would willingly quit my village to establish myself at Venice in the palace you have promised me.”

“Here we are out of the forest,” said Vitalis. I know my road now; thank you, Massaccio.”

“But when shall I come for my palace, and the portion of my intended?” returned the peasant.

“When you will,” said the other, and they separated.

Vitalis went to Venice, and Massaccio to Capalatta, where he related his adventure to his mistress, telling her what a rich portion she was to have, and what a fine palace she was to live in.

The next day early he set out for Venice, and asked for the palace of the Signor Vitalis; went straight to it, and told the domestics that he should come shortly with his mistress, in a fine carriage, to take possession of the palace which the Signor Vitalis had promised to give him. Massaccio appeared to those who heard him mad, and Vitalis was told that there was a peasant in his hall, who asked for a marriage portion, and said the palace belonged to him.

“Let him be turned out immediately,” said Vitalis. “I know him not.”

“The valets accordingly drove him away with insults, and Massaccio returned to his cottage in despair, without daring to see his mistress.

At one corner of his fireplace was seated the monkey, at the other corner the lion, and the serpent had twisted itself in spiral circles upon the hearth. Massaccio was seized with fear.

“The man has driven me from his door,” thought he; “the lion will certainly devour me, the serpent sting me, and the monkey laugh at me; and this will be my reward for saving them from the pit!”

But the monkey turned to him with a most amicable grimace; the lion, vibrating gently his tail, came and licked his hand, like a dog caressing his master; and the serpent, unrolling its ringy body, moved about the room with a contented and grateful air, which gave courage to Massaccio.

“Poor animals!” said he, “they are better than the Signor Vitalis; he drove me like a beggar from the door. Ah! with what pleasure I would pitch him again into the pit. And my bride! whom I thought to marry so magnificently! I have not a stick of wood in my wood-house, not a morsel of meat for a meal, and no money to buy any. The ungrateful wretch, with his portion and his palace!”

Thus did Massaccio complain.

Meanwhile, the monkey began to make significant faces, the lion to agitate his tail with great uneasiness, and the serpent to roll and unroll its circles with great rapidity. Then the monkey, approaching his benefactor, made him a sign to follow, and led him into the wood-house, where was regularly piled up a quantity of wood sufficient for the whole year. It was the monkey who had collected this wood in the forest, and brought it to the cottage of Massaccio. Massaccio embraced the grateful ape.

The lion then uttering a delicate roar, led him to a corner of the cottage, where he saw an enormous provision of game, two sheep, three kids, hares and rabbits in abundance, and a fine wild boar, all covered with the branches of trees to keep them fresh. It was the lion who had hunted for his benefactor. Massaccio patted kindly his mane.

“And yon then,” said he to the serpent, “have you brought me nothing? Art thou a Vitalis, or a good and honest animal like the monkey and the lion?” The serpent glided rapidly under a heap of dried leaves, and reappeared immediately, rearing itself superbly on its tail, when Massaccio saw with surprise a beautiful diamond in its mouth. “A diamond!” cried Massaccio, and stretched forth his hand to stroke caressingly the serpent and take its offering.

Massaccio then set out immediately for Venice to turn his diamond into money. He addressed himself to a jeweller. The jeweller examined the diamond; it was of the finest water.

“How much do you ask for it?” said he.

“Two hundred crowns,” said Massaccio, thinking his demand to be great; it was hardly the tenth part of the value of the stone. The jeweller looked at Massaccio, and said —

“To sell it at that price you must be a robber, and I arrest you!”

“If it is not worth so much, give me less,” said Massaccio. “I am not a robber, I am an honest man; it was the serpent who gave me the diamond.”

But the police now arrived and conducted him before the magistrate. There he recounted his adventure, which appeared to be a mere fairy vision. Yet, as the Signor Vitalis was implicated in the story, the magistrate referred the affair to the state inquisition, and Massaccio appeared before it.

“Relate to us your history,” said one of the inquisitors, “and lie not, or we will have you thrown into the canal.”

Massaccio related his adventure.

“So,” said the inquisitor, “you saved the Signor Vitalis?”

“Yes, noble signors.”

“And he promised you a marriage-portion for your bride, and his palace at Venice for yourself?”

“Yes, noble signors.”

“And he drove you like a beggar from his door?”

“Yes, noble signors.”

“Let the Signor Vitalis appear,” said the same inquisitor.

Vitalis appeared.

“Do you know this man, Signor Vitalis?” said the inquisitor.

“No, I know him not,” replied Vitalis.

The inquisitors consulted together.

“This man,” said they, speaking of Massaccio, “is evidently a knave and a cheat; he must be thrown into prison. Signor Vitalis, you are acquitted.” Then, making a sign to an officer of police, “Take that man,” said they, “to prison.”

Massaccio fell on his knees in the middle of the hall.

“Noble signors, noble signors,” said he, “it is possible that the diamond may have been stolen; the serpent who gave it me may have wished to deceive me. It is possible that the ape, the lion, and the serpent may all be an illusion of the demon. But it is true that I saved the Signor Vitalis. Signor Vitalis,” (turning to him), “I ask you not for the marriage portion for my bride, nor for your palace of marble, but say a word for me; suffer me not to be thrown into prison; do not abandon me; I did not abandon you when you were in the pit.”

“Noble signors,” said Vitalis, bowing to the tribunal, “I can only repeat what I have already said: I know not this man. Has he a single witness to produce?”

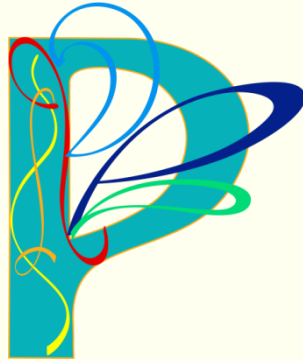
At this moment the whole court was thrown into fear and astonishment, for the lion, the monkey, and the serpent entered the hall together. The monkey was mounted on the back of the lion, and the serpent was twined round the arm of the monkey. On entering, the lion roared, the monkey sputtered, and the serpent hissed.

“Ah! these are the animals of the pit,” cried Vitalis in alarm.

“Signor Vitalis,” resumed the chief of the inquisitors, when the dismay which this apparition had caused had somewhat diminished, “you have asked where were the witnesses of Massaccio? You see that God has sent them at the right time before the bar of our tribunal. Since, then, God has testified against you, we should be culpable before him if we did not punish your ingratitude. Your palace and your possessions are confiscated, and you shall pass the rest of your life in a narrow prison. And you,” continued he, addressing himself to Massaccio, who was all this time caressing the lion, the monkey, and the serpent, “since a Venetian had promised you a palace of marble and a portion for your bride, the republic of Venice will accomplish the promise; the palace and possessions of Vitalis are thine. You,” said he to the secretary of the tribunal, “draw up an account of all this history, that the people of Venice may know, through all generations, that the justice of the tribunal of the state inquisition is not less equitable than it is rigorous.”

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Massaccio and his wife lived happily for many years afterwards in the palace of Vitalis with the monkey, the lion, and the serpent; and Massaccio had them represented in a picture, on the wall of his palace, as they entered the hall of the tribunal — the lion carrying the monkey, and the monkey carrying the serpent.



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