

Théophile Gautier

Mademoiselle de Maupin



Mademoiselle de Maupin (1885)
Félicien Rops (Belgian, 1833-1898)

[Artvee](#)

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Part I: Introduction, Preface, and Chapter 1

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was born in Tarbes, in the Hautes-Pyrénées region of south-west France, his family moving to Paris in 1814. He was a friend, at school, of the poet Gérard de Nerval, who introduced him to Victor Hugo. Gautier contributed to various journals, including *La Presse*, throughout his life, which offered opportunities for travel to various countries, among others Spain, Italy, Russia, Turkey and Egypt. He was a devotee of the ballet, writing a number of scenarios including that of *Giselle*. At the time of the 1848 Revolution, he expressed strong support for the ideals of the Second Republic, a support which he maintained for the rest of his life.

A successor to the first wave of Romantic writers, including Chateaubriand and Lamartine, he directed the *Revue de Paris* from 1851 to 1856, worked as a journalist for *La Presse* and *Le Moniteur universel*, and in 1856 became editor of *L'Artiste*, in which he published numerous editorials asserting his anti-utilitarian credo of 'Art for art's sake'. Saint-Beuve secured his critical acclaim; he became chairman of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in 1862, and in 1868 was granted the sinecure of librarian to Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, a cousin of Napoleon III, having previously been introduced to her salon.

Gautier remained in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and the aftermath of the 1871 Commune, dying of heart disease at the age of sixty-one in 1872.

Though ostensibly a Romantic poet, Gautier may be seen as a forerunner to, or point of reference for, a number of divergent poetic movements including Symbolism and Modernism.

His mainly epistolary novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, published in 1835, is a part-parody of both the erotic novels and novels of sentiment of the eighteenth century, though its focus is the search for the ideal beloved. Gautier named one of his three main characters, 'Madeleine' de Maupin, after the notorious and likely bi-sexual adventuress 'La Maupin', born Julie d'Aubigny (1673–1707), who enjoyed a wild cross-dressing youth, a career as an opera singer, and ultimately retired to a convent. In Gautier's somewhat calmer novel, set in his own nineteenth century, her namesake, disguised as a man, with the pseudonym Théodore de Sérannes, sets out to understand the male sex. Both D'Albert, initially an example of the 'superfluous' and misogynistic man but one still in search of the ideal woman of his dreams, and his amorous mistress, Rosette, fall in love with Madeleine, her disguise, and androgynous nature (she deems herself a member of an as yet unnamed third sex), causing a high degree of gender confusion. The characters' involvement in a performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which Madeleine/Théodore, takes the part of *Rosalind/Ganymede*, sets the scene for the latter half of the story.

In the preface, Gautier famously articulates his anti-utilitarian credo of 'Art for Art's sake' (*the phrase 'l'art pour l'art', had been coined by the philosopher Victor Cousin, in 1818*), while evident throughout is his Romanticism, including his desire for the Ideal, his love of the fanciful, and of the imaginatively-constructed worlds of artistic endeavour, particularly those of Classical and

Renaissance art, and his delight in the natural world, and all its creatures. Here he exceeds the boundaries of what was acceptable in the bourgeois literature of his day, so as to assert the ideal, without praising immorality but rather asserting the permanent values of love, truth, beauty and liberty of action.

This enhanced translation has been designed to offer maximum compatibility with current search engines. Among other modifications, and in particular in the preface, the proper names of people referenced, and the titles given to works of literature, etc., have been fully researched, modernised, and expanded; comments in parentheses have been added here and there to provide a reference, or clarify meaning; and minor typographic or factual errors, in the original text, have been eliminated from this new translation.

Preface

One of the most grotesque aspects of the glorious era in which we are so fortunate as to live is undoubtedly the championing of virtue undertaken by all the newspapers, whatever their hue, red, green or tricoloured.

Virtue is doubtless a very respectable person, and I have no wish to decry her, God forbid! That good and worthy woman! I find her eyes bright enough behind her spectacles, and her stockings not too badly laddered, while she partakes of snuff from her gilded snuff-box with all imaginable grace, and her little dog curtsies like a dancing master. I acknowledge it all. I even concede that she is not bad-looking for her age, and wears her years as well as one might. She is a most charming grandmother, though a grandmother she is still... To me, it seems more natural, especially at twenty years old, to prefer a fine, smart, coquettish, little girl, hair a little wanton, skirt shorter rather than longer, foot and eye quivering, cheeks slightly-flushed, laughter on her lips, and her heart worn on her sleeve, even if she be a little lacking in morality. The most monstrously virtuous of journalists could scarcely own to a different opinion; and, if they say the opposite, it is likely they do not think it. To think one thing and write another? It happens every day, especially where virtuous people are concerned.

I recall, prior to the Revolution (I speak of that of July 1830), all those jeers aimed at the unfortunate and virginal Viscount Sosthène de La Rochefoucauld who lengthened the dancers' dresses at the Opéra, and applied with patrician hands, on the grounds of modesty, a little plaster to the groins of all the statues. Viscount Sosthène de La Rochefoucauld has been far surpassed. Modesty has greatly increased since that time; we have entered into refinements he could scarcely have imagined.

I, who am not in the habit of gazing at statues' private parts, found, as did others, those fig leaves, cut with scissors by the fellow in charge of the fine arts, the most ridiculous thing in the world. It seems I was wrong, and the fig leaf is a most meritorious institution.

I was also told, though I refused to believe it, so singular did it seem, that there were people who, standing before Michelangelo's fresco of the *Last Judgment*, saw nothing in it other than the

punishment of libertine prelates, and hid their faces, crying out about 'the abomination of desolation'! (See Charles X's *Anti-Sacrilege Act of 1825-1830*, and the Biblical 'Book of Daniel': 7-12.)

Such people know nothing of the tale concerning King Rodrigo other than the lines about the snake (See Pedro de Corral's '*Crónica del Rey Don Rodrigo*', in which the snake bites him 'where most he sinned')

If there is any nudity in a painting or in a book, they seek it at once, as a pig does mud, caring nothing for the splendid flowers, or the lovely golden fruit that hangs everywhere.

I confess I am not as virtuous as they. *Dorine*, that impudent maid, may indeed display her plump bosom before me, but I will most certainly not remove my handkerchief from my pocket and cover her breast which must not be seen. I will look upon her breast as I do her face, and, if it is pale and well-formed, I will take pleasure in it. But I will not finger the softness of *Elmire's* dress, or press her in a saintly manner against the table, like that rascal *Tartuffe*.

The widespread affectation of morality which reigns now would be wholly laughable, if it were not so tedious. Every newspaper article is a pulpit; every journalist, a preacher; all they lack is a tonsure and a little collar. The current climate is all rain and homilies; one defends oneself from both by going about only in a carriage, and by rereading 'Gargantua and Pantagruel' between one's wine-bottle and one's pipe. Sweet Jesus! What a lashing! What fury!

Who bit you? What stung you? What the devil is wrong with you, to shout so loudly, and what malice has this poor sinner shown you, he who is such a good man, so easy to live with, who only asks to amuse himself and not annoy others, if possible? Deal with the sinner as Jean-Joseph Serres did with the gendarme (*on the former's arrest in 1815*): embrace him, and be done with it. Believe me, you will find it does you good. Lord, gentlemen preachers, what would you do without vice? Become virtuous today, and you will be reduced to begging tomorrow

The theatres would be instantly closed. What would you write your articles about? No more Opéra balls to fill your columns, no more novels to dissect; for balls, novels, and comedies, are the true spawn of Satan, if we are to believe our Holy Mother the Church. The actress would dismiss her admirers, and no longer be allowed to reward you for praising her. People would no longer subscribe to your paper; they would read Saint Augustine, they would go to church, they would tell their rosaries. That might be all very well; but certainly, you would gain nothing from it. If everyone were virtuous, what would inspire your articles on the immorality of the age? Surely you see that vice must be good for something.

But it is the fashion now to be virtuous and a Christian, it is an epithet one awards oneself; one poses as Saint Jerome, as one formerly did as Don Juan; one is pale and emaciated, one wears one's hair like an apostle, one walks with clasped hands, eyes fixed on the ground; one adopts to perfection a candid air; one has a Bible open on one's mantelpiece, a crucifix and blessed boxwood leaves by one's bed; one no longer swears, one smokes little, and one rarely chews tobacco. Behold the Christian! One speaks of the sanctity of art, of the noble mission of the artist, of the poetry of Catholicism, of the priest and philosopher Monsieur Félicité Robert de La Mennais, of the painters of the 'Angelic' school, of the Council of Trent, of human progress, and a thousand other beautiful things. Some, and not the least curious among them, infuse a little Republicanism into their religion. They link Robespierre with Jesus Christ in the most casual manner and, with praiseworthy seriousness, amalgamate the Acts of the Apostles with the Decrees of the *Sacred National*

Convention, *sacred* being the sacramental epithet; others add, as a final ingredient, various Saint-Simonian ideas. These are squared off at the base, and complete the edifice; one must draw up the ladder after them. It is not granted to human absurdity to extend further — *has ultra metas* (*having reached the limit*) — they are the Pillars of Hercules of the grotesque.

Christianity is so fashionable, due to widespread hypocrisy (*Tartuffery*), that neo-Christianity itself enjoys a certain favour. It is said to have as many as one follower, including Gustave Drouineau (*author of the 'Contes Spiritualistes', 1833*).

An extremely curious variation on the strictly-moral male journalist is the one with a family full of females. He takes his show of modesty to the point of cannibalism, almost.

His manner of proceeding, though simple and easy to perform at first glance, is nonetheless buffoonish and superlatively entertaining, and I believe it worth preserving for posterity – to the last ‘nephew’, as the ‘periwigs’ of the so-called ‘great’ century used to say.

First of all, to pose as a journalist of this kind, one needs a few small preparatory items, such as two or three legitimate wives, a few mothers, as many sisters as possible, a complete assortment of daughters, and innumerable female cousins. Then one needs a play or a novel, a pen, ink, paper, and the services of a publisher. Perhaps one may need an idea, and several subscribers; but one can replace them with a modicum of philosophy and shareholders’ investment.

Once you have obtained all these, you can establish yourself as a ‘moral’ journalist. The following two recipes, suitably varied, are sufficient for copy.

Here follows the first draft of a model example of a ‘virtuous’ article.

‘After the Literature of Blood, the Literature of Filth; after the morgue and the penal colony, the hovel and the brothel; after rags stained by murder, rags stained by debauchery; after, etc. (according to need and space, one may extend one’s half a dozen lines, in this tone, to fifty or more), here we are. This is where the neglect of sound doctrine and the pursuit of romantic debauchery lead: the theatre, to which one dares not venture with a woman one respects without trembling, has become a school for prostitution. One visits with the promise of seeing some illustrious name, and one is obliged to withdraw with your young daughter, in the third act, troubled and disconcerted. One’s wife hides her blushes behind her fan; one’s sister, cousin, etc.’ (You may vary the titles; it is enough that they are all female.)

Note: there is one such who has been so moral as to say: ‘I would not take my mistress to see this play.’ I admire him, I love him; I hold him to my heart, as Louis XVIII held all France to his; for he has spawned the most triumphant, most pyramidal, most hair-curling, most grandiose idea that has entered into a man’s brain in this blessed nineteenth century into which so many, and such droll ones, have entered.

The following model example of a book review is expeditious, and within the reach of all pens:

‘If you seek to read this book, lock yourself in a room at home, securely; avoid leaving it lying around on a table. If your wife and daughter were to open it, they would be lost. This book is dangerous, this book counsels vice. It might have had great success in the novelist Claude-Prosper Crébillon’s day, in lesser mansions, at those fine suppers given by duchesses; but now that the moral code has been purified, now that the hand of the people has razed the worm-eaten edifice

of the aristocracy, etc., etc., then, then, then — in every work, there must be an idea, an ideal... a moral and religious idea... a noble and profound vision meeting the needs of humanity; it is deplorable how young writers sacrifice the most holy of things to success, and waste their talents, otherwise estimable, on lewd descriptions that would make a dragoon-captain blush (the virginity of this dragoon captain is, after the discovery of America, the most beautiful such that has been made for many a long day). The novel we are reviewing here recalls *Thérèse Philosophe* (a pornographic novel by Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, 1748), *Félicia* (by André-Robert Andréa de Nerciat, 1775), *Le Compère Matthieu* (by Henri-Joseph Delaurens, 1766), and the tales of Jean-Baptiste Willart de Grécourt.' The virtuous journalist is immensely erudite as regards obscene texts; I would be curious as to why.

It is frightening to think that there are, according to the newspapers, many honest industrialists who have only these two formulas by which to live, they and the large 'family' they employ.

Apparently, I am the most profoundly immoral character to be found in Europe or elsewhere; since I see nothing more licentious in the romances and comedies of today than in those of the past, and can barely comprehend why the ears of the gentlemen of the newspapers have suddenly become so Jansenistically sensitive.

I think that not even the most innocent journalist would dare to say that 'Pigault-Lebrun' (*Charles-Antoine-Guillaume Pigault de l'Espinoy*), 'Crébillon fils' (*Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon*), Louvet (*Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray*), Voisenon (*Claude-Henri de Fusée, Abbé de Voisenon*), Marmontel (*Jean-François Marmontel*), and all those other writers of novels and short stories, celebrated in the eighteenth century and the early years of our own, do not exceed in immorality, since immorality they reveal, the most dishevelled and shameless productions of Messieurs 'such and such', whom I choose not to name, out of respect for their modesty.

It would prove a display of most blatant bad faith not to agree.

Let no one object that I have here cited minor or little-known names. If I have not touched on the brilliant and memorable, it is not because their greater authority fails to support my assertion.

Voltaire's novels and tales are certainly not, despite their merits, any more likely to be given as prizes to boarding-school misses than the immoral tales of our friend 'the Lycanthrope' (*Petrus Borel, the bohemian Joseph-Pierre Borel d'Hauterive, nicknamed 'the Werewolf'*), or even the moral tales of the sugary Marmontel.

What do we find in the comedies of the great Molière? The holy institution of marriage is flouted and ridiculed in every scene (*in a catechismic and journalistic manner*).

The husband is old, ugly and decrepit; he wears his wig askew; his clothes are no longer fashionable; he employs a beak-nosed cane, has a nose smeared with snuff, short legs, and a belly as large as a well-filled briefcase. He stammers, and speaks nothing but nonsense; he does much as he says; he sees nothing, he hears nothing; his wife is kissed in his presence; he has no idea what is being said: things proceed like this till he is well and truly declared a cuckold in his own eyes and those of the entire audience, who could not be more edified, and applaud wildly.

Those who applaud the most are those who are the most married.

In Molière's work, marriage bears the name *George Dandin* or *Sganarelle*.

As for the adulterer, *Damis* or *Clitandre*; there is no name sweet and charming enough for him. He is always young, handsome, well-made, and a marquis at least. He enters humming the newest popular air; he advances a few steps on stage with the most deliberate and triumphant air in the world; he scratches his ear with the pink nail of his coquettishly crooked little-finger; he combs his beautiful blond hair with his tortoiseshell comb, and adjusts his voluminous sleeves. His doublet and breeches vanish beneath aiguillettes and ribbon-knots, the lace at his throat is of delicate workmanship; the scent of his gloves is richer than benzoin or civet; his plumes cost a louis a feather.

How bright his eye is, how bright his cheek! How smiling his mouth! How white his teeth! How soft and well-manicured his hand.

He speaks only madrigals, perfumed gallantries, in a beautiful and precious manner, with the finest air imaginable; he has read novels, and knows poetry; he is valiant and quick to draw his weapon, he scatters gold with both hands. Thus, *Angélique*, *Agnès*, and *Isabelle* can hardly restrain themselves from leaping into his arms, however well-bred, however much the 'great lady', they may be; and then the husband is regularly deceived in the fifth act, happy that things are not so from the very first.

