

DROLL STORIES

BY

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

WHEN, in March, 1832, the first volume of the now famous *Contes Drolatiques* was published by Gosselin of Paris, Balzac, in a short preface, written in the publisher's name, replied to those attacks which he anticipated certain critics would make upon his hardy experiment. He claimed for his book the protection of all those to whom literature was dear, because it was a work of art—and a work of art, in the highest sense of the word, it undoubtedly is. Like Boccaccio, Rabelais, the Queen of Navarre, Ariosto, and Ver-ville, the great author of *The Human Comedy* has painted an epoch. In the fresh and wonderful language of the Merry Vicar of Meudon, he has given us a marvellous picture of French life and manners in the sixteenth century. The gallant knights and merry dames of that eventful period of French history stand out in bold relief upon his canvas. The background to these life-like figures is, as it were, "Sketched upon the spot." After reading the *Contes Drolatiques*, one could almost find one's way about the towns and villages of Touraine, unassisted by map or guide. Not only is this book a work of art from its historical information and topographical accuracy; its claims to that distinction rest upon a broader foundation. Written in the nineteenth century in imitation of the style of the sixteenth, it is a triumph of literary archæology. It is a model of that which it professes to imitate; the production of a writer

who, to accomplish it, must have been at once historian, linguist, philosopher, archæologist, and anatomist, and each in no ordinary degree. In France his work has long been regarded as a classic—as a faithful picture of the last days of the *moyen âge*, when kings and princesses, brave gentlemen and haughty ladies, laughed openly at stories and jokes which are considered disgraceful by their more fastidious descendants. In England the difficulties of the language employed, and the quaintness and peculiarity of its style, have placed it beyond the reach of all but those thoroughly acquainted with the French of the sixteenth century. Taking into consideration the vast amount of historical information enshrined in its pages, the archæological value which it must always possess for the student, and the dramatic interest of its stories, the translator has thought that an English edition of Balzac's chef-d'œuvre would be acceptable to many. It has, of course, been impossible to reproduce in all its vigour and freshness the language of the original. Many of the quips and cranks and puns have been lost in the process of Anglicizing. These unavoidable blemishes apart, the writer ventures to hope that he has treated this great masterpiece in a reverent spirit, touched it with no sacrilegious hand, but, on the contrary, given as close a translation as the dissimilarities of the two languages permit. With this idea, no attempt has been made to polish or round many of the awkwardly constructed sentences which are characteristic of this volume. Rough, and occasionally obscure, they are far more in keeping with the spirit of the original than the polished periods of modern romance. Taking into consideration the many difficulties which he has had to overcome, and which those best acquainted with the French edition will best appreciate, the translator claims the indulgence of the critical reader for any shortcomings he may

discover. The best plea that can be offered for such indulgence is the fact that, although *Les Cent Contes Drolatiques* were completed and published in 1837, the present is the first English version ever brought before the public.

