

## FIFTH DAY

### PROLOGUE

When morning came they broke their fast with a spiritual meal prepared for them by Oisille, a meal so nourishing that it sufficed to fortify both body and soul. The whole company was very attentive, and it seemed to them that they had never heard a sermon so much to their profit. Hearing the last bell ringing for mass, they went to exercise their souls in contemplation of the holy words to which they had just been listening. When they had heard mass and had taken a short walk, they sat down to eat, looking forward to what would no doubt be a day every bit as agreeable as those which had gone before. Saffredent declared that he wished the bridge would take another month to build, so much was he enjoying himself. But the Abbot of the place took no consolation from living amongst so many honourable people, because he did not dare to entertain his lady pilgrims in the way he was wont. Consequently he had the work on the bridge continued with all possible haste. They rested a little after dinner, and then returned to their customary diversions. Once they were all sitting in the meadow, they asked Parlamente to pick the next storyteller.

'I think,' she said, 'that Saffredent will start the day well - from the expression on his face he won't be wanting to tell us stories to make us cry!'

'Ladies,' he began, 'you'll be very hard-hearted if you don't feel sorry for this Franciscan friar I'm going to tell you a story about. Some of the stories about monks that we've already heard might have led you to think that they concern things happening to young ladies only because no great obstacles were placed in the way of their execution, and because the perpetrators of these deeds were not scared off at the outset. However, I want to show you that what really happens is that their blind lust deprives them of all fear and circumspection, and in order to convince you, I'm going to tell you about something that took place in Flanders.'

### STORY FORTY-ONE

It was the year that Madame Margaret of Austria came to Cambrai on behalf of her nephew the Emperor in order to negotiate the peace treaty between him and our most Christian King, who was represented by Madame Louise of Savoy. Now in the retinue of Margaret of Austria was the Countess of Egmont, who had the reputation among her companions of being the most beautiful of all Flemish women. After the peace conference the Countess returned to her home, and as it was the season of Advent, she sent a request to a Franciscan convent for a competent, honest man who could preach, as well as hear confessions from herself and her whole household. The Superior of the convent, being the beneficiary of the house of Egmont as well as of the house of Fiennes, to which the Countess belonged, sought out the best man he had for the job. Being more concerned than any other order to curry favour with the big noble families, the friars sent the most renowned preacher they had. Throughout Advent he carried out his duties very well, and the Countess was greatly pleased with him. On Christmas Eve she wished to make her communion and receive her Creator, so she first called for her confessor. When she had finished her confession, which for the sake of privacy she made in a chapel behind closed doors, she was followed by her maid of honour, who, after making her own confession, sent her daughter in to take her turn. The girl told him everything, and the details of her private life made our good father think he would like to risk an unusual kind of penance. So he said to her:

'Your sins are great, my daughter, so great that as a penance I order you to wear my cord against your bare flesh.'

The girl, reluctant to disobey, replied, 'Give it to me, father, and I will wear it.'

'My daughter,' answered the good father, 'it would not be right for you to tie it on yourself. It is necessary that my own



hands, these same hands which will give you absolution, should first fasten the cord around you. Then you will be absolved from all your sins.'

The girl burst into tears, and said she would not let him do anything of the kind.

'What!' said the confessor, 'are you a heretic, refusing to do penance, against the orders of God and Holy Mother Church?'

'I make my confession just as the Church commands,' said the girl, 'and earnestly desire to receive absolution and do penance, but not at your hands. So I am indeed refusing your penance!'

'If that be the case,' said the confessor, 'I cannot give you absolution.'

The young lady got up and went out with a troubled conscience, for she was indeed very young and afraid lest she had done wrong in refusing the priest. When the end of the mass came, the Countess of Egmont received the *Corpus Domini*, and the lady-in-waiting, whose turn was next, asked her daughter if she was ready to follow her. The girl started to cry, and said that she had not made her confession.

'What were you doing all that time with the preacher, then?' asked her mother.

'Nothing,' said the girl, 'because I refused to carry out the penance, and so he refused to give me absolution.'

The mother discreetly inquired a little further, and found out the strange nature of the penance which the good father wanted to impose on her daughter. She had the girl confessed by another priest, and they then made their communion together. As soon as the Countess returned from church, the lady-in-waiting registered her complaint about the preacher. The Countess was surprised and extremely angry, for she had always had a high opinion of the man. All the same her anger did not prevent her laughing at the originality of the penance. But neither did her laughter prevent her having him soundly beaten in the kitchens until under the hail of blows he confessed the truth. Finally she sent him bound hand and foot back to his Superior with the request that next time more respectable people should be appointed to the preaching of God's word.