That is how marriage is treated by Molière, one of the noblest and soberest geniuses who ever lived. Is there anything stronger to be seen in the indictments of marriage in George Sand's novels *Indiana* and *Valentine*? Paternity is even less respected, if that is possible. See Molière's husbands: *Orgon*, *Géronte*, all of them.

How they are robbed by their sons, and beaten by their servants! How their advanced age is exposed, without pity, along with their avarice, stubbornness, and imbecility! — What jests! What mystifications!

How they are thrust out of life by the shoulders, these poor old fellows who take too long to die, and keep a tight hold of their wealth! What talk there is of parents lasting for an eternity! What pleas against the so-called rights of heredity, and how much more convincing all this is than Saint-Simonian declamation!

A father is an ogre, an *Argus* (*Io's hundred-eyed guard in Greek myth*), a jailer, a tyrant, something good for nothing but delaying a marriage for three years until the final denouement. A father is the ridiculous husband complete, while a son is never ridiculed in Molière; for Molière, like the authors in every age, paid court to the younger generation at the expense of the older.

And his schemers like *Scapin*, with their Neapolitan-striped capes, their caps over their ears, their plumes sweeping the air before them, are they not the most pious of folk, the most chaste, and worthy of being canonized? The penal colonies are full of honest fellows who have not perpetrated a quarter of what they engage in. The rogueries of Charles Laisally's *Trialph* are poor things compared to theirs. And the *Lisettes* (*see Molière's 'L'École des Maris'*) and the *Martons* (*see Pierre Marivaux's 'Les Fausses Confidences'*), what lively girls, they are! Our street-walkers are scarcely as impertinent, as quick with a saucy reply. How ably they deliver a lover's note! How well they keep watch during a rendezvous! They are charming girls indeed, helpful, and good at giving advice.

It is a charming society that walks and strolls through these comedies and imbroglios. Duped tutors, cuckolded husbands, libertine servants, clever maids, love-mad young ladies, debauched

sons, adulterous women; is this not more than a match for to the young, handsome, melancholic men, and the poor, weak, oppressed, and passionate women, in the dramas and novels of our fashionable writers?

And all this, minus a final dagger thrust, minus an obligatory cup of poison: the endings are as happy as those of fairy-tales, and everyone, even the husband, could not rest more content. In Molière, virtue is always reviled and conquered; it is she who wears the horns, and turns her back on the valet *Mascarille*; morality barely appears except at the end of *Tartuffe* in the somewhat bourgeois personification of that officer of the law, *Loyal*.

All that I have said here is not to topple Molière from his pedestal; I am not foolish enough to try shaking that bronze colossus with my little arms; I simply wish to demonstrate to the pious critics, frightened by new and romantic works, that the old classics, whose reading and imitation they recommend every day, far surpass ours in ribaldry and immorality.

To Molière I might easily add Marivaux and La Fontaine those two very opposite expressions of the French spirit, along with Mathurin Régnier, Rabelais, Clément Marot, and many another. But it is not my intention here to deliver, on the subject of morality, a course in literature for the benefit of the ‘virgins’ of the newspaper columns.

It seems to me that we should not make so much fuss about so little. We are fortunately no longer in the days of Eve, that tempting blonde, and we cannot, in good conscience, act in as primitive and patriarchal a manner as those in the Ark. We are not little girls preparing for our first communion; and, when we play at *corbillon* (a rhyming game), we do not answer ‘cream-pies’ (See Molière’s *L’École des Femmes* Act I, Scene One). My naivety is quite vanished, and my virginity lost a while past; they are things one cannot possess twice; and, however fast we run we cannot own to them again, for nothing in the world is lost more swiftly than virginity, or escapes us faster than an illusion that flies from us.

Perhaps there is no great harm done after all, and whether knowledge is preferable to ignorance is a question I leave to be debated by those more learned than myself. The fact remains that our age is, I think, no longer one in which one can play at modesty and decency, or act in a childish and virginal manner, without rendering oneself ridiculous.

Since embracing civilisation, society has lost the right to be naive and prudish. There are certain blushes which are appropriate still for the bridal bed, but which are no longer so the following day; for the young woman must forget the girl she was, and if she does not it is an indecency which seriously compromises the husband’s reputation.

When I chance to read one of those fine sermons which have replaced literary criticism in the public press, I am sometimes overcome with profound remorse and apprehension, I who have on my conscience a few minor jests a little too strong in nature, such as a young man of fire and enthusiasm might own to, and reproach himself with.

Next to these Bishop Bossuets of the Café de Paris, these Father Bourdaloues of the Opéra balcony, these Catos, at so much per line, who scold the century in such an eloquent way, I find myself indeed the most dreadful scoundrel who has ever marred the face of the earth; and yet, Lord knows, the list of my sins, both capital and venial, with all the obligatory spaces and interlineations, could hardly, in the hands of the most skilled printer make one or two octavo

volumes a day, which is little enough for one who has no pretensions to paradise in the other world through winning a Montyon prize (*awarded annually by the French Academy of Sciences and the Académie Française*), or of being a blushing rose in this one.



Le Café De Paris
Jean Béraud (French, 1849-1935)

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And then, when I reflect on the fact that I have encountered, beneath the table and even elsewhere, quite a large number of these dragons of virtue, I form a better opinion of myself, and consider that with all the faults that I may have they have another, and one which is indeed, to my eyes, the greatest and the worst of all – hypocrisy, I mean.

If you look closely, you might add another little vice; though one so hideous I really don't dare name it. Come closer, and I'll whisper its name in your ear: it is that of envy. Envy, no less.

It is she who goes creeping and crawling through all those paternal homilies. However careful she is to hide her presence, we see her little flat viper's head gleam from time to time, rising above the metaphors and rhetorical flourishes; we surprise her as she licks, with her forked tongue, her jaw all blue with venom, and we hear her hiss softly in the shadow of some insidious epithet.

I am well aware that it is unbearably conceited to pretend that others envy one, and is almost as nauseating as a wealthy person who boasts of their fortune. I am not so boastful as to believe that I have enemies and am envied; that is a happiness not granted to everyone, and I would probably not enjoy it for long: therefore, I will speak freely, and without ulterior motive, as someone disinterested in the matter.

One thing that is certain and easy to demonstrate to doubters, is the natural antipathy of the critic towards the poet, of the one who does nothing towards the one who does much, of the hornet towards the bee, of the gelding towards the stallion.

One only becomes a critic after it has been clearly established in one's own eyes that one lacks the ability to be a poet. Before relegating oneself to the sorry role of cloakroom-attendant, or of scoring shots like a billiard marker or a tennis umpire, one will have long courted the Muse, and tried to devirginize her; yet lacked the vigour required; and with one's breath failing, will have retreated pale and gaunt to the foot of the sacred mount.

I understand the feeling of hatred. It is painful to see another sit down to a feast to which one is not invited, or sleep with the woman who rejected one. I pity with all my heart the poor eunuch forced to attend on the frolics of the Grand Seigneur. He is admitted to the most secret depths of the harem; he leads the Sultanas to their baths; he sees those beautiful bodies, all dripping with pearls and more polished than agates, gleaming beneath the silvery waters of the great reservoirs; the most hidden beauties are seen by him without their veils. No one is embarrassed before him — he is a eunuch — the Sultan caresses his favourite in his presence, and kisses her on her pomegranate-hued mouth — in truth, his situation is an exceedingly false one and, by his countenance, he must be forever embarrassed.

The same is true of the critic who beholds the poet wandering the garden of poetry with his nine lovely odalisques (*the Muses*), or frolicking lazily in the shade of green laurels. It is hard for him not to pick up stones from the highway to throw at the poet, and harm him, as he strolls behind the fence, if he is skilful enough.

The critic who has produced nothing is a coward; he is like an abbot who courts a layman's wife: the latter cannot contend with him, or reciprocate.

I believe one could pen a history at least as interesting as that of Tiglath-Pileser III (*King of the neo-Assyrian empire*) or Gemmagog (*Pantagruel's giant ancestor in Rabelais' 'Gargantua and Pantagruel'*) who invented the *poulaine* shoe (*elongated and pointed*), in writing the history of the different ways of deprecating others' work, from whenever to the present day.

There would be enough material for fifteen or sixteen volumes in folio; but I will take pity on the reader, and limit myself to a few lines — a gift for which I ask eternal gratitude and more. In a very remote period, lost in the mists of time, a good three weeks ago at least, the Medieval novel

appeared, mainly in Paris and the suburbs. The coat of arms was held in great honour; steepled headdresses were not despised, unlaced, but buttoned, trousers were highly esteemed; daggers were beyond price; and the *poulaine* shoe was worshipped like a fetish. All was pointed arches, turrets, small-columns, stained glass-windows, cathedrals, and fortified castles; all was young ladies and gentlemen, pages and servants, rascals and soldiers, gallant knights and ferocious lords of the manor — things which were certainly more innocent than the most innocent of games, and which did no harm to anyone.

The critics, not waiting for a second novel, immediately begin the work of disparagement; as soon as the first appeared, they wrapped themselves in camel-hair shirts, and spread a bushel of ashes on their heads: then, in a loud doleful voice, began their cry:

‘The Middle Ages again, ever the Middle Ages! Who will deliver us from the Middle Ages, from this Middle Ages which is not the real Middle Ages, this Middle Ages of cardboard and terracotta, which is the Middle Ages only in name? Oh, those steely barons, in their steel armour, with hearts of steel in their steely breasts! Oh, these cathedrals with their ever-blossoming rose-windows and their ever-flowering stained-glass windows, their granite lacework, their openwork trefoils, their saw-edged gables, their stone chasubles embroidered like bridal veils, their candles, their chanting, their gleaming priests, their kneeling people, their murmuring church-organs, and their angels hovering and beating their wings beneath the vaulted ceilings! How they have ruined the Middle Ages for me, my Middle Ages, so fine and so colourful! How they have caused them to disappear beneath a layer of coarse whitewash! What garish illumination now! Oh, ignorant daubers, who think to have coloured a wall successfully by plastering red on blue, white on black, and green on yellow, you have viewed only the surface of the Middle Ages, you have in no way divined their soul; no blood circulates in the skin with which you have clothed your ghosts, no heart beats beneath your steel corselets, there are no legs in your chain-mailed trousers, no throat or belly behind your coats of arms: here are clothes with the shape of men, and that is all. So, down with the Middle Ages, as the makers (*The word is out! The ‘makers’*) remake them for us! The Middle Ages are an answer to nothing now, we want something new.’

And the public, finding the columnists were crying out against the Middle Ages, discovered a true passion for those poor Middle Ages, which they claimed to have slain at a stroke. The Middle Ages invaded everywhere, aided by the intransigence of these newspaper critics: dramas, melodramas, romances, short-stories, poems, there were even Middle Ages vaudevilles, while Momus (*the personification of unfair criticism in Greek myth*) repeated his feudal outcry.

Alongside the Medieval novel, the *carrion-novel* (*Gautier’s coinage, indicating the Gothic novel, involved with death and corpses*) flourished, a charming form of the novel, that nervous young ladies and jaded cooks consumed in great quantities.

The critics, quickly recognising the odour, like crows flocking to a kill, tore to pieces with their beak-like pens, and shamefully put to death, this poor genre which only asked to prosper and putrefy peacefully on the greasy shelves of public reading-rooms. ‘What dare they not say? What dare they not write? A literature of the morgue or the galleys, nightmares of an executioner, hallucinations of a drunken butcher, or a galley-overseer in a hot fever!’ They benignly gave us to understand that these authors were assassins and vampires, that they had contracted a vicious

habit, that of slaying their fathers and mothers, drank blood from skulls, used shinbones for forks, and sliced their bread with a guillotine.

And yet they knew better than anyone, having often lunched among them, that the authors of these delightful massacres were fine sons of decent family, good-natured and sociable, white-gloved, and *fashionably* short-sighted, feeding more readily on beefsteaks than on chops cut from human corpses, and more often drinking Bordeaux wine than the blood of a young maiden, or a newborn child. Having touched and read their manuscripts, they knew perfectly well that they were written with ink of the greatest virtue on English paper, and not with blood from the guillotine on the skin of a Christian flayed alive.

Yet whatever they said or did, the age was obsessed with carrion, and the charnel-house pleased it rather than the boudoir; the reader was simply caught on a hook baited with a little corpse already turning blue. A thing inconceivable; hook a rose to the end of your line, and spiders will slowly weave a web in the crook of your elbow, not the smallest little fry will you catch; but hang a worm or a piece of strong cheese from it, and the carp, barbels, perch, and eels will jump three feet high from the water to snap it up. Folk are not as different from fish as we generally choose to believe.

One might have thought the journalists had become Quakers, Brahmins, Pythagoreans, or bulls in the arena, so suddenly had they taken a dislike to the colour of blood. Never had they been seen so melting, so emollient; they were cream and buttermilk. They admitted only two colours, sky-blue and apple green. Pink was only admitted on sufferance, and, if the public had allowed, they would have led them to graze grass on the banks of the Lignon (*in the Ardèche*), side by side with *Amaryllis'* flock (*see Virgil's 'Eclogues'*). They seemed to have exchanged their black tailcoats for the turtledove-hued jackets of *Céladon* or *Silvandre* (*see the pastoral romance 'L'Astrée' by Honoré d'Urfé*), and decked their goose-feather coats with pink pompoms, and favours shaped like pastoral crooks. They let their hair flow loose like a child, and turned themselves into virgins according to Marion Delorme's recipe (*Delorme was a notorious seventeenth century courtesan; see Victor Hugo's play, of 1831, in which she declares that true, though illicit, love has returned her to a state of virginity*), at which they had succeeded quite as well as she did.

They applied to literature that commandment of the Decalogue: 'Thou shalt not murder'. The smallest murder could no longer be allowed in the theatre, and a play's traditional fifth act became inadmissible.

They found the use of a dagger exorbitant, poison monstrous, the axe unspeakable. They would have liked their dramatic heroes to survive to Methuselah's age; and yet it has been recognised, since time immemorial, that the aim of all tragedy is to have the poor wretch of a protagonist, who can do nothing to avoid it, eliminated in the last scene, just as the aim of all comedy is to unite in matrimony two imbecilic players of about sixty years of age.

It was at about this time that I threw into the fire two superb, magnificent medieval dramas (having made a duplicate, as is always done), one in verse and the other in prose, whose heroes were hung drawn and quartered in the middle of the stage, which would have been most charming and quite unusual.

To conform to the critics' ideas, I have since composed an ancient tragedy in five acts, called 'Heliogabalus', in which the hero throws himself into a latrine, in an extremely original scene which

has the advantage of requiring a set not yet seen in the theatre. I have also written a modern drama extremely superior to those concerning Mark Antony, Arthur, or *l'homme fatal*, where the providential reckoning arrives in the form of a *pâté de foie gras* from Strasbourg, which the protagonist consumes to the last morsel, after having committed several acts of rape, which, together with his remorse, produces an abominable bout of indigestion from which he dies. A moral ending if ever there was one, which proves that the Lord is just, and that vice is always punished and virtue always rewarded.

As for the 'monster' genre, you know how the critics treated it, how they addressed Victor Hugo's characters: that man-eater *Hans of Iceland* (see his Gothic novel '*Han d'Islande*' of 1823); the dwarf *Habibrah* (see his novel '*Bug Jargal*', 1826); the bell-ringer *Quasimodo* (see '*Notre-Dame de Paris*', 1831); and *Triboulet* (see his play '*Le Roi s'Amuse*', 1832) who is merely a hunchback — all that strangely teeming family, all those gigantic toads who swarm and leap through the virgin forests and cathedrals of my dear neighbour's novels (note that Hugo lived at 6 Place des Vosges from 1832-1848, Gautier at no.8 from 1828-1834). Neither the grand brushstrokes of a Michelangelo, nor his oddities worthy of a Jacques Callot, nor his chiaroscuro effects in the manner of Goya, nothing found favour with them; they referred him to his odes when he wrote novels, and to his novels when he wrote plays: the common tactics of journalists who always prefer what one has done to what one is currently producing. A happy author, however, is one who is recognized as superior, even by the critics, in all their work, except, of course, that which the critics are now reporting on, and who would only have to write a treatise on theology or a cookery-book to have their plays considered admirable!