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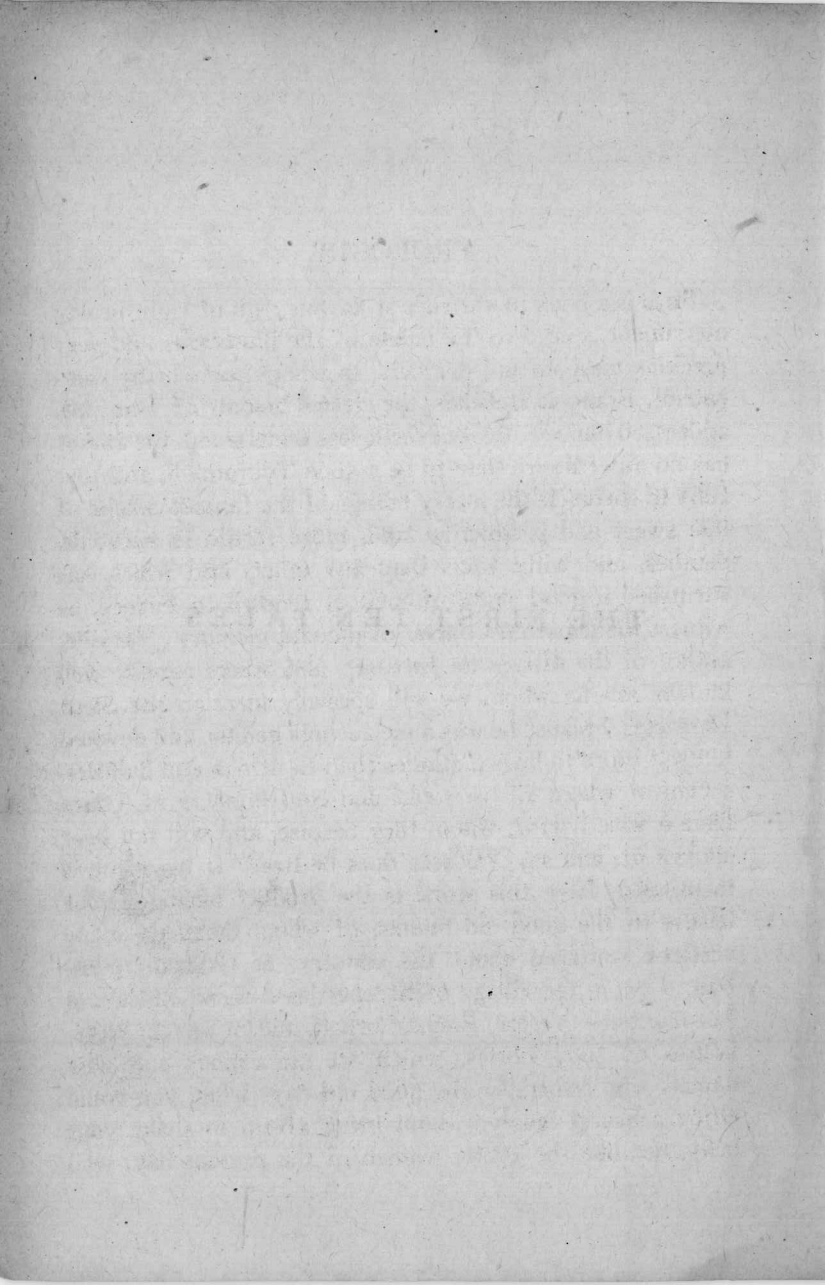
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THE FIRST TEN TALES



PROLOGUE

THIS is a book of the richest flavour, full of right hearty merriment, spiced to the palate of the illustrious and very precious tosspots and drinkers, to whom our worthy compatriot, François Rabelais, the eternal honour of Touraine, addressed himself. Be it nevertheless understood, the author has no other desire than to be a good Tourainian, and joyfully to chronicle the merry doings of the famous people of this sweet and productive land, more fertile in cuckold, dandies, and witty wags than any other, and which has furnished a good share of men of renown to France, as witness the departed Courier of piquant memory; Verville, author of the *Moyen de parvenir*, and others equally well known, among whom we will specially mention the Sieur Descartes, because he was a melancholy genius, and devoted himself more to brown studies than to drinks and dainties, a man of whom all the cooks and confectioners of Tours have a wise horror, whom they despise, and will not hear spoken of, and say, "Where does he live?" if his name is mentioned. Now this work is the product of the joyous leisure of the good old monks, of whom there are many vestiges scattered about the country, at Grenadière-les-Saint-Cyr, in the village of Sacchès-les-Azay-le-Rideau, at Marmoutiers, Veretz, Roche-Corbon, and in certain storehouses of good stories, which are old canons and wise dames, who remember the good old days when you could enjoy a hearty laugh without being afraid to shake your belly, not like the young women of the present day, who

wish to take their pleasure gravely—a custom which suits our gay France as much as a water-jug would the head of a queen. Since laughter is a privilege granted to man alone, and he has sufficient causes for tears within his reach, without adding to them by books, I have considered it a thing most patriotic to publish a drachm of merriment for these times, when weariness falls like a fine rain, wetting us, soaking into us, and dissolving those ancient customs which make the people to reap public amusement from the Republic. But of those old pantagruelists who allowed God and the king to conduct their own affairs without putting of their finger in the pie oftener than they could help, being content to look on and laugh, there are very few left. They are dying out day by day in such manner that I fear greatly to see these illustrious fragments of the ancient breviary spat upon, staled upon, set at naught, dishonoured, and blamed, the which I should be loth to see, since I have and bear great respect for the refuse of our Gallic antiquities.