\*

'So, Ladies, you see that even in a household as exalted as this one these men aren't afraid of giving vent to their passions. Just imagine what they are capable of in the more humble places where they go asking for offerings, and where so many opportunities present themselves that it's a miracle they ever get away without causing a scandal. It is all this, Ladies, which leads me to beg you not to think ill of them any more, but to be compassionate. Remember, the passion that blinds Franciscans doesn't spare women either when it decides to strike!'

'Well,' said Oisille, 'that particular Franciscan was wicked indeed! His sin is all the worse because he was a monk, a priest and a preacher, and yet he could still do an evil thing like that, on Christmas day, in church and under cover of the confessional!'

'To hear you talk,' said Hircan, 'it would seem that Franciscans ought to be angels, or somehow better behaved than other men. But from the examples you've heard you should expect them to be even worse than the one we've just heard about. Indeed, it seems to me that this man was very much to be excused, given the fact that he found himself in a situation where he was alone, at night, with a pretty young girl.'

'Yes,' said Oisille, 'but after all it was Christmas night.'

'And that excuses him all the more,' said Simontaut, 'because he was in the same situation as Joseph – in the company of a beautiful virgin, and he wanted to beget a child so that he could truly play his part in the mystery of the Nativity!'

'If he'd really been thinking of Joseph and the Virgin Mary,' said Parlamente, 'he wouldn't have had such evil intentions. But the fact is that he was a thoroughly bad character – or he would not, without any provocation whatsoever, have tried such an evil trick.'

'It seems to me,' said Oisille, 'that the Countess punished him as he deserved, and in a way that should serve as a warning to his companions.'

'But the question is,' said Nomerfide, 'whether she did right to shock people like that, I mean, whether it might not have been better if she had gently reproached him for what he had done rather than expose a fellow creature in such a fashion.'

'I think what she did was right,' said Geburon, 'since it is required that we correct our fellow-men privately before telling



anyone else or referring it to the Church. [In any case, when a man has no sense of shame at all, it's very difficult for him ever to reform,] since it's shame that keeps people from sin, just as much as conscience itself.'

'I believe,' said Parlamente, 'that we should indeed follow the teaching of the Gospel – except towards people who themselves preach the word of the Gospel yet practise the opposite. We shouldn't hesitate to make a public scandal of people whose scandalous behaviour affects everybody. It seems to me to be to one's credit to let these people be seen as they really are, so that a cheap imitation doesn't get mistaken for the precious stone, [and so that young girls who are not always alive to the dangers may be put on their guard.] But who will Saffredent choose to speak next?'

'Since it is you who ask me,' replied Saffredent, 'it is you whom I choose. Could any man of understanding do otherwise?'

'Well, since you have chosen me, I'll tell you a story whose truth I can myself testify to. I've always heard it said that when virtue resides in a weak and frail person, when it is assailed by some strong and all-powerful antagonist, it is then that virtue is most to be praised, and then that it shows itself as it truly is. If strength can defend itself against strength, that is not surprising, but if the weak defeats the strong, then the weak is extolled by the whole world. The people in my story are known to me personally, and I would, I think, be doing an injustice if I did not recount to you how I have seen great virtue hidden beneath the most humble garments and ignored by everyone. The deeds of the person I have in mind are so noble and so good that I feel obliged to tell you about them.'

## STORY FORTY-TWO

In one of the best towns in Touraine there lived a lord, a lord of high and noble birth, who had been brought up there from his early childhood. I shall say nothing of the perfections, of the grace and beauty of this young prince, except that in his day there was no one to equal him. At the age of fifteen he derived more pleasure from horses and hunting than from looking at the ladies. But one day, when he was in a church, he caught sight of a young lady who had been brought up in the château which was his home. This girl was called Françoise. Her father had remarried after her mother's death and she had moved to Poitou with her brother. She also had an illegitimate half-sister, of whom her father was extremely fond, and who had been married to a butler in this young prince's household, with the result that she was as well-placed as anyone else in the family. The father died and left everything he possessed to Françoise, who went to live in her newly inherited property, just outside the town. But being marriageable, and only sixteen years old, she preferred not to remain alone in her house, and instead went to board with her sister, the butler's wife. Now the young prince saw that for a girl with light brown hair she was rather attractive and that her graceful manner was unusual for one of her station, to the point that she looked more like a noblewoman or a princess than a townswoman, and he took a long look at her. He had never before been in love, but now he felt within his heart an unaccustomed glow of pleasure. When he returned to his chamber he made inquiries about the girl whom he had seen in church, and realized that when he had been small she had come to the château to play with her dolls with his sister, who, once reminded of her childhood friend, sent for her, gave her a warm welcome and invited her to come to see them often. This the girl gladly did, whenever there was a wedding feast or some other gathering. On these occasions the young Prince derived such pleasure from the sight of her that he took it into his head to be in love with her. As he knew she was of poor family and