As for the novel of the heart, the ardent and passionate novel, whose father is a German, *Werther* (see Goethe's '*The Sorrows of Young Werther*', 1774) and whose mother is a Frenchwoman, *Manon Lescaut*, (see the novel of that name by Antoine François Prévost d'Exiles, 1731) I uttered, at the start of this preface, a few words on the moral insects that have desperately attached themselves to that form of literature, on the pretext of defending religion and morality. Critical lice are like bodily lice that abandon the corpse to batten on the living. From the corpse of the Medieval novel, the critics have passed to the body of this, which has a tough and resilient skin that could well break their teeth.

I think, despite all the respect I have for these modern 'apostles', that the authors of so-called 'immoral' novels, without being as profoundly married as our virtuous journalists, generally have a mother, and that several of them have sisters, and are provided with a wider female family, too; but their mothers and sisters never read novels, even 'immoral' novels; they sew, embroider, and take care of household matters. Their stockings, as the playwright Eugène de Planard would say, are completely white, as their legs show, and not blue, and that fine fellow *Chrysale*, who hated learned women so much, would present them to the learned *Philaminte* (see Moliere's play '*Les Femmes Savantes*') as models of womanhood.

As for the wives of these gentlemen, since they have so many, however virginal their husbands may be, it seems to me that there are certain things of which they should have knowledge — in truth, it may well be that the former have taught them nothing, which suggests that these husbands wish to keep their wives in precious and blissful ignorance. Allah is great, and Muhammad is his prophet! Women are full of curiosity; let heaven and morality allow them to satisfy it in a more

legitimate way than Eve, their grandmother, and not go asking questions of the serpent! And as for their daughters, if they have been to boarding school, I fail to see what books could teach them.

It is as absurd to say that a man is a drunkard because he describes a drunken orgy, or debauched because he tells of debauchery, as to claim that a man is virtuous because he has written a book on morality; every day we see the opposite. It is the character who speaks and not the author; if his hero is an atheist, it does not mean he is an atheist; if he makes the brigands act and speak like brigands, he is not, for that reason, a brigand. If that were true, we would have to guillotine Shakespeare, Corneille and all the tragedians; they committed more murders than Mandrin and Cartouche (*infamous eighteenth-century outlaws*); however, it is not so, and will not be so for a long time, I believe, however virtuous and moral criticism may become. It is one of the habits of such narrow-minded little scoundrels to always confuse the author with the work, and to resort to personal attacks, so as to add a degree of wretched and scandalous interest to their miserable rhapsodies, which they know no one would read if they contained only their individual opinion.

I scarcely comprehend where all this outcry is leading, what the point might be of all this howling and anger, and what it is that drives these small-time Geoffrois de Charny (*Geoffroi de Charny was a highly renowned fourteenth century knight*) to appoint themselves the Don Quixotes of morality, who, like true literary policemen, seize and pummel, in the name of virtue, any idea that wanders about in book-form with its wimple (*cornette*) askew or its skirt hitched a little too high. It is most singular.

It is the age, whatever they may claim, that is 'immoral' (*if the word means anything, which I very much doubt*), and no other proof is needed than the quantity of 'immoral' books it produces, and the degree of success they achieve. Books reveal our moral state; our moral state is not inspired by books. The Regency made Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, it was not Crébillon who made the Regency. François Boucher's little shepherdesses wore make-up and were carelessly dressed, because the little marquises of his age wore make-up and were carelessly dressed. Paintings depict their models; the models are not born from paintings. I know not who said, I know not where, that literature and the arts influence morality. Whoever it was, he was undoubtedly a great fool. It is as if one said: seeds cause spring growth; whereas, on the contrary, spring causes seeds to grow, just as cherry-trees fruit because it is summer. Fruit burdens the tree, not the tree its fruit, which is indeed a law eternal and invariable in its application; centuries follow one another, and each bears its fruit, which is never quite that of the preceding century; books are the fruit of morality.

Alongside these moralistic journalists, beneath their shower of homilies like summer rain in a park, there have arisen, between the wooden trestles of the Saint-Simonian platform, a host of little, mushrooms of a rather curious new species, whose natural history I will reveal.

They are the utilitarian critics. Wretched folk with noses too short for spectacles, yet who cannot see beyond their noses.

When an author sets down some volume, a novel or a book of poetry, on the utilitarian critic's desk, that gentleman nonchalantly leans back in his armchair, balances the thing on its hind legs, and, rocking to and fro with a business-like air, puffs himself up and cries: What is the point of this book? How can it be applied to the moral welfare and social well-being of the most numerous and poorest classes? What! Not a word within it as regards the needs of society, nothing educational or progressive! Why, rather than striving for the over-arching synthesis of humanity,

and following, via the events of history, the phases of regenerative and providential thought, do authors write poems and novels that lead nowhere, and which fail to set the generations on the path of the future? How can they concern themselves with form, style, or rhyme in the presence of such grave themes? What do style, rhyme, or form have to do with us? Progress is what matters (poor wretches of authors, they are so naive)! Society is suffering, it is prey to a vast inner turmoil (translation: no one subscribes to utilitarian newspapers). It is up to the poet to seek the cause of this malaise and to cure it. He will find the means by empathising, heart and soul, with humanity (philanthropic poetry, that indeed would be something rare and charming!) We await such poets; we summon them with all our might. When such a fellow appears, his will be the acclamations of the crowd; his, the palm; his, the crown; his, the Prytaneum (*the seat of Government*) ...'

Fine; but, as I would have the reader remain awake till the end of this sacred preface, I will not continue in faithful imitation of the utilitarian style which, by its very nature, is somewhat soporific, and might replace, to advantage, both laudanum and academic discourse.

No, you imbeciles, no, you goitrous cretins, a book won't add gelatine to soup; a novel is not a pair of boots without seams; a sonnet, is not a jet-spray; a drama is not a railway-track, all things which are essential to civilisation, and which set Humanity on the path of progress. By the innards of all the Popes past, present and future, no, no, two hundred thousand times no.

One cannot make a cotton cap from a metaphor, or wear a simile like a slipper; or use an antithesis as an umbrella; or, sadly, wrap a few colourful rhymes round one's stomach as a waistcoat. I own to the profound conviction that even an ode is too thin a garment for winter, nor would one be better dressed in a stanza, an antistrophe, or an epode, than that Cynic's wife who was content with her virtue alone for a chemise, and went about stark naked, or so the story goes. However, it is true that the famous Seigneur de La Calprenède (*Gauthier de Costes*) once had on a suit of clothes, and when asked what it was made of, he replied: *Silvandre*, which was a play of his whose performance had recently met with success.

Utilitarian reasoning makes one shrug one's shoulders above one's head, far higher than those of the Duke of Gloucester (*see Shakespeare's Richard III*). Those who claim to be economists, and want to rebuild society from the ground up, seriously put forward such nonsense.

A novel has two uses: one material, the other spiritual, if one can use such a word as 'use' in relation to a novel. The material use is as follows. First of all, it provides the few thousand francs that go into the author's pocket and ballast him so that the Devil or the wind fail to blow him away; for the publisher, it is a fine thoroughbred horse that prances and snorts as it pulls its 'ebony and steel cabriolet' along, as *Le Figaro* puts it (*a reference to Eugène Renduel, the fashionable bookseller, and publisher of Gautier's works including this one, who possessed just such a carriage*); for the paper merchant, one more factory beside a river, and often the means of spoiling some beautiful location; for the printers, a few tons of wood-pulp to feed their printing-presses each week; for the reading-room, a pile of proletarian verdigris, and a quantity of grease, which, if it were properly collected and used, would render whaling superfluous. Its spiritual use is that, while reading a novel, one dozes, and avoids reading useful, virtuous, and progressive newspapers, or other such indigestible and stupefying drugs.

Let it be said: novels do not contribute to civilisation. I will not speak of tobacconists, grocers, and purveyors of fried food, who have a great interest in that branch of literature, the paper it uses being, in general, of a superior quality to that of newspapers.

In truth, there is something laughable about the dissertations of these Republican or Saint-Simonian gentlemen. I would ask, firstly, what exactly that great hulking noun means with which they daily fill the emptiness of their columns, and which serves as their shibboleth and sacramental term — Utility: what is this word, and to what does it apply?

There are two kinds of utility, and the word's meaning is always merely relative. What is useful to one is not useful to another. You are a cobbler; I am a poet. It is useful to me that my first line rhymes with my second; a rhyming dictionary is of great use to me. You have no use for it in repairing an old pair of boots, and it is fair to say that an awl and a cutter would be of little use to me in writing an ode. Then, you will object that a cobbler is far above a poet, and that one can do without the latter more easily than the former. Without claiming to demean the illustrious profession of cobbler, which I honour as much as the profession of 'constitutional monarch', I will humbly admit that I would rather see my shoe unstitched than my verse ill-rhymed, and would rather do without boots at all than poetry. Hardly ever going out, and getting around more by my brains than my feet, I wear out my shoes less than the virtuous republican who runs from one ministry to another, merely to be granted some post or other

I know there are some who prefer windmills to churches, and bread for the body to that of the soul. To them, I have naught to say. They deserve to be economists in this world, and also in the next.

Is there anything absolutely useful on this earth, in this life of ours? First of all, it is of little use for us to exist on this planet. I challenge the most learned of the crew to say what use we are, unless it is to subscribe to *Le Constitutionnel* or some other newspaper of the kind.

And if the usefulness of our existence is to be admitted *a priori*, what things are really useful in supporting it? Soup, and a little meat twice a day, that's all that's needed to fill one's stomach, in the strict sense of the phrase. Man, for whom a coffin two feet wide by six long is enough, and more, after his death, needs scarcely more space when alive. A hollow cube seven to eight feet in all directions, with a hole to allow him to breathe, a single cell, that is, of the hive, is enough to house him and protect his back from the rain. A blanket, drawn carefully around his body, will defend him as well against the cold as the most elegant and best-cut tailcoat by Jean-Jacques Staub (*the renowned tailor, at 92 Rue de Richelieu*), or indeed better.

With all these, he will be able to subsist, literally. They say one can live on twenty-five centimes a day; but to prevent oneself from dying is not to live; and I cannot see that a city organized on utilitarian lines would be any more pleasant to live in than the cemetery of Père-la-Chaise.

Nothing that is beautiful is indispensable to life. If we were to eliminate flowers, the world would not suffer much materially; yet who would wish to dispense with flowers? I would sooner relinquish potatoes than roses, and I believe that there is scarcely a single utilitarian in the world capable of tearing up a bed of tulips to plant cabbages instead.

What is the use of female beauty? As long as a woman is medically sound and able to bear children, she will always suffice as far as the economists are concerned.

What use is music? What use are paintings? Who are we, who are so foolish as to prefer Mozart to Armand Carrel (*co-founder of the Republican newspaper 'Le National'*), or Michelangelo to the inventor of Dijon mustard?

Nothing is truly beautiful except that which serves no purpose; everything useful is ugly, since it is the expression of some need or other, and those of human beings are ignoble and disgusting, like their poor, weak natures. The most useful place in a house is its latrine.

I, with all due respect to these gentlemen, am one of those for whom the superfluous is necessary, and I cherish things and people in inverse proportion to the services they render. To a certain useful vase of mine, I prefer a Chinese vessel, adorned with dragons and mandarins, which is no use to me at all, and the talent of mine I most prize is my inability to divine anagrams or charades. I would happily renounce my rights as a Frenchman and a citizen, in order to view an authentic painting by Raphael, or a beautiful woman naked: Princess Borghese, for example, posing for Canova, or Giulia Grisi taking her bath. I would very willingly consent, for my part, to the return of that cannibal Charles X, if from his castle in Bohemia, he brought me a case of Tokay, or Schloss Johannisberg (*the first Riesling winery*), and I would find the electoral laws quite broad enough if certain streets were more so, and other things less. Although I am not a dilettante, I prefer the sound of the violin's horsehair, and that of the tambourine, to the bell of Monsieur le Président. I would sell my trousers for a signet ring, and my bread for a pot of jam. The most becoming occupation for a civilised man, it seems to me, is to do nothing, or to smoke his pipe or cigar studiously. I also own to a great respect for those who play skittles, and also for those who write excellent verse. You see that my principles are far from being utilitarian, and that I will never be the editor of a virtuous newspaper, unless I become a convert, which would be rather droll.

Instead of establishing a Montyon Prize to reward virtue, I would prefer to grant, like Sardanapalus, that great philosopher who has been so badly misunderstood, a large bonus to whoever would invent a new pleasure; since enjoyment seems to me the goal of life, and the only useful thing in the world. The Creator wanted it so, he who made women, perfume, sunlight, beautiful flowers, fine wines, frisky horses, greyhounds, and angora cats; he who did not say to his angels: 'Be virtuous', but: 'Love', and who gave us a mouth with skin more sensitive than the rest with which to kiss women; eyes raised aloft to view the sunlight; a subtle sense of smell to breathe the soul of flowers; sinewy thighs to squeeze the flanks of stallions, and fly as fast as thought, without the need for the railway and its steam engines; delicate hands to caress the elongated heads of greyhounds, and the velvety backs of cats, and the polished shoulders of less virtuous creatures; and who, finally, has granted to us alone the triple and glorious privilege of drinking without our being thirsty, of striking a spark, and of making love in every season, which distinguishes us from the brute creatures far more than the habit of reading newspapers and agreeing charters.

Lord, what a foolish thing the supposed perfectibility of the human race is, a thing which we hear talked of constantly! As if one were to claim that human beings are machines capable of improvement, and that a more tightly-meshed cog, a more suitably-placed counterweight will make them work in a more convenient and easier way. When we have succeeded in giving a man a double stomach, so that he can chew his cud like an ox, and eyes on the back of his head, so that, like Janus, he can see those who stick their tongues out at him from behind and can contemplate his backside in a less awkward pose than that of the Venus Callipyge in Naples, and planted wings on his shoulder-blades so that he is not obliged to pay six sous a time to travel by omnibus; when we

have created a single new organ for him, then fine, the word 'perfectibility' will signify something. Despite all our wondrous perfections, what is done now that was not done just as well or better before the Flood?

Can we drink more than we drank in the days of ignorance and barbarism (in their ancient form)? Alexander the great, the equivocal friend of the handsome Hephaestion, never failed to drink deep, even though he lacked a 'Journal of Useful Knowledge' (*created by Émile de Girardin, in 1831*) in his day, and I know of no utilitarian who would be capable of draining, without becoming oedemic, swollen that is to a greater extent than Emmanuel Lepeintre ('*Lepeintre Jeune*', a comic actor famous for his obesity) or an adult hippopotamus, the huge cup he called the Cup of Heracles. That Marshal of France, François de Bassompierre, who emptied a dozen such (*see his 'Mémoires', 1665*), while drinking the health of the canons of Saverne, seems to me singularly estimable in that regard, his act being little susceptible to perfectibility.