Bear in mind also, ye wild critics, ye scrapers-up of words, harpies who mangle the intentions and inventions of every one, that as children only do we laugh, and as we travel onward laughter sinks down and dies out, like the light of the oil-lit lamp. This signifies, that to laugh you must be innocent, and pure of heart, lacking which qualities you purse your lips, drop your jaws, and knit your brow, after the manner of men hiding vices and impurities. Take, then, this work as you would a group or statue, certain features of which an artist cannot omit, and he would be the biggest of all big fools if he put leaves upon them, seeing that these said works are not, any more than is this book, intended for nunneries. Nevertheless, I have taken care, much to my vexation, to weed from the manuscripts the old words, which, in spite of their age, were still strong,

and which would have shocked the ears, astonished the eyes, reddened the cheeks, and sullied the lips of maidenly young men, and Madame Virtue with three lovers; for certain things must be done to suit the vices of the age, and a periphrase is much more agreeable than the word. Indeed, we are old, and find long trifles better than the short follies of our youth, because at that time our taste was better. Then spare me your slanders, and read this rather at night than in the daytime, and give it not to young maidens, if there be any, because this book is inflammable. I will now rid you of myself. But I fear nothing for this book, since it is extracted from a high and splendid source, from which all that has issued has had a great success, as is amply proved by the royal orders of the Golden Fleece, of the Holy Ghost, of the Garter, of the Bath, and by many notable things which have been taken therefrom, under shelter of which I place myself.

Now make ye merry, my hearties, and gaily read with ease of body and rest of reins, and may a cancer carry you off if you disown me after having read me. These words are those of our good Master Rabelais, before whom we must all stand, hat in hand, in token of reverence and honour to him, prince of all wisdom, and king of comedy.

THE FAIR IMPERIA

THE Archbishop of Bordeaux had added to his suite when going to the Council at Constance quite a good-looking little priest of Touraine whose ways and manner of speech were so charming that he passed for a son of La Soldée and the Governor. The Archbishop of Tours had willingly given him to his confrère for his journey to that town, because it was usual for archbishops to make each other presents, they well knowing how sharp are the itchings of theological palms. Thus this young priest came to the Council and was lodged in the establishment of his prelate, a man of good morals and great science.

Philippe de Mala, as he was called, resolved to behave well and worthily to serve his protector, but he saw in this mysterious Council many men leading a dissolute life and yet not making less, nay—gaining more indulgences, gold crowns and benefices than all the other virtuous and well-behaved ones. Now during one night—dangerous to his virtue—the devil whispered into his ear that he should live more luxuriously, since every one sucked the breasts of our Holy Mother Church and yet they were not drained, a miracle which proved beyond doubt the existence of God. And the little priest of Touraine did not disappoint the devil. He promised to feast himself, to eat his bellyful of roast meats and other German delicacies, when he could do so without paying for them, as he was poor. As he remained quite continent (in which he followed the example of the poor old archbishop, who sinned no longer because he was

unable to, and passed for a saint), he had to suffer from intolerable desires followed by fits of melancholy, since there were so many sweet courtezans, well developed, but cold to the poor people, who inhabited Constance, to enlighten the understanding of the Fathers of the Council. He was savage that he did not know how to make up to these gallant sirens, who snubbed cardinals, abbots, councilors, legates, bishops, princes, and margraves, just as if they had been penniless clerks. And in the evening, after prayers, he would practice speaking to them, teaching himself the breviary of love. He taught himself to answer all possible questions, but on the morrow if by chance he met one of the aforesaid princesses dressed out, seated in a litter and escorted by her proud and well-armed pages, he remained open-mouthed, like a dog in the act of catching flies, at the sight of the sweet countenance that so much inflamed him. The secretary of Monseigneur, a gentleman of Perigord, having clearly explained to him that the Fathers, procureurs, and auditors of the Rota bought by certain presents, not relics or indulgences, but jewels and gold, the favour of being familiar with the best of these pampered cats who lived under the protection of the lords of the Council; the poor Tourainian, all simpleton and innocent as he was, treasured up under his mattress the money given him by the good archbishop for writings and copying—hoping one day to have enough just to see a cardinal's lady-love, and trusting in God for the rest. He was hairless from top to toe and resembled a man about as much as a goat with a night-dress on resembles a young lady, but prompted by his desires he wandered in the evenings through the streets of Constance, careless of his life, and, at the risk of having his body halberded by the soldiers, he peeped at the cardinals entering the houses of their sweet-hearts. Then he saw the wax-candles lighted in the houses

and suddenly the doors and the windows closed. Then he heard the blessed abbots or others jumping about, drinking, enjoying themselves, love-making, singing the secret *Alléluia* and applauding the music with which they were being regaled. The kitchen performed miracles, the Offices said were fine rich pots-full, the Matins sweet little hams, the Vespers luscious mouthfuls, and the Laudes delicate sweetmeats, and after their little carouses, these brave priests were silent, their pages dived upon the stairs, their mules stamped restively in the streets; everything went well—but faith and religion were there. That is how it came to pass the good man Huss was burned. And the reason? He put his finger in the pie without being asked. Then why was he a Huguenot before the others?

