
PROLOGUE

On the first day of September, when the springs of the Pyrenees are just beginning to be at their most potent, there were a number of people staying at the spa town of Cauterets. They had come from Spain [and other countries] as well as from France, some to drink the waters, some to bathe in them, and some to be treated with the mud. These are all very remarkable cures, so remarkable that patients long given up by their physicians go home completely restored to health. But it is not my purpose here to expatiate on the powers of these waters and their fine situation. I wish merely to relate those details which will serve the subject I have in hand.

The patients all remained at the spa for over three weeks, until their condition improved and they felt they could return home. But as they were preparing to leave, the rain came. It fell in such torrents and with such extraordinary force, you would have thought that God had quite forgotten that once He had promised to Noah never again to destroy the world by water. In Cauterets the huts and houses were all so badly flooded that it was impossible for anyone to stay there. Visitors who had come from the Spanish side went back over the mountains as best they could, with those among them who knew the tracks coming off the best. But the French lords and their ladies, thinking they could get back to Tarbes just as easily as they had come, discovered that the streams were so swollen they they could ford them only with difficulty. And when they came to the Gave de Pau, which on the way there had not been two feet deep, they found that it had turned into a raging torrent. So they turned back to look for the bridges, only to find that the flimsy wooden structures had been swept away by the force of the water. Some of the party thought they might be able to resist the current if they waded across in groups. But they were carried off so swiftly that those who had been about to follow them could not bring themselves to make the attempt. At this point, disagreeing on what they should do next, they split up to look for different

routes. Some of them crossed the mountains, passed through Aragon into Roussillon, and from there went to Narbonne. Others went straight to Barcelona, from where they went by sea to Marseilles and Aigues-Mortes. But one of the travellers was an old lady named Oisille, a widow, with much experience of life. She resolved not to let the treacherous roads frighten her, and made her way to the abbey of Our Lady at Sarrance. Not that she was so superstitious as to believe that the glorious Virgin should leave her seat at her Son's right hand in order to come and take up residence in such a desolate spot. She simply had a desire to see this holy place about which she had heard such a lot, and was also fairly certain that if there was any way at all of finding refuge from danger, the monks were sure to have found it. Eventually, she reached her destination, but only after struggling through rugged and hostile terrain. Indeed, so arduous were the climbs with which she was confronted, that in spite of her age and weight, she was obliged for the most part to go on foot. But the most tragic thing was that most of her horses and servants died on the way, so that by the time she arrived at Sarrance she was accompanied only by one man and one woman. There the monks received them charitably.

Amongst the French travellers there were also two noblemen who had gone to the spa more because they were devoted to the service of two ladies who were there than because they had anything wrong with their health. When they saw the party was breaking up, and that the ladies were being led off by their husbands in another direction, these two gentlemen decided to follow at a distance, without saying anything to anyone. One evening during the journey the two married men and their wives arrived at the house of a man who was more of a bandit than a peasant. The two young gentlemen who were following behind stayed in a farm cottage nearby. Towards midnight they were woken up by a tremendous din. They jumped out of bed, roused their servants, and asked their host what was going on. The poor man was in a fair state of fright. It was a band of outlaws, he told them, and they had come to get their share in some loot that their comrade was keeping in his house next door. Immediately the two men grabbed their swords, and, taking their servants with them, dashed to the aid of their ladies,

counting death for their sakes a far happier fate than a long life without them. When they got to the house, they found the outside door broken in, and the two other men and their servants putting up a valiant fight. But they were already badly wounded, and outnumbered by the bandits. Most of their servants were dead. They were beginning to give way. Through the window the two younger men could see the ladies wailing and weeping. So inflamed were their hearts by pity and by love, they fell upon the outlaws in a paroxysm of fury, like two enraged bears coming down from the mountains, and killed so many that the rest fled for safety to their hideout. The villains having been thus defeated, and the host himself being among those killed, it remained only for the two young noblemen to send his wife, who they had learned was even worse than he, the same way. A single thrust of the sword did the job. They then went into a downstairs room, where they found one of the married gentlemen breathing his last. The other was not hurt, although his clothes were torn to shreds and his sword had been broken. The poor man thanked the pair for coming to his aid in the way they had, embraced them, and asked them not to leave him and those of his party who had survived. The two young men were only too glad to agree. And so, after burying the dead man, and consoling his wife as best they could, they took to the road again, not knowing which way they should go, but trusting in God's guidance.