What economist could enlarge our stomachs so as to hold as many beefsteaks as Milo of Croton, who ate an ox? The menus of the 'Café Anglais', or 'Le Grand Véfour', or any other celebrated Parisian restaurant you like, seem to me meagre and ecumenical in the extreme, compared to Trimalchio's dinner menu (*see Petronius' 'Satyricon'*). At what table do they now serve a sow and her twelve wild boars in a single dish? Who alive now has eaten moray eels and lampreys fattened on human flesh? Do you really believe Jean Brillat-Savarin perfected the work of Caelius Apicius (*see the 'De re culinaria'*)? Is it at Chevet's that Vitellius's fat tripe-seller would find enough to fill that emperor's famous dish he called 'The Shield of Minerva' with pheasant and peacock brains, flamingo-tongues, and pike-livers (*see Suetonius' 'The Twelve Caesars'*)? Do the oysters eaten at 'Au Rocher de Cancale' really render them as highly sought after as were those of the Lucrine Lake, which was devoted to them especially. The little suburban houses of the Regency marquises are wretched places for emptying a wine-bottle, compared to the villas of the Roman patricians, at Baiae, Capreae and Tibur. Should not the cyclopean magnificence of those great voluptuaries who built eternal monuments in which to indulge the pleasures of a day cause us to fall flat on our faces before the genius of the ancients, and forever erase from our dictionaries the word *perfectibility*?

Have we added a single deadly sin to the total? Sadly, there are only seven, just as before; the number of ways the just may fall from grace, which is a mediocre number. I doubt that, at the rate we are going, even after being besieged by Progress, any lover would be capable of repeating the thirteenth labour of Hercules (*traditionally, that of impregnating forty-nine of the fifty daughters of King Thespia, in a single night*). His marathon love-making is regarded, by many, as his greatest feat. Can one be any more agreeable to the Lord than in the days of Solomon? Many illustrious scholars and most respectable ladies hold completely the opposite opinion, and claim that agreeableness is decreasing. Well then, why talk of progress? I know you will tell me we have an upper house and a lower house, that it is hoped that soon everyone will possess the vote, and the number of representatives be doubled or tripled. Do you think too few errors are perpetrated by the National Assembly, and are an insufficient number for the nasty brew they mix? I scarcely see the point of depositing two or three hundred provincial politicians in a wood-panelled salon (*in the Palais Bourbon*), with a ceiling painted by Alexandre-Évariste Fragonard, simply to have them fiddle with, and mar, I know not how many absurd or atrocious petty laws. What matters it whether a sabre, an aspergillum (*for sprinkling holy water*), or an umbrella governs your parliament! It is always simply a stick, and it surprises me that devotees of progress should argue over the choice of stick that

tickles their shoulders, when it would be much more progressive and less costly to break it and cast the pieces to the Devil.

The only one among you who possess a modicum of common sense is a madman, a mighty genius, an imbecile, a divine poet far above Lamartine, Hugo and Byron; he is Charles Fourier the Phalansterian (*and Utopian*) who is all of the above in one: he alone employs logic, and has the audacity to push his conclusions to the end. He affirms, without hesitation, that human beings will soon possess a tail fifteen feet long with an eye embedded at the end; which is progress, indeed, and would allow one to do a thousand fine things that could not be done before, such as knocking out an elephant without a blow from one's fist; swinging from trees without a rope, as easily as the fittest macaque; doing without an umbrella or parasol, by spreading one's tail over one's head in a plume, as squirrels do who cheerfully lack umbrellas, and a host of other prerogatives that would take too long to enumerate. Several Phalansterians even claim they already have a small one that can only grow longer, if the Lord grants them life.

Charles Fourier has invented as many species of animals as Georges Cuvier, the great naturalist. He has invented horses that will be three times the size of elephants, dogs as big as tigers, fish capable of feeding more people than the two employed by Jesus Christ in that 'miracle' which the unbelieving Voltaireans think an April Fool's jest, and I a parable of some magnificence. Fourier has built cities beside which Rome, Babylon and Tyre are mere molehills; he has piled Babels one upon another, and produced infinitely more spirals in rifling a gun-barrel than those in all the engravings by John Martin; he has imagined I know not how many orders of architecture and new culinary seasonings; he has outlined a project to build a theatre that would seem grandiose even to Romans of the Empire, and prepared a menu that even Lucullus or Nomentanus would perhaps have found adequate for a dinner with friends; he promises to create new pleasures, and develop the organs and the senses; he cannot but render women more beautiful and more voluptuous, men more robust and more vigorous; he guarantees your fertility, while proposing to reduce the number of inhabitants of the world so that everyone is at ease here; which is more rational it seems than urging the proletarians, except when cannonading them in the streets when they proliferate too greatly, and gifting them bullets instead of bread, to create others.

It is only in this way that Progress is possible. All the rest is a savage mockery, a witless farce, not even useful for fooling gawping idiots.

The phalanstery (*a building designed for a self-contained Utopian community*) is truly an improvement on the Abbey of Thélème (*see Rabelais' 'Gargantua and Pantagruel', Book I:52*), and relegates the Earthly Paradise definitively to the class of things that are wholly bewigged and outdated. The Thousand and One Nights and Countess d'Aulnay's tales (*see her collection 'Les Contes des Fées', 1697*) alone can successfully compete with the phalanstery. What creative fecundity! There is enough in the idea to defray three thousand marvellous cartloads of romantic or classical poetry; and our versifiers, academicians or not, are quite unimaginative, compared to Charles Fourier, the inventor of 'passionate attraction'. This idea of using forms of motion that we have until now sought to repress is most assuredly a noble and powerful idea.

Oh! You say that we are making progress! If, tomorrow, a volcano were to erupt beneath Montmartre, shroud Paris in ash, and bury her in a tomb of lava, as Vesuvius once did Stabia, Pompeii, and Herculaneum, and then, a thousand years from now, the antiquarians of that age

were to carry out excavations, and exhume the corpse of our dead city, tell me what monument, built now, if any remained standing, could equal the splendour of the great buried Gothic cathedral of Notre-Dame? A fair idea of our later art might be transmitted by uncovering the Tuileries as retouched by Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine! The statues from the Pont Louis XV (*the Pont de la Concorde; the statues are now dispersed*) would also make a fine effect, transported to the museums of that day! Were it not for the paintings of the old schools, and the statues from antiquity or the Renaissance, filling the gallery of the Louvre, that long, shapeless corridor; if it were not for Ingres' ceiling (*The Apotheosis of Homer*), which might prevent their believing Paris to have been merely a Barbarian encampment, a village of Welshmen or cannibalistic Tupi Indians, what they would find amidst their excavations would be most curious. National Guards' sabres, and firefighters' helmets, and coins struck using an ill-formed die, that is what would be found in place of those beautiful weapons, so curiously worked, that the Middle Ages left at the foot of its towers and in its ruined tombs, and of those medals that fill Etruscan vases and litter the foundations of every Roman building. As for our miserable furniture in wood veneer, all these wretched chests, bare, ugly, and mean that we call sideboards or bureaux, all these shapeless, fragile utensils, I trust time would take pity on them sufficiently and destroy even the smallest vestige.

One fine day, a fancy seized us, that of building a magnificent and grandiose monument. We were obliged to borrow its plan from the ancient Romans; and, even before its completion, our Pantheon bent on its legs like a rickety child, and staggered like an invalid, dead-drunk, so much so that we were forced to provide it with crutches of stone, without which it would have fallen, piteously, full length, in front of all, and given the nations an object of amusement for a hundred years and more. We sought to plant an obelisk in one of our squares; we were driven to stealing one from Luxor, and it took us two years to bring it here. Ancient Egypt lined its roads with obelisks, as we line ours with poplar trees; she bore bundles of them in her arms, as a market gardener carries bundles of asparagus, and carved monoliths from the flanks of her granite mountains more easily than we can carve a toothpick or an ear-scoop. A few centuries ago, we were blessed with Raphael, and Michelangelo; now we have the ever-popular Paul Delaroche, all because we are progressing. You boast of your Opéra; ten Opéras like yours could have danced the saraband in the Roman Circus. The animal-trainer Henri Martin himself, with his tame tiger, and poor gouty lion asleep like a subscriber to the *Gazette*, is a miserable thing compared to the gladiators of antiquity. What are your benefit performances that last until two in the morning, when you think of those Games that lasted a hundred days, those performances where real ships actually fought over an actual sea; in which thousands of men studiously cut each other to pieces — turn pale, O, heroic Antonio Franconi (*founder of the equestrian theatre, Cirque Olympique*)! With the water extracted, the sandy arena displayed roaring lions and tigers, fearful extras serving for only a single occasion, and the leading role was filled by some robust Dacian or Pannonian athlete who was often unable to be there to take his bow at the end of the performance, and whose leading lady was a beautiful but greedy Numidian lioness hungry from fasting for three days? Does not a tightrope-walking elephant seem superior to Mademoiselle George (*Marguerite Georges*)? Do you think Marie Taglioni's dancing better than that of Arbuscula (*a stage performer in Ancient Rome*), or Jules Perrot's better than that of Bathyllus? I am convinced that Roscius would have yielded nothing to Bocage (*Pierre-Martinien Tousez*), excellent though the latter is. Galeria Copiola, of Ancient Rome, filled the role of an ingénue at the age of a hundred and four. It is fair to say that the oldest of our young ladies is hardly more than sixty, and that Mademoiselle Mars (*Anne Salvétat*)

is showing no sign at all of progress in that direction. The Romans had three or four thousand gods in whom they believed, and we have only one, in whom we scarcely believe; this is progress of a curious kind. Was not Jupiter stronger than Don Juan, and a nobler seducer? In truth, I know of nothing superior that we have invented or even perfected.



Louis Béroud (1852–1930)
L'escalier de l'opéra Garnier (1877)
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

After the 'progressive' journalists, as if to serve as their antithesis, come the 'jaded' journalists, who are usually twenty years old or so, who have never left their neighborhood, and have only ever slept with the housemaid. These folk are bored by everything, exasperated by everything, and

wearied by everything; they are sated, numbed, worn out, unreachable. They know in advance what you are going to say; they have seen, felt, experienced, heard everything that it is possible to see, feel, experience, or hear; the human heart has no corner so remote that they have not shone a lantern there. They tell you, with marvellous aplomb: ‘The human heart is not like that; women are not like that; this character is false.’ or else they cry ‘What then! Always love or hatred! Always men and women! Cannot we be told of something else? But man, indeed, is worn down to the bone, and woman even more so, since Honoré de Balzac involved himself with them. Who shall deliver us from men and women? Do you think, sir, that your tale is new? It is new only in the manner of the Pont Neuf: nothing in the world is more commonplace; I heard the same I know not where, when I was being wet-nursed or elsewhere; I have been listening to the same for ten years or more. Besides, understand, sir, that there is nothing I am not acquainted with, that everything seems worn out to me, and that your idea, were it as virgin as the Virgin Mary, I would no less affirm to have seen as a whore by the roadside, in the arms of the lowest scribbler, the meanest of pedants.’

These jaded journalists were responsible for ‘Jocko the Brazilian Monkey’, ‘The Green Monster’, ‘The Lions of Mysore’ (*all pieces performed at the Cirque Olympique*) and a thousand other wonderful inventions.

They complain endlessly of being obliged to read books and view plays. Regarding some poor vaudeville performance, they speak of almond trees in blossom, fragrant lime-trees, the spring breeze, the scent of fresh foliage; they become lovers of nature like Young Werther, yet have never set foot outside Paris, and would not know a cabbage from a beetroot. If it is winter, they will tell you of the pleasures of the domestic hearth, the crackling fire and the andirons, slippers, and reverie, and dozing; they will not fail to quote the famous line from Tibullus:

‘Quam juvat immites ventos audire cubantem’

‘What joy to hear the raging winds as I lie there’

(See Tibullus: Elegies I:1, line 45)

by which means they grant themselves a little frisson at once disillusioned and naive, the most charming in the world. They will pose as men whom the works of mankind can no longer move, whom dramatic emotions leave as cold and as dry as the knife with which they sharpen their pen, yet who nonetheless cry out, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau: ‘Behold the periwinkle!’ (*See Rousseau’s ‘Confessions’ Book VI.*) Such folk profess a fierce antipathy towards the colonels played on stage at the Théâtre du Gymnase, the uncles from America, the cousins male and female, the wise old soldiers of the Guard, and the amorous widows, and attempt, it seems, to cure us of vaudeville by proving every day, in their column-inches, that not all French people are born intelligent. In truth, I find little harm in it; quite the opposite, and I am happy to recognise that the extinction of

vaudeville, or comic-opera, in France (it being the national genre) would be one of the greatest blessings of heaven. But I would like to know what kind of literature these gentlemen would be prepared to accept in its place, though indeed it could prove no worse.

Others preach against false taste, and translate Seneca's tragedies. Lately, to complete the order of march, a new battalion of critics has formed of a kind not seen before.

Their formula for criticism is the most convenient, most extensible, most malleable, most peremptory, most superlative, and most triumphant that a critic could ever imagine. Zoilus (*a critic of Homer's works noted for his harsh and malignant attacks*) would surely have appreciated it.

Before now, when one wanted to diminish any work, and discredit it in the eyes of patriarchal and naive subscribers, one trotted out false or perfidiously isolated quotations; one truncated sentences and mutilated verses, so that even the author found himself to be the most ridiculous being in the world; one accused him of imaginary plagiarisms; one compared passages of his book with passages in ancient or modern texts, which had not the least connection with it; one accused him, in ranting style, and with many solecisms, of being ignorant of his own native language, of mangling the French of Racine and Voltaire; one proclaimed, in all seriousness, that his work encouraged cannibalism, and that his readers would inevitably become cannibalistic or at least rabid in a week; it was all wretched, retrogressive, spiritless, fossilised. By dint of having reiterated it in newspaper columns and reviews, the accusation of immorality was rendered so inadequate, and useless, that only *Le Constitutionnel*, a modest and progressive newspaper, as we know, still had the desperate courage to employ it.

Therefore, 'anticipatory' criticism has been invented, prospective criticism. Do you not see, at first glance, how charming the idea is, and how imaginative? The recipe is simple, and I can reveal it here: the work that will be considered fine, and will be highly-praised, is the work that has not yet appeared. The work that has appeared is infallibly detestable. That of tomorrow will be superb; but sadly, it is always today.

It is a form of criticism based on the same principle as that of the barber whose sign bore these words written in large letters: 'Free Shave Here Tomorrow!' All the poor devils who read his placard promised themselves that next day they would experience the ineffable and sovereign sweetness of being shaved once in their lives without spending a penny: and such was their delight the hair on their chins grew half a foot during the night preceding this happiest of days; but, once the napkin was round their necks, the barber demanded his fee; they must cough up, or he would treat them as people did the thieving walnut-pickers and apple-gatherers in Le Perche (in *Normandy, and noted for both products*) and he swore a great *Sacredieu* of an oath that he'd cut their throats with his razor, unless they paid him, while the poor fellows, teeth chattering, pointed, pitifully and wretchedly, to the placard with its sacred inscription. 'Ha, ha! Little fools!' laughed the barber, 'You're no scholars, back to school with you! The sign says: 'Tomorrow'. I'm not so daft as to shave you 'today' for free; my colleagues would scorn me for hurting the trade. Come back in a week that has three Thursdays, that's best. A miserly old beggar I'd be, if I didn't shave you for free, then, on the word of an honest barber.'

Authors who read a 'prospective' article, in which current works are denigrated, flatter themselves that the book they are writing will be the texts of the future. They try to accommodate the critic's ideas, as far as possible, and to become socially-oriented, progressive, moralistic,

palingenetic (*regenerative*), mythical, pantheistic, followers of Philippe Buchez (*a disciple of Saint-Simon*), thinking in that way to escape a formidable decree of anathema; but what happens to them is what happened to the barber's customers — today is not the eve of tomorrow. That forever-promised day will never dawn; for the barber's formula is too convenient to be abandoned quite so soon. While decrying the author, of whom one is jealous, and whose book one would like to annihilate, one dons gloves and demonstrates one's highly-generous impartiality. One seemingly asks nothing more than to find something good therein to praise, yet one never does. This recipe is far superior to the one I termed 'retrospective', which consists of praising only past works, which are no longer read, and which trouble no one, at the expense of modern works, which the author cares for, and which involve their self-esteem more directly.

