

STORY EIGHTEEN

My story is about a noble lord of excellent family. He was living in one of the important towns in the kingdom of France, and was studying at the schools there. His desire was to attain that knowledge which is the key to honour and virtue among men of worth. At the age of seventeen or eighteen he was so knowledgeable that one would have thought him a shining example, fit to instruct his fellow-students. However, he was also to become a pupil in the School of Love. Now Love is a subtle teacher, and to ensure that his lessons would be heard and taken to heart, he concealed himself behind the fair eyes and face of a certain lady. She was the most beautiful lady in all the land, and as chance would have it, was in the town at that time for some lawsuit. But before setting about the conquest of the heart of the noble young lord, Love first vanquished the heart of the lady herself, by bringing all his manly perfections before her eyes. For he was indeed so fair of face, so fair of speech, so fair in all his ways that there was not a man in all the land, whatever his station, who could surpass him. Those of you who know how quickly the fire of love spreads when it starts to smoulder in the heart and in the imagination will understand that once Love enters two such perfect subjects, he never stops until he has rendered them obedient to his commands, until indeed he has filled them both so full of his clear light that all their thoughts, all their desires and all their speech are nothing but the blazing forth of his flame. With the timidity of youth, the young lord pursued his desires with the utmost caution. But already the lady was conquered. There was no need of force. Yet Modesty, that persistent companion of ladies, prevented her for a while from showing her feelings. But in the end, the fortress of the heart where Honour dwells was destroyed, and the poor lady gave herself up to that which she had never wished to resist.

In order to test the long-suffering, constancy and love of her servant, she acceded to his demands on one exceedingly difficult

condition. If he was able to keep this condition, then she would love him perfectly for evermore. If, however, he were to fail, then he would not possess her for as long as he should live. The condition was this. She would be happy to go to bed with him and to talk with him there. But they were both to keep their nightshirts on, and he was to demand nothing more than her discourse and chaste kisses! The young man, who felt that there was no joy in the world to be compared with that which she was promising him, agreed. Evening came, and the promise was kept. However much she encouraged him, however much he was tempted, he refused to break his word. Purgatory itself could not, he felt, be worse than what he went through that night. Yet so great was his love, so firm was his hope, that he was happy to wait in patience, for he was sure that the eternal love which it had cost him so much to win would in the end be his. So he left her bed without once [asking of her anything that would have gone against his promise.] But the lady was, I think, more astonished than pleased by his upright behaviour, and began to think that either he did not love her as much as he had said, or that he had found her less attractive than he had expected. [Completely disregarding his demonstration of honour, chastity, patience and fidelity,] she decided to put the young man's love to another test before keeping her own promise. To this end, she asked him to approach one of the girls in her entourage, a girl who was extremely attractive and somewhat younger than herself. The idea was that he should make amorous overtures to this young girl, so that people would think it was because of her that he came to the house so often. The young lord, quite certain that his lady loved him as much as he loved her, carried out to the letter everything she ordered him to do. He forced himself for her sake to pursue her young companion, who, seeing what a handsome, gently spoken young man he was, believed his lies rather than the truth, and promptly fell in love with him, thinking he loved her. When the lady realized things had gone as far as this, she decided at last to permit the young man, who was still pressing her to fulfil her promise, to come to her room at one hour after midnight. She had, she told him, tried out his love and tested his obedience so thoroughly that it was only right that she should reward his

long and patient wait. There can be no doubt about the joy which her loving and devoted servant experienced.

At the appointed hour he went to his lady's room. But she still wanted to test the strength of his love. So before he arrived, she took the young girl on one side, and said to her: 'I know that there's a certain young gentleman who's in love with you, and I think you are no less passionately in love with him. Well, I feel so sorry for you both, that 'I've decided to give you the opportunity to talk on your own together for as long as you like.'

The girl was so transported, that she could scarcely conceal the love she felt, and said that she could never refuse such a proposal. Following her mistress's advice, indeed her orders, she went to the appointed bedroom, undressed and lay down on the magnificent bed. The door was left half open, and all the candles lit, so that the girl and all her charms could be clearly seen. Then, pretending to go away, the lady herself hid near the bed in a spot where she could not be seen. It was not long before her poor devoted servant arrived, prompt at the appointed hour and fully expecting to find his beloved waiting for him as promised. In he crept, closed the door behind him, took off his gown and his fur-lined shoes, and went over to the bed, thinking to find there his heart's desire. No sooner did he stretch out his arms to embrace the recumbent figure he took to be his lady, than the poor girl, thinking he was all hers, flung her arms around his neck. The expression in her eyes and the passionate words she murmured would have been enough to put the holiest hermit off his paternosters! But prompted by his great love for his lady, the young man recognized both the voice and the face, and jumped out of the bed even faster than he had jumped in, when he realized that this was not the woman for whom he had suffered so long and so deeply!

Angry not only with the girl herself, but also with her mistress, he said: 'I shall not be made other than I am either by your wild desires or by the wicked one who put you here! Seek to be an honest woman, for by no act of mine shall your good name be lost!'