If you would like to know the names of the three gentlemen and the two ladies with them, they were Hircan, his wife Parlamente, and Longarine, the young widow. The two young men were Dagoucun and Saffredent. They rode all day, and towards evening they glimpsed a church tower in the distance. Eventually, after a hard struggle along the tracks, they arrived at the abbey of Saint-Savin, where the monks received them humanely. The abbot, who was himself of a good family, provided them with accommodation worthy of their station and asked them about their adventures, as he showed them to their quarters. When he had heard what had happened to them, he was able to inform them that there were others in the same boat. There were, in fact, in another room, two young ladies who had escaped from dangers just as great or even greater, inasmuch as

they had had to deal, not with men, but with wild beasts. Half a league this side of Pierrefitte they had met a bear coming down the mountain. They had taken flight and galloped so fast that their horses had dropped dead beneath them as they rode through the abbey gates. Two of their women had arrived some time after them, and reported that the bear had killed all their male servants. So the three newly arrived gentlemen and the two ladies went in to see them, and recognized them at once as their companions Nomerfide and Ennasuite. They were both in tears, but once they had all embraced, told one another about their misfortunes, and heard a few [pious] exhortations from the good abbot, they began to take some consolation from their reunion. The next morning they heard mass with great devotion, praising God for delivering them from the perils of the mountains.

While they were at mass a man came rushing into the church in his shirt sleeves, shouting for help as if someone was chasing him. Hircan and the other two gentlemen got up at once to see what was the matter. Two men with drawn swords were in hot pursuit. When they saw so many people about they tried to get away, but Hircan and the others ran after them and made sure they did not get away with their lives. When Hircan came back he found that the man in the shirt sleeves was another of their companions, a man by the name of Geburon. He told them how he had been in a farm cottage near Pierrefitte, when three men had appeared. He had been in bed at the time, and dressed in nothing but his shirt. But he had jumped up, grabbed his sword, and had managed to wound one of the men and immobilize him. While the other two were busy picking up their companion, he had weighed up the odds, and decided that rather than face two armed men in his present state of undress, his best chance was to make a run for it. He thanked God now that he had been so lightly dressed, and he expressed his gratitude to Hircan and the other two for avenging him.

After they had heard mass and dined, they sent someone to find out if it was possible yet to cross the Gave de Pau. When they learned that the river was still impassable, they were extremely worried, in spite of the fact that the abbot repeatedly reassured them that they could have lodging in the abbey until the floods subsided. For that day they accepted this offer, and

the same evening, as they were about to go to bed, an old monk turned up. He had come from Sarrance where he went every year for the Nativity of our Lady. On being asked about the journey, he told how, because of the floods, he had come over the mountains, and found the tracks more treacherous than he had ever seen them. On the way he had witnessed a very moving spectacle. He had come across a gentleman by the name of Simontaut, who, tired of waiting for the flood waters to go down, had decided to try to attempt a crossing. He had placed his trust in his excellent horse, and had grouped his servants round him to break the force of the current. But in the middle all the men on weaker mounts had been swept off down the stream. Neither men nor horses were ever seen again. The gentleman, finding himself completely alone, turned his horse back. But the animal could not make it, and collapsed under him. By God's will he was close enough to the edge to be able to drag himself on all fours out of the water and up the hard stony bank, though he had swallowed a good deal of water, and was so exhausted that he could hardly keep going. He lay amongst the rocks, soaked through and sick at heart at having seen his servants perish before his eyes. By a stroke of good fortune he was found in the evening by a shepherd bringing home the sheep. The mere sight of the gentleman, let alone the tale he had to tell, was enough to make the shepherd understand his plight. He had taken him by the hand and led him to his humble abode, where he had kindled a few sticks to dry him out as best he could. That same evening God had brought to the shepherd's house the old monk, who had told Simontaut the way to Sarrance, and assured him that he would find better accommodation there than anywhere else. He had also told him that he would meet there an old widow by the name of Oisille, who had suffered misfortunes similar to his own.