I declared, before commencing this review of gentlemen-critics, that the material could well provide fifteen or sixteen thousand volumes in folio, but that I would content myself with a few lines; I fear that these few lines will be lines each two or three thousand fathoms long, resembling those large pamphlets so thick that not even a cannon-ball could pierce them, which perfidiously bear the title: a 'Word on the Revolution', a 'Word... *on this or that*'. The history of the words and deeds, and of the multiple loves, of the diva Madeleine de Maupin would then run a high risk of being rejected, and the reader should understand that an entire volume is not too much to sing the adventures of that beautiful Bradamante (*see Ariosto's 'Orlando Furioso' for the warrior-maid of that name*), in a worthy manner. That is why, however much I may wish to continue describing the coat-of-arms of the illustrious Aristarchus (*of Samothrace, the critical editor of Homer's works*) of the day, I will rest content with the sketch I have just drawn, adding a few thoughts on the benevolent natures of my kind-hearted brothers in Apollo, who, as dumbly as Cassandra in the *commedia dell'arte*, remain in receipt of the blows from Harlequin's baton, and kicks in the backside from Paillasse the clown, without being moved any more than a statue is.

They resemble the fencing master who, under attack, crosses his arms behind his back, and receives on his bared chest all the thrusts of his adversary, without attempting a single parry. The whole matter is like a plea where the royal prosecutor alone has the right to speak, or a debate where no reply is allowed.

The critic slashes here and there. He cuts from on high, and slices from the ground up. Absurd, detestable, monstrous: it means nothing, it means everything. A drama is performed, the critic goes to view it; it turns out that it in no way corresponds to the drama which, given its title, he had conceived in his head; then, in his column, he substitutes his own drama for the author's drama. He writes long erudite tracts; he pours forth all the knowledge he acquired the day before in some library, and ill-treats those from whom he should learn, the least of whom has shown themselves more able than himself.

Authors endure this with a magnanimity, a patience, that seems truly inconceivable. Who, after all, are these critics with such piercing tones, such abrupt speech that one would think them true sons of the gods? They are simply fellows with whom we went to college, and who evidently benefited less from their studies than we did, since they produce nothing, and can do nothing but scorn and befoul those of others, like true Stygian Stymphalides (*the monstrous birds of Heracles' Sixth Labour in Greek myth*).

Would it not be something to criticise the critics themselves? For these mighty folk, who are forever expressing their disgust, and are so proud and difficult, are far from possessing the Pope's supposed infallibility. If one did, there would be enough to fill a daily newspaper of the largest format. Their historical, and other, blunders, their fabricated quotations, their errors in the use of the French language, their plagiarisms, their drivel, their hackneyed, tasteless jokes, their poverty of ideas, their lack of intelligence and tact, their ignorance of the simplest things which easily allows them to take Piraeus for a man, and Paul Delaroche for a painter, would provide authors with ample means to take revenge, with no more work to do than underline the relevant passages in pencil and reproduce them verbatim; for the title of critic does not grant one the title of great writer, and merely by reproaching others for poor language or taste one does not, thereby, avoid making them oneself; our critics prove it every day. If a Chateaubriand, a Lamartine, or the like were the critic, I might concede that one should get down on one's knees and pay worship; but that some little X, Y, or Z, or other letter of the alphabet between A and W, should play Quintilian (*the Roman critic and orator*), and scold one in the name of morality and noble literature, that is what ever revolts me and goads me to unparalleled fury. I would welcome an order from the police that would forbid certain names from attacking certain others. It is true though that a cat can look at a king, and that Saint Peter of Rome, giant as he was, could not prevent the *Trasteverini* (*the inhabitants of the Trastevere, 'over the Tiber'*) from pelting him, vigorously, yet I still cannot believe it wrong to command, as regards certain monumental reputations: 'No dumping of rubbish here.'

Charles X alone understood the matter. By ordering the suppression of the newspapers, he rendered a great service to the arts and civilisation. Newspapers are akin to brokers or horse-dealers, interposing themselves between artists and the public, between the king and the people. We know the fine things that have resulted from this. Their perpetual barking deafens inspiration, and sows such misgivings in hearts and minds that one dares trust neither the poets nor the government; something which renders royalty and poetry, two of the greatest things in the world, impossible, all to the great misfortune of the people, who sacrifice their well-being for the dubious pleasure of reading, every morning, a few ill-written sheets of an ill-intentioned paper, printed in poor ink and in a feeble style. There was no art criticism under Julius II, and I know of no articles criticising Daniele da Volterra, Sebastian del Piombo, Michelangelo, or Raphael, nor Lorenzo Ghiberti, nor Benvenuto Cellini; and I think that, for people who had no newspapers, who knew neither the word 'art' nor the word 'artistic', they showed talent enough, and acquitted themselves not too badly at their profession. Reading newspapers inhibits true scholarship and artistry; it is like a daily excess that makes you arrive enervated and lacking strength at the bed of the Muses, those harsh and difficult girls who demand fresh and vigorous lovers. The newspaper kills the book, as the book has killed architecture, and as artillery has done away with the need for courage and muscular strength. We have no idea of the pleasures that newspapers rob us of. They steal the virgin nature of all things from us; they leave us nothing of our own, and unable to comprehend a book ourselves. They rob the drama of theatrical surprise, and inform one of all the denouements in advance; they deprive one of the pleasure of commenting, chattering, gossiping and backbiting, of writing a new story, or peddling a true one for a week or more in all the salons of the world. They intone ready-made judgments to us, in spite of ourselves, and warn us against things we might like; they make the sellers of sulphur-tipped matches, if they have any brains left, talk as impertinently about literature as provincial academicians; all day long, they would have us hear, instead of naive ideas or individual nonsense, badly digested scraps of newspaper which resemble

omelettes, uncooked on one side and burnt on the other, which we are drowned in anew, mercilessly, every three or four hours, and which tell us little that babes at the breast do not already know; they dull our taste, and make us like those drinkers of peppered-brandy, those swallowers of lime-juice, who no longer find any flavour in the most generous wines, and are unable to grasp their flowery and perfumed bouquet. If Louis-Philippe, once and for all, were to suppress all literary and political journals, I would be infinitely grateful to him, and I would immediately rhyme for him a beautiful, wild dithyramb in free verse with optional rhymes, signed: 'Your very humble and very faithful subject etc.' Let no one imagine that literature would die; in the days when there were no newspapers, a quatrain occupied all of Paris for eight days and the opening of a new play, six months.

It is true that one would lose the pleasure of the advertisements at thirty sous a line, and the eulogies, and one's fame would be less immediate and less astounding. But I have thought of a most ingenious way of replacing the advertisements. If by the time this glorious novel of mine goes on sale, my gracious monarch has abolished the newspapers, I will most assuredly employ it, and I promise myself wonders and marvels. When the great day arrives, twenty-four criers on horseback, in my publisher's livery, with his address on their fronts and backs, each bearing in their hand a banner on which the title of the novel will be embroidered on both sides, and each preceded by a drummer and a tambourine-player, will traverse the city, and, halting in the squares, and at the crossroads, will call out, in loud and intelligible voices:

'Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today, the admirable, inimitable, divine, and more than divine novel by the world-famous Théophile Gautier, entitled 'Mademoiselle de Maupin', is published; a novel that Europe, the rest of the globe, and even Polynesia, have awaited, impatiently, for a year or more. Five hundred copies are being sold every minute, and further copies will follow every half-hour; the nineteenth edition is already in play. A picket of municipal guards at the shop-door are there to restrain the crowds and quell disorder.' — It would certainly be well worth a three-line advertisement in the *Journal des Débats* and *Le Courrier Français*, amidst those for elasticated-belts, crinoline-collars, baby-bottles with indestructible teats, Regnaud's Balsamic Paste, and various cures for the toothache.

May 1834.

Chapter 1: D'Albert to Silvio

My dear friend, you complain of the infrequency of my letters. What would you have me write, except that I am well and still hold the same affection for you? These are things that you know perfectly well, being perfectly natural, given my age, and the fine qualities I see in you, that it is well-nigh ridiculous to make a wretched sheet of paper travel a hundred leagues and yet say nothing more. I have searched, in vain; I find nothing worth reporting. My life is the most eventless in the world, and nothing arrives to break its monotony. Today brings on tomorrow as yesterday brought

on today; and, without displaying a prophet's conceit, I predict, boldly, each morning, what will happen each evening.

Here is the story of my day: I rise, it goes without saying; thus, each day begins; I breakfast, I perfect my fencing style, I exit, I return, I dine, I pay a few visits, or occupy myself with a book: then retire to bed precisely as I did the previous day; I fall asleep, and my imagination, not being excited by anything new, grants me only worn-out, hackneyed dreams, as monotonous as my real life: it is scarcely entertaining, as you see. However, I am better-adapted to this existence than I might have been six months ago. I am bored, it is true, but in a quiet and resigned manner, which does not lack a certain sweetness, which I might willingly compare to those warm pallid autumn days in which, after the excessive heat of summer, one finds a secret charm.

This existence, though seemingly I have accepted it, is scarcely made for me however, or at least it bears very little resemblance to the one I dream of, and to which I believe myself suited. Perhaps I am wrong, and actually I am fit for no better a life than this; but I find that hard to believe, for, if it were my true destiny, I would surely have embraced it more readily, and not been bruised, in so many places and so painfully, by its sharp corners.

You know how strange adventures have an all-powerful attraction for me, how I adore everything that is singular, excessive, and dangerous, and with what avidity I devour novels and traveller's tales; there is perhaps no imagination on earth wilder or more vagrant than mine: well, I know not why, nor through what fatality, I have failed to experience an adventure; have never made a journey. For me, a tour of the world is a tour of the city in which I live; I touch the horizon on every side; I rub shoulders with reality. My life is that of the sea-shell in the sand, the ivy wrapped around a tree, the cricket on the hearth. In truth, I am astonished my feet have not yet taken root. Love is depicted wearing a blindfold; it is Destiny should be pictured so.

I have for servant a somewhat heavy and stupid sort of peasant, who has travelled as far as the north wind, who has been to the Devil, I know not where, who has seen with his own eyes everything I form such beautiful ideas of, and yet he cares about it all as little as does a glass of water; he has found himself in the most bizarre of situations; he has engaged in the most astounding adventures one can engage in. I encourage him to talk sometimes, and grow furious thinking that all these fine things have happened to a lout capable of neither feeling nor reflection, and who is only good for what he can do, that is to say, brush clothes and clean my boots.

It is evident that the life of this scoundrel should have been mine. As for him, he thinks me very happily situated, and is profoundly astonished to see me as sad as I am.

All this is scarcely interesting, my poor friend, and hardly worth writing about, is it not? But, since you absolutely wish me to write to you, I must tell you what I think and feel, and relate the history of my ideas, in the absence of events or action. There may be little order and novelty in what I have to tell you; but you have no one to blame but yourself, since it is what you wish to hear.

You are my friend from childhood, we were raised together, our life has for long been a shared one, and we are used to exchanging the most intimate thoughts. I can therefore relate to you, without a blush, all the nonsense that fills my idle brain; I will add not a word, nor subtract a word.

With you I set aside all self-esteem. Also, it shall be the exact truth, even as regards petty and shameful things; assuredly, I shall not hide myself from you.

Under the shroud of indifference, of wearisome ennui, of which I spoke just now, a thought, more torpid than dead, sometimes stirs; I do not always reach the sweet and sad calm that melancholy yields. I have relapses and slip back into my former state of agitation. Nothing is more tiring in the world than these tempests without reason, these impulses without aim. On such days, though I have no more to do than on any other, I rise early in the day, before the sun, feeling an urge to hurry, feeling I shall never possess the time I need; I dress swiftly, as if the house were on fire, donning my clothes at random, lamenting every lost minute. Someone who saw me might think I was hastening to an amorous rendezvous, or some financial affair — not at all — I have no idea where I am going; but go I must, and would think my salvation compromised if I stayed. It seems to me that someone without is summoning me, that my destiny is passing by, this very moment, in the street; that it is a matter of life and death.

I descend the stairs, looking bewildered and surprised, my clothes in disarray, my hair unkempt; people turn to laugh at me, thinking me some young debauchee who has spent the night in the tavern, or elsewhere. I am drunk indeed, though I have not been drinking, and am as drunken as my footsteps, sometimes slow, sometimes rapid. I travel from street to street like a dog that has lost its master, searching at random, restless, alert, turning about at the slightest noise, passing amidst each group without heeding the rebuffs of the folk I collide with, and gazing everywhere with a clarity of vision I lack at other times. Then I am made aware, suddenly, of being in error; that what I seek is, assuredly, not there, that I must journey further; to the other end of the town, who knows? And I set off as if the Devil were bearing me away. I only touch the ground with the tips of my shoes, seeming to weigh not an ounce. I must look strange, indeed, with my furiously busy expression, my arms gesticulating, as I utter inarticulate cries. When I think of it all calmly, I laugh at myself whole-heartedly, which nonetheless fails to stop me, I'd have you believe, from recommencing my course at the first opportunity.

If someone were to ask why I am racing about amid crowds, I would certainly be most embarrassed to answer. I am in no hurry to arrive, since I am going nowhere. I am unafraid of being late, since I have made no appointment. No one is waiting. I have no reason to hurry.

Is it an opportunity for love, an adventure, a woman, an idea, or a tilt at fortune, something missing from my life, that I seek without realising, driven by some vague instinct? Does my existence need to be rendered complete? Is it merely the desire to quit myself and my home, the tedium of my situation desiring another? It is something of all these things, and perhaps all of them at once. The fact remains: it is a most unpleasant state of being, a feverish bout of irritation which is commonly succeeded by plain apathy.

I am often possessed by the idea that, if I had only left an hour earlier, or redoubled my pace, I might have arrived in time; that, while I was passing through this street, what I was seeking was traversing some other, and that the intensity of traffic alone was enough to make me miss what I had been pursuing, at random, for so long.

You cannot imagine the depth of sadness, the profound despair, into which I fall when I realise all of it leads to nothing, that my youth is passing by, yet no perspective opens before me; then all my idle passions murmur dully in my mind, and devour each other for lack of alternative

nourishment, like the creatures in a zoo whose keeper has forgotten to feed them. Despite the stifled, subterranean disappointments of each day, there is something in me that still resists, and does not wish to die. I own to no hopes, for to hope one must feel desire, a certain propensity for wishing that things would turn out in one way rather than another. I desire nothing, for I desire all. I do not hope, or rather I no longer hope, hope being only too foolish, and it is a matter to me of profound indifference whether a thing is, or is not. I wait: for what? I know not, but I wait.

It is a quivering wait, full of impatience, interspersed with jolts and nervous movements, like that of a lover waiting for his mistress. No one arrives. I fly into a rage or begin to cry. I wait for heaven to open for an angel to descend, and grant me a revelation; for a revolution to break out and for me to be offered a throne; for a virgin out of a Raphael painting to detach herself from the canvas, descend, and embrace me; for relatives I do not possess to die, and leave me enough wealth that my fantasies will bathe in a river of gold; for a hippogriff to take me and carry me off to unknown regions. Whatever I am waiting for, it is surely nothing commonplace or mediocre.

I reach the point that, on returning home, I never fail to say: 'Has anyone been? Is there a letter? Is there anything new?' I know perfectly well there is nothing, that there can be nothing. It matters not; yet I am always most surprised and disappointed on receiving the usual answer: 'No, sir, nothing at all.'