Beside himself with rage, he marched out, and for a long time he did not come back to see his lady. However, Love, who

never abandons hope, assured the young gentleman that the longer his constancy was tried and tested, the longer and pleasanter would be the enjoyment in the end. For her part, the lady, who had seen and heard everything, was surprised at the depth and constancy of his love, but it pleased her too, and she was anxious to see him again to ask his forgiveness for the pain she had inflicted in testing him. So at the earliest opportunity she addressed him in tones of such gracious tenderness that he not only forgot all his past torments, but even began to think of them with pleasure. For after all, it was through them that his constancy was honoured at last, and through them that his lady was convinced of his love. From that hour on there were no more obstacles and no more trials, and from his lady he received all that his heart could desire.

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'Now, Ladies, can you tell me of a woman as constant, as patient and as faithful in love as the man in this story? Anyone who's been through such temptations will find the temptations we are shown in pictures of St Anthony as nothing by comparison. Anyone who can remain patient and chaste when beautiful women offer not only their beauty and their love, but also time, place and opportunity, will surely be virtuous enough to resist every single devil in Hell!'

'It is a great shame,' said Oisille, 'that he did not address himself to a woman who had the same resources of virtue as he. We should then have had the most perfect example of pure and perfect love that has ever been heard of.'

'Tell me,' said Geburon, 'which of the two trials do you think was the most difficult for the young man to bear?'

'I think the second,' Parlamente said, 'because disappointment and resentment are the strongest temptations of all.'

Longarine, however, felt that the first trial was the hardest, 'since he had to overcome Love as well as overcome himself, in order to keep his promise.'

'It is easy for you to talk,' said Simontaut, 'but those of us who know the truth in such matters ought to say what they think. As far as I'm concerned, he acted like an idiot the first time, and like a madman the second. You see, I think that by keeping his promise he only made his lady suffer as much as,

or more than, he himself suffered. The only reason she made him make such a promise in the first place was so that she could make herself look more virtuous than she really was. She knew perfectly well that desperate love can't be held back by orders or oaths or by anything else in the whole world. But she wanted to make her vice look virtuous, and to make it appear that she could be won only by acts of virtue nothing less than heroic. The second time, he showed that he was mad to let the girl go, when she was so obviously in love with him and was certainly worth more than the woman he'd made his promise to. What is more, he had a good excuse, given the bitter disappointment he had just experienced.'

Dagoucin objected to this, saying that his opinion was exactly the opposite, and that on the first occasion the young man had shown himself patient, constant and true to his word, while the second occasion showed that in his love he was perfect, true and faithful.

'And how do we know,' said Saffredent, 'that he wasn't one of those referred to in a certain chapter headed *De frigidis et maleficiatis*?* If Hircan had really wanted to sing this man's praises, he should have gone on to tell us how he acquitted himself once he got what he wanted. Then we could judge whether it was his virtue or his impotence that made him so well-behaved!'

'You may be quite sure,' said Hircan, 'that if he'd told me, I wouldn't have kept it back, any more than I have the rest of the story. But knowing him as well as I do, and knowing what his temperament is like, I shall always take the view that he acted the way he did because of the power of his love rather than because of frigidity or impotence.'

'Well,' Simontaut replied, 'if he was the kind of man you say, then he ought to have broken his oath. After all, even if she had got annoyed at a little thing like that, it wouldn't have been too difficult to calm her down again!'

'But perhaps she didn't want him to do it just then?' said Ennasuite.

* Reference to the Decretals of Gregory IX, Liber iv, Titulus xv: *De frigidis et maleficiatis, et impotentia coeundi* ('On men who are impotent and under magic charms, and on the inability to copulate').

'So what? Wasn't he strong enough to force her,' Saffredent said, 'seeing that she led him on?'

'Holy Mary!' exclaimed Nomerfide. 'That's a fine way to talk! Do you think that's the way to win the favour of a lady you believe to be chaste and virtuous?'

'In my opinion,' said Saffredent, 'when a man desires that sort of thing from a woman, the greatest honour he can do her is to take her by force. Because, however humble a girl may be, she will want you to beg and beseech over and over again. There are others who have to be given a lot of presents before you can win them round. [Others are so stupid that they let themselves go at the slightest trick or guile, and with them it's merely a matter of finding the right method.] But when you're faced with one that's too sensible and good to be tricked, and too well-behaved to be won round by presents and talk, is one not justified in trying every possible means of conquering her? Whenever you hear that a man's taken a woman by force, you can take it from me that the woman in question must have deprived him of all hope of success by other means. You shouldn't think the worse of a man who risks his life like that in order to give vent to his love.'

Geburon started to laugh. 'I've often seen places besieged and taken by storm,' he said, 'because neither threats nor offers of money could persuade the defending forces to parley, for they say that once you engage in talks, you're already half defeated!'

'It would seem that all the love-affairs in the world are based on the kind of wicked passion [that Simontaut and Saffredent have just been talking about]!' said Ennasuite. 'But there are people who have been in love, and loved long and constantly, without having those motives.'

'If you know a story about somebody like that,' said Hircan, 'then I hand over to you for the next one.'

'I do know such a story,' she replied, 'and shall be only too happy to tell it to you.'