When they heard the old monk mention the name of the good Lady Oisille and the gentle knight Simontaut, they were overjoyed beyond description. They praised their Creator that He had been satisfied to take the servants and save their masters and mistresses. Parlamente in particular gave heartfelt thanks to God, for Simontaut had long served her as her devoted and loving servant. They pressed the monk to tell them the road to

Sarrance, and although he made it sound very difficult, they were not deterred from setting out that very day. The abbot provided them with everything they needed – [the best horses in Lavedan, good Béarnese cloaks,] wine and victuals, as well as guides to conduct them safely over the mountains. Most of the journey had to be done on foot rather than on horseback, but eventually they arrived, exhausted and bathed in sweat, at the abbey of Our Lady at Sarrance. The abbot was not a particularly nice character, but he did not dare to refuse them board and lodging, for fear of offending the Seigneur de Béarn, who, as he knew perfectly well, was on friendly terms with them. Hypocrite that he was, he put on as pleasant an air as he was able, and took them to see the good Lady Oisille and the noble Simontaut. They were overjoyed to be reunited so miraculously, and they spent the whole night in the church without finding it a moment too long, praising and thanking God for the great mercy He had bestowed upon them. In the morning they took a little rest, then heard mass. They all received the holy sacrament of union, in which all Christians are united in one, beseeching Him, who in His goodness had brought them together, that their journey might be finished to His glory.

After they had dined they sent someone to inquire whether the water had gone down, only to learn that the river was more swollen than before, and that it would be a long time before they could cross with safety. So they decided to build a bridge, using two rocks which were fairly close to one another. To this day there are planks at this point for the use of foot-travellers coming from Oléron who do not want to use the ford. The abbot was rather pleased that they were offering to put themselves to this expense, because it meant that he might get an increased number of pilgrims. So he provided the necessary workmen, but he was so mean that he contributed not a penny to the actual cost. The workmen said that they could not do the job in under ten or twelve days. This was rather a boring prospect for all of them, men and women alike. However, Parlamente, the wife of Hircan, was not one to let herself become idle or melancholy, and having asked her husband for permission, she spoke to the old Lady Oisille.

'Madame,' she said, 'you have had much experience of life,

and you now occupy the position of mother in regard to the rest of us women, and it surprises me that you do not consider some pastime to alleviate the boredom and distress that we shall have to bear during our long stay here. Unless we have some amusing and virtuous way of occupying ourselves, we run the risk of [falling] sick.'

Longarine, the young widow, added, 'What is worse, we'll all become miserable and disagreeable – and that's an incurable disease. There isn't a man or woman amongst us who hasn't every cause to sink into despair, if we consider all that we have lost.'

Ennasuite laughed and rejoined, 'Not everyone's lost a husband, like you, you know. And as for losing servants, no need to despair about that – there are plenty of men ready to do service! All the same, I do agree that we ought to have something to amuse us, so that we can pass the time as pleasantly as we can.'

Her companion Nomerfide said that this was a very good idea, and that if she had to spend a single day without some entertainment, she would be sure to die the next.

All the men supported this, and asked the Lady Oisille if she would kindly organize what they should do.

'My children,' replied Oisille, 'when you ask me to show you a pastime that is capable of delivering you from your boredom and your sorrow, you are asking me to do something that I find very difficult. All my life I have searched for a remedy, and I have found only one – the reading of holy Scripture, in which one may find true and perfect spiritual joy, from which proceed health and bodily repose. And if you ask what the prescription is that keeps me happy and healthy in my old age, I will tell you. As soon as I rise in the morning I take the Scriptures and read them. I see and contemplate the goodness of God, who for our sakes has sent His son to earth to declare the holy word and the good news by which He grants remission of all our sins, and payment of all our debts, through His gift to us of His love, His passion and His merits. And my contemplations give me such joy, that I take my psalter, and with the utmost humility, sing the beautiful psalms and hymns that the Holy Spirit has composed in the heart of David and the other authors. The contentment this affords me fills me with such well-being that