Sometimes, however, though rarely, the thought is more precise. It is of some beautiful woman whom I do not know in the least, who knows nothing of me, whom I have met at the theatre or in church, and who paid me not the least attention. I scour the whole house, and not until I have opened the door of the very last room – I hardly dare say this, it seems so foolish – I hope she has come to see me, I hope she is there. It is no conceit on my part. I am so little conceited that several women have spoken very tenderly about me to others, saying that I seem indifferent to my own talents, and think little of my own remarks. It is prompted by something other.

When I am not stupefied by boredom and discouragement, my soul awakens and regains all its former vigour.

I hope, I love, I desire, and my desires are so violent that I imagine them drawing everything towards them, as a strong magnet attracts iron particles to itself, even distant ones. That is why I wait for what I seek, instead of advancing towards it, and often neglect the opportunities that offer themselves most favourably to my hopes. Another person would write the most loving note in the world to the god or goddess of his or her heart, or would seek the opportunity to draw closer to them. As for me, I ask my messenger for the answer to a letter I have not yet written, and spend my time constructing in my head the most marvellous situations whereby I might make myself appear in the most unexpected and favourable light to the one I love. One could make a book larger than Polybius' *Histories*, out of all the stratagems, more ingenious than those in his work, that I have conceived by which I might introduce myself to her, and reveal my passion. Yet it would suffice to say to one of my friends: 'Introduce me to Madame So-and-So,' and to then offer her a compliment of a mythological nature suitably punctuated with sighs.

Hearing all this, one might think I was fit for the asylum; however, I am a fairly reasonable fellow, and have not often acted wildly. All takes place in the cellar of my soul, and all my ludicrous ideas are buried, carefully, deep within me; from without one sees nothing, and I have the

reputation of being a quiet and cold young man, somewhat insensitive to women, and indifferent to the things of his age; which is as far from the truth as the world's judgments usually are.

Nonetheless, despite all obstructions, a few of my wishes have been fulfilled, and through the small amount of joy the accomplishment of those aims has caused me, I have come to fear others' accomplishments. You will remember the childish ardour with which I desired to have a horse of my own; my mother gifted me one quite recently; it is ebony black, with a little white star on its forehead, a full mane, shiny coat, slender legs, precisely as I desired. When they brought him to me, it gave me such a shock that I remained, for a good quarter of an hour, utterly pallid, without being able to recover; then I mounted him, and without saying a single word, set off at full gallop, and rode for more than an hour straight ahead, over the fields, in a rapture difficult to imagine: I did so every day for more than a week, and know not, in truth, how I failed to kill him, or at least leave him winded. Little by little all this great ardour subsided. I have put my horse to a trot, then a walk, and ended by riding him so nonchalantly that he often stops without my noticing; pleasure turned into habit far more quickly than I would have believed. As for Ferragus, that is what I named him, he is truly the most charming creature one could see. He has hair on his fetlocks like eagle-down; he is lively as a goat, and gentle as a lamb. You will find great pleasure in a gallop when you visit; and although my fury for riding has subsided, I still love him very much, for he has a most estimable character, and I sincerely prefer him to many a person. If you only heard how joyfully he neighs when I go to see him in his stable, and with what intelligent eyes he regards me! I confess I am so touched by his testimonies of affection, that I embrace his neck, and kiss him quite as tenderly as if he were a beautiful girl.

I had another desire, one more vivid, more ardent, more perpetually present, more dearly cherished, for which I had built a ravishing house of cards in my soul, a palace of chimeras, frequently razed, yet raised again with a desperate show of constancy. My wish was to possess a mistress, a mistress entirely my own, like my horse. I know not if the realisation of this dream would soon fine me as cold as did the realisation of the other. I doubt it, but perhaps I am wrong, and I shall weary of her as quickly. Through some peculiar trait, I desire what I desire so frantically, yet without doing anything to procure it, that if, by chance or otherwise, I arrive at the object of my wish, I have such strong moral qualms, and am so troubled, that I feel faint and no longer have enough vigour to enjoy it: also, things which come to me without my having wished for them usually give me more pleasure than those which I have coveted most ardently.

I am twenty-two years old; I am no longer a virgin. Alas! One is no longer so at this age, neither in body nor in heart, which is far worse. Apart from those who pleasure people for money, whom one should count no more than one does a lascivious dream, I have indeed had, here and there, in some obscure corner or other, a few honest women, or ones who were nearly so, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither young nor old, such as offer themselves to young folk who own to no settled affair, and whose heart is idle. With a little goodwill, and a fairly strong dose of romantic illusion, one may call that possessing a mistress, if you wish. As for me, it is impossible for me to do so, and if I had a thousand adventures of that kind, I would still believe my wish as unfulfilled as ever.

So, I have not yet had a mistress, though all my desire is to have one. It is an idea that particularly troubles me; for it is not the result of an effervescent temperament, hot bloodedness, or the first flowering of puberty. It is not the woman that I desire, it is simply a woman, a mistress; I want her, I will have her, and soon. If I fail, I confess I shall not recover from the failure, for it

would result in an inward confirmation of my timidity, a dull sense of discouragement which would seriously influence the rest of my life. I would believe myself lacking in certain respects, inharmonious or disjoined, deformed in mind or heart; for what I ask is only just, and nature owes it to every man. Until I have achieved my goal, I will look upon myself as a mere child, and will lack that confidence in myself I should possess. A mistress is for me the only manly dress for a young Roman.

I see so many men, base in every way, with beautiful women, whose lackeys they are barely worthy of being, that I blush for them, and for myself. It leaves me with a poor opinion of women to see them fall in love with such louts, who despise and deceive them, rather than giving themselves to a loyal and sincere young man who would consider himself fortunate, and would adore them on his knees; to myself, for example. It is true that such men clutter the drawing-rooms, flaunt themselves before all the beauties, and are always leaning on the back of some armchair, while I remain at home, my forehead pressed to the window-pane, watching the river steam, and the fog rise, while silently erecting in my heart that perfumed sanctuary, that wondrous temple where I shall lodge the future idol of my soul. A chaste and poetic occupation, for which women are as little grateful as could be.

Women have very little taste for mere contemplation, and particularly prize those who put their ideas into action. After all, they are not wrong. Obligated, by their education and social position, to be silent and wait, they naturally prefer those who approach them and speak, so rescuing them from a false and tiresome situation. I feel all that; but I will never, in my life, be able to take it upon myself, as I see many do, to rise from my place, cross a room, and say, unexpectedly, to some woman: 'You look like an angel in that dress', or, 'Your eyes, this evening, are particularly radiant'.

All this does not stop me from absolutely needing a mistress. I know not whom it will be, and I see none among the women I know who can suitably fulfil that important role. I find in them very few of the qualities I require. Those who are sufficiently young lack sufficient beauty or intellect; those who are young and beautiful possess a base and repulsive degree of virtue, or lack the necessary freedom; and then there is always some husband, brother, mother or aunt, or I know not what, who has all-seeing eyes and expansive ears, and who must be cajoled or hurled out the window. Every rose has its aphids, every woman has crowds of relatives from whom she must be carefully weeded, if one is ever to reap the fruit of her beauty. Even her second cousins in the provinces, whom we have never seen, seek to maintain the immaculate whiteness of their dear cousin in all its purity. It is nauseating, and I will never have the patience needed to uproot all the weeds, and prune all the brambles, that inevitably obstruct one's path to a pretty woman.

I dislike mothers, greatly, and I like little girls even less. I must also confess that married women offer only a most mediocre attraction. There is a degree of confusion and complication in such a case which revolts me; I cannot bear the idea of sharing. The woman who has both a husband and a lover, prostitutes herself to one of the two, and often to both; and then, I could not consent to give way before another. My natural pride could not bend to such degradation. I will never depart simply because another man has arrived. Even if the woman is compromised and lost, even if we fight with knives, each one with one foot on her body, I will remain. Hidden staircases, wardrobes, closets, all the machinations of adultery, are no use to me.

Nor am I fond of what is called virginal candour, the innocence of youth, purity of heart, and those other charming things that are most effective in verse form; I call them mere silliness, ignorance, imbecility, or hypocrisy. The virginal candour that consists of sitting on the very edge of an armchair, arms pressed against one's body, one's eye on the tip of one's corset, and speaking only with the permission of one's grandparents, that innocence which holds a monopoly in uncurled hair and white dresses, that purity of heart which wears collared bodices because it has no throat or shoulders to speak of as yet, seems to me, in truth, no very wondrous thing.

I care naught for making some little fool spell out the alphabet of love. I am neither old enough nor corrupt enough to take pleasure in that: moreover, I would have scant success, since I have never been able to teach anything to anyone, even of what I know best. I prefer women who read to one fluently; one reaches the end of the chapter sooner; and in all things, and especially in love, the end is what one must consider. In that respect, I am rather like those people who take a novel by the tail, and read the denouement before turning to the first page.

This mode of reading and loving has its charm. One savours the details more when the ending is settled, and it is the first chapter that presents the unexpected.

So much for the little girls and the married women, who are now excluded from the role. It must therefore be among the widows that I must choose my divinity. Alas! I am afraid, though they are all that remain, that I will scarcely find there what I long for.

If I were to fall in love with one of those pale narcissi bathed in the warm dew of tears, and leaning with melancholy grace over the new marble tomb of some happily and recently deceased husband, I would certainly be, and in short order, as unhappy as her deceased husband was in his lifetime. Widows, however young and charming they may be, have a serious disadvantage that other women lack: if you are not on the best of terms with them and a cloud darkens the sky of love, they immediately, and with an excessively contemptuous air, cry: 'Ah! How badly you are behaving today! Exactly like my spouse. When we were quarrelling, he spoke in the same way. How singular, your voice and look are to his; when you are angry, you cannot imagine how much you resemble my husband; it's quite frightening.' It is far from pleasant to hear such things said to one's face, point-blank! There are widows who even go so far as to praise the deceased, as in a eulogy, and to glorify his heart and his legs at the expense of your legs and heart. At least, with women who have only lovers, whether one or more, one has the ineffable advantage of never hearing one's predecessor spoken of, which is a consideration of no minor interest. Women have too great a love for what is right and proper not to maintain a discreet silence in such cases, and all such matters are relegated to the past as swiftly as possible. It is clearly understood: one is always a woman's first lover.

I doubt there can be a serious counter to such a well-founded aversion. It is not that I find widows entirely unattractive if they're young and pretty and have not yet quit the state of mourning. There are their languid little airs, their little displays of letting their arms droop, bowing their necks, swelling their throats like bereaved turtledoves, their simpering, while softly and charmingly veiled in transparent crepe, a coquetry of grief which is easily understood, sighs skillfully managed, tears that fall so fittingly, and grant the eyes such brilliance! Certainly, second only to wine, if not before it, the liquor I best like to drink is that beautiful, clear, limpid tear trembling at the tip of a dark or a blond eyelash. How can one resist? One cannot. And then a black dress becomes a woman so

well! White skin, leaving poetry aside, contrasts with it like ivory, snow, milk, alabaster, every whiteness on earth employed by madrigal makers: while a dark skin shows only a hint of darkness, full of vivacity and fire. Mourning clothes favour a woman; the reason I shall never marry is for fear my wife will do away with me, so as to wear them on my behalf. There are women, though, who have no idea how to take advantage of their grief, and who cry in such a way as to make their noses red and their faces resemble those grotesque masks that adorn fountains: it is a reef on which many run aground. It takes a deal of charm and artfulness to cry in a pleasing manner; and without those attributes, one runs the risk of lacking consolation for many a long day. However great the pleasure of rendering some Artemisia unfaithful to the shade of her King Mausolus, I prefer my choice of she whose heart I seek in exchange for mine not to be made amongst that weeping crowd.

I hear you say, at this point: 'Then, who will you accept?' 'You reject young women, married women, widows. You dislike mothers; and I suppose you like grandmothers no better. Who the Devil can you love then?' That is the question; one without an answer as yet, which if I found it would lessen my torment. Until now, I have loved no woman, but I love and have loved, 'to love'. Though I have had no mistresses, and the women I have had only roused desire in me, I have known and know Love itself: I love not this one or that, not one rather than another, but one I have never seen, yet who must exist somewhere, and whom I will find, God willing. I know exactly what she is like, and when I meet her, will recognise her.

I have often imagined the place where she lives, the dress she wears, her eyes and hair. I hear her voice; I would know her step among a thousand others, and if, by chance, someone pronounced her name, I would turn my head; it is impossible for her not to possess one of the half a dozen names I have assigned to her in my mind.

She is twenty-six years old, no more, no less either. She is no longer inexperienced, and yet not jaded. It is a charming age at which to make love fully, without childishness, and without libertinism. She is of average height. I do not wish her a giantess or a dwarf. I want to be able to carry my goddess from the sofa to the bed myself; but it would displease me to have to search for her there. It is a requirement that, raising herself a little on tiptoe, her mouth reaches mine for a kiss. That is the right height. As for her plumpness, she must be not too thin. I am a bit of a Turk in this respect, and it would displease me somewhat to find a bony ridge where I seek a curve; a woman's skin must be well filled, her flesh good and firm like the fruit of an unripe peach: that will be exactly how the mistress I seek is made. She is blonde with dark eyes, pale as a blonde but with the colouring of a brunette, and with something crimson and sparkling in her smile. The lower lip a little broad, the pupils swimming in moisture, the throat rounded, slender, and smooth, the wrists narrow, the hands long and well-formed, the gait undulating like a snake risen on its tail, the hips full and moving, the shoulders broad, the nape of the neck covered with down: a model of beauty both refined and strong at the same time, elegant but lively, poetic but real; an idea of Giorgione's executed by Rubens.

Here is how she is costumed: she wears a dress of scarlet or black velvet, with slits of white satin or silvery cloth, an open bodice, a large Medici ruff, a capriciously ruffled felt hat like that of Helena Fourment, with long white feathers curled and crimped, a gold chain or a band of diamonds around her neck, and a quantity of large rings, variously enamelled, on the fingers of both hands.

I would not have her lack a ring or a bracelet. The dress must be true velvet or brocade; at most I would allow a descent to satin. I prefer a crumpled silk skirt to a linen one, and a headdress of pearls or feathers rather than natural flowers or a simple bow: I know that often the lining of a linen skirt is at least as attractive as that of a silk skirt; but I prefer the silk. Also, in my reveries, I have endowed myself with many a queen as my mistress, many an empress, princess, sultana, many a famous courtesan, but never a bourgeois woman or a shepherdess; and, in my most wayward thoughts, I have never abused a woman on a carpet of grass, or a bed of serge d'Aumale (*from which military coats were made*). I think beauty a diamond that should be mounted and set in gold. I cannot imagine a beautiful woman without a carriage, horses, footmen, and everything else one possesses with a hundred thousand francs a year: there is harmony between beauty and wealth. The one demands the other: does not a pretty foot call for a pretty shoe? A pretty shoe calls for carpets and a carriage, and what follows. A beautiful woman ill-dressed and in an ugly house is, in my opinion, the most painful sight one can see, and I could bear her no love. Only the rich and beautiful can be in love without seeming ridiculous or rousing pity. For that reason, few have the right to be in love. I myself, first and foremost, would be excluded, nonetheless, that is my opinion.



