

# Jasper



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## Tale of the day:

### *The Confrontation at Canossa*

The old man paced back and forth, thinking and praying, thinking and praying. His steps echoed down the long halls of the castle. It was winter, and snow lay deep on the ground outside. He could hear sounds from the high window. They were not the sounds of birds twittering as they hunted for the stray seed or early bud on a tree. It was like the wind, but not the wind. You will probably never have heard this sound. It was the mutter of a thousand men, half a mile away, just beyond the moat of the castle. The men were armed with iron mail and helmets, shields and swords. They were cold, and impatient, and sullen. They would have liked to storm the castle, but they were ordered not to, and besides, the castle had defenders of its own.

Then came the sound of a door, and the step

of a light foot. The old man knew who it was without looking.

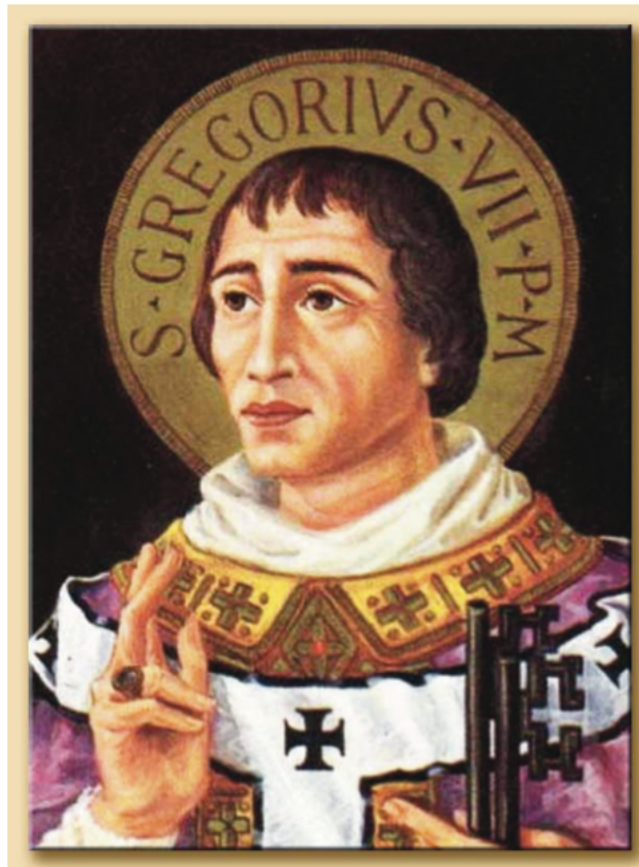
An middle-aged woman came up to him. She was his friend from many years back. She was wearing a long silk gown, gray, the color of

penitence. A string of jewels lay upon her neck. Otherwise there was nothing showy about her. She carried a letter, made of sheepskin, rolled up, tied with a string, and sealed with a ball of wax.

"It is from our friend Anselm, my lord," she said.

He looked up for the first time, and smiled, sadly. "From Anselm, all the way from the seacoast in the north," he said. "I wish I were there now. Let us see what Anselm says," he said, and broke the seal, and read, silently.

"Our saintly monk bids me to hold fast, and be strong, because the good Lord will be my help," said the old man, "my help even if an army should come against me. Well, the army is here, waiting in the snow. Anselm wouldn't have known that. But he would have said what he said, all the same."



“My lord,” said the woman, laying a hand upon his shoulder, “you have no need to meet this Henry. He hates you, and he is waiting for you to make one false move. He would appoint every bishop in Germany, his cousins, his friends, the men he can dangle like a puppet on a string. He would be *pope in your place*.”

“That he cannot be, married as he is, and not ordained a priest,” said the Pope, pretending to make a point, but he knew and she knew that the emperor, Henry the Fourth of that name, might as well be pope, for all that he wanted to exercise authority over everything and everyone in Germany.

“If you yield to him now,” said Matelda, the countess of that castle and the most powerful woman in Europe, friend of saints like Anselm, and protector of the pope, “you will never recover. Do not do it.”

The old man fell silent and resumed his pacing.

“He is a liar,” said Matelda. “You know it.”

“I know it,” said Gregory, the seventh of that name.

“He is ambitious,” said Matelda.

“I know that too.”

“You are under no obligation,” she said, but he interrupted her.

“Ah, but my good woman, I am. I am a priest, and he comes to me as a penitent.”

“He is lying.”

“Most likely.”

“Ah, you men, you men and your rules!” she cried, losing her patience. “Have I put forth all my forces just to have you play the priest now and pretend that this Henry, this devil in a man’s skin, intends to obey you for a single moment once you have absolved him of his sins?”

“Her sins, though many, were forgiven,” said Pope Gregory, echoing the words of Jesus.

“Not as many as his, not by a thousand!” cried Matelda.

“You are probably right.”

They fell silent again.

Henry IV, under the pretense of wishing to reform the Church in his lands, had been handing the crozier – the shepherd’s crook – to new bishops, and had been vesting them in their official garments. Pope Gregory VII was also a German – his name was Hildebrand – and he wanted real reform. For in those days a bishop might be a man with more interests in lands and armies and women than in holiness and saving souls.

When Henry kept on doing what he had always done, the Pope took a dramatic step. He declared that Henry was no longer in communion with the Church.

These days, if a man were to be excommunicated, he would wave around the decree like a flag, and people might like him all the better for it. Not in those days. As soon as the decree came down, every one of the smaller dukes and counts in Germany, and every one of Henry’s soldiers and servants, knew that they were no longer obligated to obey him. It was looking as if just one word from an old priest in Rome, just one word from a man without any soldiers at all, one word from a monk whose hands were not shining with gold rings and whose flesh was not comforted by rich food and fine clothing, could bring down an emperor – an emperor! Imagine it.

So the emperor had come south, through the Alps, in the winter, and was now outside in the snow, with his men. He was wearing burlap, no fine furs. He was barefoot. He was on his knees.

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words of Jesus.”

What would you do?

You cannot let the emperor assume authority over the Church. That would be disastrous. You do not trust him. But there he is, in the snow, barefoot, on his knees, pleading, saying that he has repented of his wickedness, and begging you, in the name of Jesus, to let him have the sacraments again, beginning with the sacrament of penance.

“All the world hangs in the balance,” said Matelda, “and Jesus came to save the world.”

“Jesus came to save the world,” said Gregory, “and he would have come to save even such a man as Henry. And there have been worse emperors, far worse than he.”

Matelda snorted for all reply.

“It has been three days,” said Gregory. “Jesus lay in the tomb for three days. I will not make Henry kneel in the snow for four. You had better move your forces to the gate, in case he tries something.”

“They are there already,” she said.

“You know me too well, then,” said he.

“Too well, my good lord.”

That was one of the most dramatic moments in the history of the world. A principle was at stake. Would the Church be made to lie under the weight of emperors and kings and dukes and their armies, or would she be free of them, and exercise spiritual authority over them? But for Gregory, the heart of his priesthood was at stake too. If he had not been a holy man, he never would have done what he did, for he

admitted Henry to his presence, he heard his confession, he absolved him of his sins, he assigned him a severe penance, and then he waited for what he knew would probably come. For Henry might have been sincere, while he was in the snow. The priest has to hope. He might have been sincere. But the snow melted.

And Pope Gregory VII, whom we honor as a saint of the Church, would be persecuted again by this same presumptuous emperor, and he would die not in Rome, but in exile. But that is another story.



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