whatever the evils of the day, they are to me so many blessings, for in my heart I have by faith Him who has borne these evils for me. Likewise, before supper, I withdraw to nourish my soul with readings and meditations. In the evening I ponder in my mind everything I have done during the day, so that I may ask God forgiveness of my sins, and give thanks to Him for His mercies. And so I lay myself to rest in His love, fear and peace, assured against all evils. And this, my children, is the pastime that long ago I adopted. All other ways have I tried, but none has given me spiritual contentment. I believe that if, each morning, you give one hour to reading, and then, during mass, say your prayers devoutly, you will find even in this wilderness all the beauty a city could afford. For, a person who knows God will find all things beautiful in Him, and without Him all things will seem ugly. So I say to you, if you would live in happiness, heed my advice.'

Then Hircan spoke: 'Madame, anyone who has read the holy Scriptures – as indeed I think we all have here – will readily agree that what you have said is true. However, you must bear in mind that we have not yet become so mortified in the flesh that we are not in need of some sort of amusement and physical exercise in order to pass the time. After all, when we're at home, we've got our hunting and hawking to distract us from the thousand and one foolish thoughts that pass through one's mind. The ladies have their housework and their needlework. They have their dances, too, which provide a respectable way for them to get some exercise. All this leads me to suggest, on behalf of the men here, that you, Madame, since you are the oldest among us, should read to us every morning about the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the great and wonderful things He has done for us. Between dinner and vespers I think we should choose some pastime, which, while not being prejudicial to the soul, will be agreeable to the body. In that way we shall spend a very pleasant day.'

Lady Oisille replied that she herself found it so difficult to put behind her the vanities of life, that she was afraid the pastime suggested by Hircan might not be a good choice. However, the question should, she thought, be judged after an open discussion, and she asked Hircan to put his point of view first.

'Well, my point of view wouldn't take long to give,' he began, 'if I thought that the pastime I would really like were as agreeable to a certain lady among us as it would be to me. So I'll keep quiet for now, and abide by what the others say.'

Thinking he was intending this for her, his wife. Parleme, began to blush. 'It may be, Hircan,' she said, half angrily and half laughing, 'that the lady you think ought to be the most annoyed at what you say would have ways and means of getting her own back, if she so desired. But let's leave on one side all pastimes that require only two participants, and concentrate on those which everybody can join in.'

Hircan turned to the ladies. 'Since my wife has managed to put the right interpretation on my words,' he said, 'and since private pastimes don't appeal to her, I think she's in a better position than anyone to know which pastime all of us will be able to enjoy. Let me say right now that I accept her opinion as if it were my own.'

They all concurred in this, and Parleme, seeing that it had fallen to her to make the choice, addressed them all as follows.

'If I felt myself to be as capable as the ancients, by whom the arts were discovered, then I would invent some pastime myself that would meet the requirements you have laid down for me. However, I know what lies within the scope of my own knowledge and ability – I can hardly even remember the clever things other people have invented, let alone invent new things myself. So I shall be quite content to follow closely in the footsteps of other people who have already provided for your needs. For example, I don't think there's one of us who hasn't read the hundred tales by Boccaccio, which have recently been translated from Italian into French, and which are so highly thought of by the [most Christian] King Francis I, by Monseigneur the Dauphin, Madame the Dauphine and Madame Marguerite. If Boccaccio could have heard how highly these illustrious people praised him, it would have been enough to raise him from the grave. As a matter of fact, the two ladies I've mentioned, along with other people at the court, made up their minds to do the same as Boccaccio. There was to be one difference – that they should not write any story that was not truthful. Together with Monseigneur the Dauphin the ladies promised to produce ten