Madame Moitessier (1851)
Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (French, 1780 - 1867)

[Artree](#)

It will be evening when we meet for the first time, in front of a lovely sunset. The sky will possess those orange, pale-yellow, and light-green tones that one sees in paintings by the old masters: there will be a great avenue of chestnut trees in bloom, and ancient elms their branches full of doves, beautiful trees of a fresh, dark green, their moist shade full of mystery; a few statues and marble vases here and there, their snowy whiteness highlighted against the verdant background; a pond over which the usual swan sails; and in the distance a castle in brick and stone, as in the time of Henri IV, with a pointed slate roof, tall chimneys, weather vanes on all the gables, and tall narrow windows. At one of these windows, leaning, in melancholy mood, on the balcony, the queen of my soul in the attire I described just now; behind her an African servant holding her

fan, her parakeet on his arm. Nothing is missing, as you see, and all perfectly absurd. The beautiful woman drops her glove; I pick it up, kiss it, and return it to her. The conversation begins; I reveal all the wit I lack; I say charming things; she responds, I reply, with a luminous shower, a firework display, of dazzling words. In short, I am adorable, and adored. Supper time arrives, I am invited; I accept. What a supper, my dear friend, and what a chef my imagination! Wine sparkles in the glasses, a blond and golden pheasant steams in a dish with a coat of arms: the feast is prolonged well into the night, and you may imagine that it is not at my house that it ends. Is that not something worth dreaming of? Nothing in the world seems simpler and, in truth, it is surprising it has not occurred a dozen times, rather than being dreamed of but once.



Henry VI and Sully before the Château Royal de Fontainebleau (1818)
Alexandre Louis Robert Millin du Perreux (French, 1764-1843)

[*Artvee*](#)

Sometimes, I am in a vast forest. The hunt is here; the horn sounds, the hounds bark and course the path with the speed of lightning; the beautiful woman, riding side-saddle, is mounted on a Turkish horse, one as white as milk, and as frisky and lively as can be. Though she is an excellent rider, he paws the ground, prances, and rears, and she finds it more than troublesome to restrain him; he grips the bit in his teeth, and bears her straight towards a precipice. I swoop from the heavens, on purpose, I restrain the horse, I take the fainting princess in my arms, I restore her

to her senses and escort her back to her castle. What well-born woman would refuse her heart to a man who has risked his life for her? None; and gratitude is a by-way that swiftly leads to love.

You will at least agree that when I indulge in romance, it is not half-heartedly, and that I act as madly as anyone can. I am ever the same, for nothing in the world is darker than madness which acts with reason. You must also agree that when I write letters, they are volumes rather than mere notes. In all things, I prefer what exceeds the usual limits. That is why I love you. Refrain from making fun of all the nonsense I scribble: I am quitting the pen to set my ideas in action; for I forever return to my refrain: I desire a mistress. I know not if it will be the lady in the park, or the beauty on the balcony, but I bid you farewell as I set forth in search of her. My resolution is made. Even if she I seek is concealed in the depths of Cathay, or at Samarkand, I will know how to discover her. I shall let you know of the success of my enterprise, or of its failure. I hope to see it successful: wish me luck, my dear friend. As for myself, I shall dress in my finest clothes, and leave my house determined to return only with a mistress who accords with my ideas. I have dreamt enough. Now, I must act.

The End of Part I of Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin'

Part II: Chapters 2 to 4

Chapter 2: D'Albert to Silvio

Well, my friend, I am home again! I have been neither to Cathay, Cashmere, nor Samarkand; and it is fair to say that I no more possess a mistress than ever. Though I raised my hand and swore a great oath that I would travel to the ends of the earth, I have not even passed the bounds of the city. I know not how I contrive it, but I have never been able to keep my word to anyone, not even myself: the Devil must have something to do with it. If I say: 'I shall go there tomorrow', I will most certainly fail; if I intend to visit the tavern, I arrive at church; if I wish to go to church, the road becomes tangled beneath my feet like a skein of thread, and I find myself in a wholly different place. I fast when I have decided to indulge in an orgy, and so on. I think, therefore, that what prevents me from having a mistress is that I have resolved to have one.

I must tell you about my expedition in detail: it is well worth the narrating. I had spent at least two full hours each day at my toilette. My hair was combed and curled, the few whiskers I had were trimmed and waxed, and, the emotion of desire somewhat enlivening the ordinary pallor of my face, I really looked quite well. Finally, after having carefully examined myself in the mirror to see if I was handsome enough, and whether my air was gallant enough, I left the house resolutely, my head held high, my chin raised, my gaze direct, one hand on my hip, making the heels of my boots clink like an infantry officer, elbowing the bourgeoisie, while appearing utterly victorious and triumphant.

I was like another Jason going to win the Golden Fleece. But, alas, Jason was more fortunate than I! Besides winning the fleece, he also won a beautiful princess and, so far, I have neither princess nor fleece.

I went, thus, through the streets, noticing all the women, approaching them, and gazing at them more closely when they seemed worth examining. Some assumed a grand and virtuous air and passed by without raising an eye. Others were at first surprised, and then smiled, if they had white teeth. Some turned round after a while to look at me, when they thought I was no longer looking at them, and blushed like cherries when they found themselves face to face with me. The weather was fine; crowds of folk were out for a walk. And yet, I must admit, despite all the respect I have for the most interesting half of the human race, what is commonly called the fair sex is devilishly ugly: out of a hundred women there was hardly a single passable one. This one had a moustache; that one had a blue nose; others had red marks instead of eyebrows; One was not badly made, but her face was red. The head of a second was charming, but she could have scratched her ear with her shoulder-blade; the third would have put Praxiteles to shame for the roundness and softness of certain contours, but she skated about on feet like Turkish stirrups. Another

displayed the most magnificent shoulders one could meet with; on the other hand, her hands resembled, in shape and size, those enormous scarlet gloves that serve for a haberdashers' sign. In general, how much weariness showed on those faces! How withered, etiolated, worn down, ignominiously, by petty passions, and petty vices! What expressions of envy, malicious curiosity, greed, and shameless coquetry! And how much uglier a woman who is not beautiful is than a man who is unhandsome!

I saw none of worth except a few grisettes; but there was more linen to rumple there than silk, and that is not what I am about. Truly, I believe that Man, and by Man, I mean Woman also, is the ugliest creature on earth. This quadruped that walks on its hind feet seems to me singularly presumptuous to rank itself, as if of right, the highest in all Creation. A lion, a tiger, is more beautiful than a man, and in many a species its individuals attain a beauty that is proper to them, which is extremely rare as regards human beings. How many monsters to produce an Antinous (*the emperor Hadrian's handsome favourite*)! How many ugly *Gotons* (*Margoton, a variant on Marguerite, i.e. a country-wench*) for a beautiful *Phyllis* (*see Virgil's 'Eclogues'*).

I am very much afraid, my dear friend, that I will never embrace my ideal, and yet there is nothing extravagant or unnatural about that same. It is not the ideal of a ninth-grade schoolboy. I ask for neither 'ivory globes', nor 'alabaster columns', nor 'azure snares'; I have employed in its composition neither lilies, snow, nor roses, neither jet nor ebony, coral, ambrosia, pearls, nor diamonds. I have left the stars of the sky alone, and not sought to pluck the sun from a summer sky. It is an almost bourgeois ideal, it is so simple, and it seems to me that with a sack or two of piastres I could find her ready-made and already realised in the nearest bazaar in Constantinople or Smyrna; she would probably cost me less than a horse or a pure-bred hound: and to think that I will not, because I feel I cannot! It is enough to render one furious, and I rage against fate, in the most profound state of anger.

You are not as mad as I am, you are happy; you have simply let your life run on without tormenting yourself, and have taken things as they came. You did not seek happiness, and yet it came to seek you; you are loved, and you love. I feel no envy; do not think that of me, at least; but I find myself less joyful in thinking of your happiness than I should be, and I say to myself, with a sigh, that I wish I might enjoy such a state.

Perhaps happiness passed me by, and I failed to see it, blind as I was; perhaps the voice spoke, and the noise of my internal tempest prevented my hearing. Perhaps I have been loved, in secret, by some humble heart that I have misunderstood, or even broken; perhaps I myself have been another's ideal, the pole of some suffering soul, its dream by night, the object of its thoughts by day. If I had looked down at my feet, perhaps I would have seen some lovely Magdalene there with her jar of perfume, and her tear-drenched hair. I ran about, raising my arms to the sky, eager to gather the stars that fled from me, disdainingly to pick the little daisy, amidst the dew and the grass, that opened its golden heart to me. I have committed a great fault: I have asked of love something other than love, that which it could not give. I forgot that Love was a naked god, and failed to understand the meaning of that magnificent symbolism. I asked him for brocaded robes, feathers, diamonds, a sublime mind, science, poetry, beauty, youth, supreme power, all that is not in Love's gift; love can offer only itself, and he who wants something other from it, is not worthy of being loved.

I have doubtless been in too much haste; my hour is not yet come; the Lord who lent me life will surely not rob me of it without my having lived. What good is it to hand the poet a lyre without strings, or grant a man a life without love? The heavens cannot allow so great an inconsistency; and doubtless, at the appointed time, will place in my path the one I must love, and by whom I shall be loved. But why did love arrive before my mistress! Why am I thirsty without possessing a fountain from which to quench that thirst? Or why am I unable to fly, like birds in the desert, to some place where water exists? The world is, for me, a Sahara without wells or oases. My life lacks a single shaded corner to shelter me from the sun: I suffer all the ardour of passion without its ecstasies, without its ineffable delights; I know its torments, yet not its pleasures. I am jealous of what exists not; I pine for the shadow of a shadow; I breathe sighs that have no cause; my insomnia is devoid of the phantom I might adore; I shed tears that drench the ground, which is never dry; I grant the wind tender kisses that are not returned; I harm my eyesight trying to see an uncertain and deceptive form in the distance; I wait for what never arrives, and count the hours anxiously, as if I were party to some tryst.

Whoever you may be, angel or demon, virgin or courtesan, shepherdess or princess; whether you come from the north or the south, you whom I do not know, yet whom I love, oh, no longer force me to wait, or the flame will consume the altar, and you will find nothing in place of my heart but a heap of cold ash. Descend from the sphere where you dwell; quit the light-filled sky, consoling spirit, and cast the shade of your broad wings over my soul. You, woman whom I will love, come, that I may take you in my arms, empty for so long. Golden gates of the palace you inhabit, roll on your hinges; humble latch of your cabin, rise in the air; woodland branches, arching brambles, untwine yourselves; enchantment that surrounds the turret, charm uttered by some magician, let your spell be broken; open, crowded ranks, let her pass through!

O my ideal, arrive too late, and I may lack the strength to love you! My soul is like a dovecote full of doves. At every hour of the day, some desire flies forth. The doves return to the dovecote, but my desire does not return, in all its strength, to the heart. The sky's azure whitens with the innumerable horde of my desires; they traverse space, from world to world, from sky to sky, seeking some love beside which to land and spend the night: hasten, my dream! Or you will find naught in the empty nest but the eggshells left behind by the fledglings that have flown.

My friend, my childhood companion, you are the only person to whom I can tell such things. Write to me that you pity me, and do not think me merely a hypochondriac. Console me, I have never needed it more. How worthy of envy are those who have a passion they are able to satisfy! The drunkard finds no cruelty in the bottle; he stumbles from the tavern to the gutter, and finds himself happier on his dung-heap than a king on his throne. The sensual man visits courtesans, seeking a love readily obtainable, or immodest refinements: painted cheeks, short skirts, dishevelled bodices, libertine talk, he is happy; his eyes widen, his lips are moist; he attains the highest degree of happiness, he feels the ecstasy of gross voluptuousness. The card-player needs only green baize and a greasy, worn deck of cards to procure that poignant anguish, those nervous spasms, that diabolical pleasure his dreadful passion brings. Such folk can sate or distract themselves; something impossible for me. The idea has taken such possession of me that I barely love the arts now, and poetry lacks charm for me; what once delighted me makes not the slightest impression.

I am beginning to believe that I am in the wrong. I demand of nature and society for more than either can give. What I seek has no existence, and I should not complain of failing to find it. However, if the woman we dream of lacks human form, what makes us love only her and not the rest, given we are human, and our instinct should draw us implacably to what is human? What conjured the idea of this imaginary woman? From what clay did we mould this invisible statue? Whence came the feathers we attached to the back of this chimera? What mystical bird laid, in a dark corner of our soul, the unseen egg from which our dream has hatched? What is this abstract beauty we feel, and cannot define? Why, before some woman who charms us, do we say she is beautiful, yet nonetheless find her ugly? Where is the model, the type, the inner pattern that serves as our point of comparison? For beauty is not an absolute idea, and is only appreciated through contrast. Was it in heaven that we saw her, shining like some star, or at the ball, in her mother's shadow, the fresh bud of a rose, its petals opening? Was it in Italy or Spain? Was it here or there, yesterday or long ago? Was she an adored courtesan, a fashionable singer, a prince's daughter, her proud and noble head bending beneath a heavy diadem of pearls and rubies? Was she that young and childlike face leaning from the window, amidst the nasturtiums and morning glories? To what school did the painting belong in which that beauty rose white and radiant from the dark shadows? Was it Raphael who drew those contours that please you? Was it Cleomenes (*supposedly the sculptor of the Venus de' Medici*) who polished the marble that you adore? Are you in love with the goddess Diana, or the Madonna? Is your ideal an angel, a sylph, a woman? Alas! She is a little of all those things, and yet none of them exactly.

Those transparent tones, that radiant, charming freshness, that roseate flesh so full of life, that lovely blonde hair unfurled like a golden mantle, that sparkling laughter, those amorous dimples, these curves undulating like flames, that supple strength, that satin sheen, that ample form, those rounded arms, that smooth fleshy back, all that healthy beauty, Rubens portrayed. While Raphael alone could fill such chaste lineaments with that pale amber tone. Who else but he curved those broad eyebrows so fine and black, and thinned the lashes of those eyelids so modestly lowered? Had not Antonio Allegri (*Correggio*) something to do with your ideal? It is from him that the lady of your thoughts stole that warm matte whiteness which ravishes you. She posed for many an hour before the artist could capture the secret of that ever-blossoming angelic smile; the oval of her face was modelled on that of a nymph or a saint. The line of the hip, so voluptuously curved, is that of the sleeping Antiope (*the mother of Amphion, see Antoine Watteau's painting 'Jupiter and Antiope', Louvre*). The full but slender hands could be those of Danaë (*the mother of Perseus*) or of Mary Magdalene. Dusty antiquity itself provided the material for the composition of your young chimera; those strong, supple loins that you embrace with such passion in dream were sculpted by Praxiteles. Your goddess purposely let the little tip of her charming foot escape the ashes of Herculaneum, so that her image would not be lame. Nature has also contributed her part. Through the prism of desire, you have viewed, here and there, beautiful eyes behind a blind, an ivory forehead pressed against a window-pane, a smiling mouth behind a fan. You have divined the shape of an arm from a hand, a knee from an ankle. What you saw was perfect: you assumed the rest resembled what you saw, and you completed it with aspects of other beauties seen elsewhere. Even the ideal beauty, realised by the old masters, was not enough for you, and you asked of the poets even more rounded contours, a more ethereal form, a more divine grace, a more exquisite refinement; you asked them to grant your phantom breath and speech, to gift her their capacity for love, reverie, joy and sadness, their melancholy and morbidity, their memories and hopes, their science and passion,

mind and heart; you took all, and added, to crown that impossible vision, your own passion, intellect, dreams and thoughts. A star lent its rays, a flower its perfume, the palette its colours, poetry its harmony, the marble its form, and you your desire. How little a real woman, who eats, drinks, rises in the morning and retires at night, however adorable and full of grace she might be, could bear comparison with such a creature! One cannot reasonably hope to meet her, and yet one does hope, one does seek. What a singular blindness! It is sublime, or absurd. How I pity and admire those who ever pursue the reality of their dream, and who die content if they have kissed their chimera on the lips but once! But what a dreadful fate is that of those Columbuses who fail to discover their New World, of the lovers who fail to find their mistress!

Ah! If I were a poet, it is to those whose lives were wasted, whose arrows failed to hit the mark, who died without uttering the word they wished to say and without pressing the hand intended for them, to all that has miscarried, and passed unnoticed, to the smothered fire, genius without issue, the unknown pearl on the sea-bed, to all that has loved without being loved in return, to all that has suffered and not met with pity, that I would dedicate my song — it would prove a noble task.