To return, however, to our sweet little Philippe, not unfrequently did he receive many a thump and hard blow, but the devil sustained him, inciting him to believe that sooner or later it would come to his turn to play the cardinal to some lovely dame. This ardent desire gave him the boldness of a stag in autumn, so much so that one evening he quietly tripped up the steps and into one of the first houses in Constance where often he had seen officers, seneschals, valets, and pages waiting with torches for their masters, dukes, kings, cardinals, and archbishops.

“Ah!” said he, “she must be very beautiful and amiable, this one.”

A soldier well armed allowed him to pass, believing him to belong to the suite of the Elector of Bavaria, who had just left, and that he was going to deliver a message on behalf of the above-mentioned nobleman. Philippe de Mala mounted the stairs as lightly as a greyhound in love, and was guided by a delectable odour of perfume to a certain chamber where, surrounded by her handmaidens, the lady of the house was

divesting herself of her attire. He stood quite dumbfounded like a thief surprised by sergeants. The lady was without petticoat or head-dress. The chamber-maids and the servants, busy taking off her stockings and undressing her, so quickly and dexterously had her stripped, that the priest, overcome, gave vent to a long *Ah!* which had a flavour of love about it.

"What want you, little one?" said the lady to him.

"To yield my soul to you," said he, flashing his eyes upon her.

"You can come again to-morrow," said she, in order to be rid of him.

To which Philippe replied, blushing, "I will not fail."

Then she burst out laughing. Philippe, struck motionless, stood quite at his ease, letting wander over her his eyes that glowed and sparkled with the flame of love. What lovely thick hair hung over her ivory white back, showing sweet white places, fair and shining between the many tresses! She had upon her snow-white brow a ruby circlet, less fertile in rays of fire than her black eyes; still moist with tears from her hearty laugh. She even threw her slipper at a statue gilded like a shrine, twisting herself about from very ribaldry, and allowed her bare foot, smaller than a swan's bill, to be seen. This evening she was in a good humour, otherwise she would have had the little shaven-crown put out by the window without more ado than her first bishop.

"He has fine eyes, Madame," said one of the handmaids.

"Where does he come from?" asked another.

"Poor child!" cried Madame, "his mother must be looking for him. Show him his way home."

The Tourainian, still sensible, gave a movement of delight at the sight of the brocaded bed where the sweet form was about to repose. This glance, full of amorous intelligence,

awoke the lady's fantasy, who, half laughing and half smitten, repeated "To-morrow," and dismissed him with a gesture which the pope Jehan himself would have obeyed, especially as he was like a snail without a shell, since the Council had just deprived him of the holy keys.

"Ah, Madame, there is another vow of chastity changed into an amorous desire," said one of her women; and the chuckles commenced again thick as hail.

Philippe went his way, bumping his head against the wall like a hooded rook as he was. So giddy had he become at the sight of this creature, even more enticing than a siren rising from the water. He noticed the animals carved over the door but could make no more than four of them: and as that was full of diabolical longings and his entrails sophisticated. Once in his little room he counted his coins all night long, and returned to the house of the archbishop with his head all his treasure, he counted upon satisfying the fair one by giving her all he had in the world.

"What is it ails you?" said the good archbishop, uneasy at the groans and "oh! oh's!" of his clerk.

"Ah! my lord," answered the poor priest, "I am wondering how it is that so light and sweet a woman can weigh so heavily upon my heart."

"Which one?" said the archbishop, putting down his breviary which he was reading for others—the good man.

"Oh! Mother of God! you will scold me, I know, my good master, my protector, because I have seen the lady of a cardinal at the least, and I am weeping because I lack more than one little crown to enable me to convert her."

The archbishop, knitting the circumflex accent that he had about his nose, said not a word. Then the very humble priest trembled in his skin to have confessed so much to his