stories each, and to get together a party of ten people who were qualified to contribute something, excluding those who studied and were men of letters. Monseigneur the Dauphin didn't want their art brought in, and he was afraid that rhetorical ornament would in part falsify the truth of the account. A number of things led to the project being completely forgotten – the major affairs of state that subsequently overtook the King, the peace treaty between him and the King of England, the confinement of Madame the Dauphine and several other events of sufficient importance to keep the court otherwise occupied. However, it can now be completed in the ten days of leisure we have before us, while we wait for our bridge to be finished. If you so wished, we could go each afternoon between midday and four o'clock to the lovely meadow that borders the Gave de Pau, where the leaves on the trees are so thick that the hot sun cannot penetrate the shade and the cool beneath. There we can sit and rest, and each of us will tell a story which he has either witnessed himself, or which he has heard from somebody worthy of belief. At the end of our ten days we will have completed the whole hundred. And if, God willing, the lords and ladies I've mentioned find our endeavours worthy of their attention, we shall make them a present of them when we get back, instead of the usual statuettes and beads. I'm sure they would find that preferable. In spite of all this, if any of you is able to think of something more agreeable, I shall gladly bow to his or her opinion.'

But everyone of them replied that it would be impossible to think of anything better, and that they could hardly wait for the morrow. So the day came happily to a close with reminiscences of things they had all experienced in their time.

As soon as morning came they all went into Madame Oisille's room, where she was already at her prayers. When they had listened for a good hour to the lesson she had to read them, and then devoutly heard mass, they went, at ten o'clock, to dine, after which they retired to their separate rooms to attend to what they had to do. At midday they all went back as arranged to the meadow, which was looking so beautiful and fair that it would take a Boccaccio to describe it as it really was. Enough for us to say that a more beautiful meadow there never was seen. When they were all seated on the grass, so green and soft that there

was no need for carpets or cushions, Simontaut said: 'Which of us shall be [the one in charge]?'

'Since you have spoken first,' replied Hircan, 'it should be you who give the orders. Where games are concerned everybody is equal.'

'Would to God,' sighed Simontaut, 'that the one thing in all the world I had were the power to order everyone in our party to comply with my wishes!'

Parlamente knew very well what he meant by this remark, and started to cough. Hircan did not notice the colour rising in her cheeks, and simply went on to invite Simontaut to start, which he did at once.

'Ladies, I have been so ill rewarded for my long and devoted service, that, in order to avenge myself on Love and on the woman who is so cruel to me, I shall do my utmost to collect together all the accounts of foul deeds perpetrated by women on us poor men. And every single one will be the unadulterated truth.'

FIRST DAY

STORY ONE

In the town of Alençon, during the lifetime of the last Duke Charles, there was a procurator by the name of Saint-Aignan. He had married a noblewoman of the region who was more beautiful than she was virtuous, and who, on account of her charms and well-known flightiness, was the object of the attentions of the Bishop of Sées. To achieve his ends the prelate took care to humour the husband. The result was that not only did the husband fail to notice the wicked behaviour of his wife and the Bishop, but he even came to forget the affection he had always had for his master and mistress. Indeed, things went so far, that although he had in the past been their most loyal servant, he turned so much against them that he even brought in a sorcerer to procure the Duchess's death. And so the Bishop continued his affair with the wretched woman, who for her part continued to do his bidding more out of greed than love. Besides, the husband had urged her to go on cultivating him. However, in the town of Alençon there also lived a certain young man. He was the son of the Lieutenant-General, and the procurator's wife became half demented with infatuation for him. She frequently made use of the Bishop in order to obtain commissions for her husband that would get him out of the way while she saw the son of the Lieutenant, who was called du Mesnil. This arrangement persisted for quite some time. She had the Bishop for profit, and young du Mesnil for pleasure. Of course she swore to du Mesnil that if she bestowed favours on the Bishop, it was only so that they themselves would have more freedom to indulge in their pleasures. In any case, she assured him, the Bishop got nothing from her but fair words, and nobody but he, du Mesnil, would get anything else.

One day, when Saint-Aignan had gone to visit the Bishop, his wife asked him if she might go into the country. The town did not agree with her, she said. No sooner had she arrived at her husband's farm in the country than she wrote a note to du Mesnil, telling him to come and see her there around ten o'clock