

The Decameron

Giovanni Boccaccio

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE AUTHOR TO THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSES

Gracious Ladies, so often as I consider with my selfe, and observe respectively, how naturally you are enclined to compassion; as many times doe I acknowledge, that this present worke of mine, will (in your judgement) appeare to have but a harsh and offensive beginning, in regard of the mournfull remembrance it beareth at the verie entrance of the last Pestilentiall mortality, universally hurtfull to all that beheld it, or otherwise came to knowledge of it. But for all that, I desire it may not be so dreadfull to you, to hinder your further proceeding in reading, as if none were to looke thereon, but with sighes and teares. For, I could rather wish, that so fearefull a beginning, should seeme but as an high and steepy hil appeares to them, that attempt to travell farre on foote, and ascending the same with some difficulty, come afterward to walk upon a goodly even plaine, which causeth the more contentment in them, because the attayning thereto was hard and painfull. For even as pleasures are cut off by griefe and anguish; so sorrowes cease by joyes most sweete and happie arriving.

After this briefe mollestation; briefe I say, because it is contained within small compasse of Writing; immediately followeth the most sweete and pleasant taste of pleasure, whereof (before) I made promise to you. Which (peradventure) could not bee expected by such a beginning, if promise stood not thereunto engaged.

And indeed, if I could well have conveyed you to the center of my desire, by any

other way, then so rude and rocky a passage as this is, I would gladly have done it. But because without this Narration, we could not demonstrate the occasion how and wherefore the matters hapned, which you shall reade in the ensuing Discourses: I must set them downe (even as constrained thereto by meere necessity) in writing after this manner.

The yeare of our blessed Saviours incarnation, 1348, that memorable mortality happened in the excellent City, farre beyond all the rest in Italy; which plague, by operation of the superiour bodies, or rather for our enormous iniquities, by the just anger of God was sent upon us mortals. Some few yeeres before, it tooke beginning in the Easterne partes, sweeping thence an innumerable

quantity of living soules: extending it selfe afterward from place to place Westward, until it seized on the said City. Where neither humane skill or providence, could use any prevention, notwithstanding it was cleansed of many annoyances, by diligent Officers thereto deputed: besides prohibition of all sickly persons enterance, and all possible provision dayly used for conservation of such as were in health, with incessant prayers and supplications of devoute people, for the asswaging of so dangerous a sicknesse.

About the beginning of the yeare, it also began in very strange manner, as appeared by divers admirable effects; yet not as it had done in the East Countries, where Lord or Lady being touched therewith, manifest signes of inevitable death followed thereon, by bleeding at the nose. But here it began with yong children, male and female, either under the armepits, or in the groine by certaine swellings,

in some to the bignesse of an Apple, in others like an Egge, and so in divers greater or lesser, which (in their vulgar Language) they termed to be a Botch or Byle. In very short time after, those two infected parts were growne mortiferous, and would disperse abroad indifferently, to all parts of the body; whereupon, such was the quality of the disease, to shew it selfe by blacke or blew spottes, which would appeare on the armes of many, others on their thighes, and every part else of the body: in some great and few, in others small and thicke.

Now, as the Byle (at the beginning) was an assured signe of neere approaching death; so prooved the spots likewise to such as had them: for the curing of which sicknesse it seemed, that the Physitians counsell, the vertue of Medicines, or any application else, could not yeeld any remedy: but rather it plainly appeared, that either the nature of the disease would not endure it, or ignorance in the Physitians could not comprehend from whence the cause proceeded, and so by consequent, no resolution was to be determined. Moreover, beside the number of such as were skilfull in Art, many more both women and men, without ever having any knowledge in Physicke, became Physitians: so that not onely few were healed, but (well-neere) all dyed, within three dayes after the saide signes were seene; some sooner, and others later, commonly without either Feaver, or any other accident.

And this pestilence was yet of farre greater power or violence; for, not onely healthfull persons speaking to the sicke, comming to see them, or ayring cloathes in kindnesse to comfort them, was an occasion of ensuing death: but touching