How right Plato was in wishing to banish you from his Republic, and what harm you have done, O poets! How your ambrosia has rendered our absinthe even more bitter; and how even more arid and devastated life has seemed after gazing at the infinite perspective you revealed to us! How your dreams have inspired our dreadful struggle with reality! And how, during the combat, our hearts have been trodden and trampled by you, violent you athletes of verse!

We sit like Adam at the foot of the wall of the Earthly Paradise, on the steps of the stair that leads to the world you have created, a light brighter than sunlight glittering through the cracks of the door, hearing only a few vague, scattered notes of the seraphic harmony. Every time a chosen one enters or leaves in the midst of a flood of splendour, we crane our necks and try to catch a glimpse through the open door. The fairy-tale architecture there has its equal only in Arab tales. Rows of columns, overlapping arcades, pillars twisted into spirals, marvellously-cut foliage, hollowed-out trefoils, porphyry, jasper, lapis-lazuli, what more do we see? Dazzling reflections and transparencies, profusions of rare gemstones, sardonyxes, chrysoberyls, aquamarines, iridescent opals, azedarach beads, jets of crystal, torches that render the stars pale, a splendid vertiginous mist full of noise — every Assyrian luxury!

The door closes; we see nothing more, and our lowered eyes, full of corrosive tears, view once more this poor, barren, pallid ground, these ruined hovels, these folk in rags; the soul, mere arid rock where nothing germinates, lost amid all the miseries and misfortunes of reality Ah! If we could but fly there, if the steps of that fiery staircase did not scorch our feet; but alas, Jacob's ladder can only be climbed by the angels!

What a fate! The poor man dies at the rich man's door! What irony! A palace contrasted with a hut, the ideal with reality, poetry with prose! How deep the hatred the roots of which twist deep in the hearts of the wretched! What a gnashing of teeth must sound at night from their pallets, as the wind carries to their ears the sighs of the theorbos and the viola d'amore! Poets, artists, sculptors, musicians, why have you deceived us? Poets, why have you told us your dreams? Artists, why have you fixed on canvas the elusive phantom that rose from your heart to your head with the flow of your blood, and asked: 'Is this her?' Sculptors, why did you split marble from the cliffs

of Carrara to have it express, eternally, before all eyes, your most secret and fleeting desires? Musicians, why did you hark, at night, to the songs of the stars and the flowers, and write them down? Why did you compose such beautiful things that the sweetest of voices, crying to us: 'You, I love!', seems hoarse as the grinding sounds of a saw, or the cawing of crows? A plague on you, impostors!... May the heavenly fire burn and destroy all those paintings, those poems, those statues, those scores...

Ah! My tirade, of interminable length, has strayed a little far from the epistolary style. What an outpouring! I have yielded to lyricism, my friend, and run on, ridiculously far, in the style of Pindar! All of this is far from my subject, which is, if I am not wrong, the glorious and triumphant story of the Chevalier D'Albert in pursuit of Daraïde, 'the most beautiful princess in the world', as the old tales say.

But in truth, the tale is so ill I am forced to resort to thoughts and digressions. I hope it will not always be so, and that before long the novel of my life will appear more knotted and tortuous than a Spanish imbroglio.

After wandering about from street to street, I resolved to seek out a friend of mine who has offered to introduce me to a house where, as he expresses it, one can see a world of pretty women, a view of the ideal enough to satisfy twenty poets. He says there is someone there to suit every taste: aristocratic beauties, each with the gaze of an eagle, sea-green eyes, a straight nose, a proudly-raised chin, regal hands, and the gait of a goddess; silver lilies mounted on golden stems; simple sweetly-scented violets pale in colour, with moist and lowered eyes, frail necks, and diaphanous flesh; lively and piquant beauties, rare beauties, beauties of every kind, for that house is a real seraglio, lacking only the eunuchs and their leader, the *kislar agha*. My friend tells me he has already entered into five or six affairs there. So many? That seems extreme, and I am much afraid of not achieving a like success; but *De C**** claims it will be so, and that I will soon be more successful than I believe. I have, according to him, only one fault, which will be corrected with age, and by mixing in company, that is the fault of dreaming too much of a single woman, and not attending enough to the many. That might well be true. He says I will be perfectly amiable when I have rid myself of this one little fault. May the Lord grant it so! Women must think I despise them; since a compliment, which they would find adorable, and utterly charming, on the lips of another, angers them and displeases them on mine, as much as the most cutting epigram. That is no doubt what *De C**** reproaches me for.

My heart was beating a little as I climbed the stairs, and I had barely recovered from my emotion when *De C****, dragging me by the elbow, brought me face to face with a woman of about thirty years of age — quite beautiful — dressed with muted luxury, and an extreme pretension of childish simplicity, which did not prevent her from being painted with rouge, and crimson as a carriage wheel: she was the lady of the house.

*De C****, adopting that shrill, mocking tone so different from his usual one, and which he deploys in society when he wishes to appear charming, said to her, with many demonstrations of ironic respect, in which the deepest contempt was visibly evident, partly in a low partly in a loud voice:

‘Here’s the young man I spoke of the other day, a man of very great merit; he’s of the highest birth, and it cannot be otherwise than agreeable to you to receive him; which is why I have taken the liberty of introducing him to you.’

‘Indeed, sir, you have done well,’ replied the lady, in the most outrageous mincing manner. Then she turned towards me, and, having looked me over, from the corner of her eye, like a connoisseur, and in a manner that made me blush to the ears, addressed me: ‘You may consider yourself always a guest, and visit whenever you have an evening to spare.’

I bowed rather awkwardly and stammered a few incongruous words which must have given her no high opinion of my abilities; other folk entered, which freed me from the awkwardness attached to my welcome. *De C**** pulled me into a window- corner and began to lecture me, energetically.

What the Devil! You’ll compromise me; I announced you as a phoenix of wit, a man of unbridled imagination, a lyric poet, everything most transcendent and passionate, and you stand there like a tree-stump, without saying a word! What lack of eloquence! I thought you were given to a more fertile vein; come, loosen your tongue, babble at random; you need not say anything sensible or judicious, on the contrary, that could be harmful; speak, that is the thing; speak a great deal, speak for a good while; draw attention to yourself; set aside all fear and modesty; consider everyone here a fool, or almost, and don’t forget that the orator who wishes to succeed can never sufficiently despise his audience. Come, what think you of the mistress of the house?’

‘I already find her quite displeasing; and, though I spoke to her for barely three minutes, I was as bored as if I were her husband.’

‘Ah! That’s what you think?’

‘Why, of course.’

‘Is your repugnance for her quite insurmountable? So much the worse; it would have been good for you to woo her, even if only for a month; she is suave, and a decent young man can but be educated by her.’

‘Well, if I must,’ I said, rather piteously, ‘I’ll do so; but is it as necessary as you seem to think?’

‘Alas, yes! It is of the utmost necessity, and I will explain the reason. Madame de Thémînes is quite the fashion now; she possesses all the ridiculousness of the age, and a superior manner, sometimes that of tomorrow, but never that of yesterday: she is perfectly up-to-date. People dress as she dresses, and she never wears what has once been worn. She is rich, moreover, and her carriages are fashioned in the best taste. She lacks wit, but commands a great deal of contemporary jargon; she has the liveliest tastes but little passion. People like her, but they do not move her; she has a cold heart and the mind of a libertine. As for her soul, if she has one, which is doubtful, it is of the darkest, and there is no act of wickedness or baseness of which she is incapable; but she is extremely clever and preserves appearances, just as much as is necessary, so that nothing can ever be proven against her. Thus, she will sleep with a man and not write him the simplest note thereafter. Also, her most intimate enemies find nothing to say of her, except that she uses too much rouge, and that certain parts of her person do not, in truth, possess all the charm they might seem to have – which is untrue.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘A good question! As anyone learns such things, by assuring myself of the reality.’

‘Then you too have slept with Madame de Thémines!’

‘Indeed! Why should I not have? It would have been the utmost impropriety if I had not. She has done me great service, and I am very grateful to her.’

‘I don’t understand what kind of service she can have done you...’

‘Are you really such an idiot?’ *De C**** cried, gazing at me with the most comical expression in the world. ‘Indeed, it appears so. Must I teach you everything? Madame de Thémines is said, and rightly so, to have special access to certain places, and a young man whom she has taken up, and retained for some time, can present himself, boldly, anywhere, and be certain of not remaining long without entering into an affair, or two. Besides that ineffable benefit, there is another which is no less valuable, which is that, as soon as the women in her circle see you as Madame de Thémines’ official admirer, even though they may not possess the least liking for you, they will make it their duty and pleasure to tempt you away from that fashionable person; and, instead of the advances and approaches that you would have been obliged to make, you will be spoiled for choice, and necessarily become the target of all their teasing and flirting. However, if she inspires too strong a repugnance in you, ignore my advice. You are not required to woo her exactly, though it would have been polite and proper. But, if not, make your choice, swiftly, and address her that pleases you best, or seems easiest of conquest, since by delaying, you lose the benefit of your novelty, and the advantage it grants you, for a few days at least, over all the cavaliers here. None of these ladies understand passions that are born of intimacy, and develop slowly, in respect and silence: they are for love at first sight, and occult sympathy, a thing marvellously well devised to spare the trouble of resistance, and all those lengthy repetitions with which sentiment entwines the romance of love, and which merely postpone its conclusion, needlessly. These ladies are very economical in their employment of time, and it feels so precious to them that they would be troubled if they left a single minute of it unused. They have a longing to oblige the human race that cannot be too highly praised, and they love their neighbour as themselves, which is perfectly evangelical and meritorious; they are very charitable creatures, who would not, for anything in the world, cause a man to die of despair.

Three or four of them must already be determined in your favour, and I would kindly advise you to take yourself briskly in that direction, instead of amusing yourself by chatting with me in a window embrasure, which will scarcely aid you much further.’

‘But, my dear *De C****, I am completely new to these things. I lack what it takes to distinguish at first glance a woman who favours me from one who does not; and I may blunder oddly, if you fail to grant me the benefit of your experience.’

‘Truly, you are of some nameless primitive race. I scarcely believe it possible to be as pastoral and bucolic as you, in the blessed century in which we live! What the devil are you doing with that pair of large dark pupils your eyes possess, which would be most effective, if you knew how to use them? Look there, in that corner by the fireplace, the little woman in pink who is toying with her fan: she has been eyeing you for a quarter of an hour with a most significant assiduity and fixity: none other could be indecorous in so superior a manner, or display such noble effrontery. She

greatly displeases those women who despair of ever reaching her height of impudence, but, on the other hand, greatly pleases the men, who find in her all the piquancy of a courtesan. Indeed, she is charmingly depraved, full of wit, verve, and caprice. She would make an excellent mistress for a young man who is prejudiced in his taste. In eight days, she will rid your conscience of its scruples, and so corrupt your heart that you will never more appear ridiculous or wax elegiac. She is inexpressibly positive about everything; she penetrates everything with a rapidity and certainty of thought that astonish. That little woman is algebra incarnate, and is precisely what a dreamer and an enthusiast need. She will soon cure you of your misty idealism: great will be the service she will render you. And she will do so, moreover, with the greatest pleasure, for her very instinct is to disenchant poets.' My curiosity being aroused by *De C****'s description, I made my retreat, and, weaving between the groups of people, approached the lady and examined her most attentively. She could not have been more than twenty-five or twenty-six years old. Her figure was neat, but quite well built, though a little heavy; she had white and rounded arms, hands rather nobly shaped, a pretty and ever so charming foot, broad and glossy shoulders, a short neck, but what there was of it most satisfactory and yielding no poor idea of the rest; as for her hair, it was extremely shiny and of a bluish-black like jay's wings; the corners of her eyes turned upwards sharply towards her temples, her nose was slender with wide nostrils, her mouth moist and sensual, with a small cleft on the lower lip, and an almost imperceptible down at its corners. And with all this, she possessed a liveliness, an animation, a healthy strength, and I know not what expression of luxury, skilfully tempered by coquetry and artifice, which rendered her, in short, a very desirable creature, more than justifying the very lively desire she had inspired, and did inspire every day.

I too desired her; yet I understood nonetheless that it was not this woman, however agreeable she was, who could realise my wish sufficiently for me to say: 'I possess a mistress, at last!

I returned to *De C****, and said: 'The lady quite pleases me, and I might perhaps come to some arrangement with her. But, before saying anything specific and binding, I would have you be so kind as to show me those indulgent beauties who have been so good as to determine themselves in my favour, so I may choose. It would also please me, since you are serving as my tutor here, to add a few comments, and name their faults and qualities; the manner in which they should be addressed, and the tone to be adopted with them, so that I do not seem too much of a provincial or a literary man.'

'That I will,' said *De C****. 'Observe that lovely melancholy swan who raises her neck so harmoniously and makes her sleeves flap like wings? She is modesty itself, all that is most chaste and virginal in the world; she has a brow of snow, a heart of ice, the looks of a Madonna, the expression of a Saint Agnes, a white dress, and the same soulfulness; she wears nothing in her hair but orange-blossoms or water-lilies, and is tethered to the earth by a mere thread. She has never had a sinful thought, and is profoundly ignorant of how men differ from women. The Holy Virgin is a mere bacchante compared to her, which, however, does not prevent her from having had more lovers than any woman I know, and that is saying a great deal, indeed. Examine the throat of that discreet person; it is a little masterpiece, and truly it is difficult to display so much while hiding more; tell me if, with all her modesty and prudishness, she is not ten times more indecent than the good lady on her left who bravely displays two hemispheres which, if joined together, could frame a full-size map of the world, or the other, on her right, décolleté down to the waist, who parades her nudity with an intrepidity full of charm? That virginal creature, if am not very mistaken, has

already calculated what promise of love and passion your pallor and your dark eyes may hold; and what leads me to say so is that she has not once looked in your direction, at least in appearance; for she knows how to ply her gaze with such art, and glance so skillfully from the corner of her eye, that nothing escapes her; one might think she could see behind her head, for she knows perfectly well what transpires behind her. She is a feminine Janus. If you wish to succeed with her, you must leave behind your proud and careless manner. You must speak to her without looking at her, without making a movement, in a contrite attitude, and a stifled and respectful tone of voice; in this way, you can say anything you wish to her, provided it is suitably veiled, and she will freely permit all, first in speech, and then in action. But take care to roll your eyes, tenderly, when she lowers hers, and speak to her of the sweetness of platonic love, and the commerce of souls, while employing the least platonic and ideal of pantomimes in the world! She is very sensual, and very sensitive; kiss her as much as you like; but, in the most intimate abandonment, do not forget to call her madame at least three times per sentence: she fell out with me, because while lying on her bed I said something, I know not what, using a familiar form of address. The Devil! She is not an 'honest' woman for nothing.'

'I lack the desire, from what you say, to risk the adventure: a prudish Messalina! Such an alliance would be monstrous and strange.'

'Rather, as old as the hills, dear fellow! It is something you see every day; nothing is more common. You would do wrong not to settle for her. She has one overriding charm, which is that with her one always seems to be committing a mortal sin, and the slightest kiss seems as if it led to utter damnation; whereas with the others one scarcely believes one is even committing a venial sin, and often one can't believe one is committing a sin at all. That is why I kept her longer than any mistress. I would still possess her, if she had not left me herself; she is the only woman who has escaped me, and I have a certain respect for her because of that. She displays little refinements of voluptuousness that could not be more delicate, and the great art of appearing to yield under duress what she grants most freely: which gives each indulgence the charm of a rape. You will find a dozen lovers here who will swear to you, on their honour, that she is the most virtuous creature in existence. Yet she is precisely the opposite. It is a curious study to anatomise that virtue among the pillows. Having been warned, you run no risk, and thus will not be so clumsy as to fall sincerely in love with her.'

'How old is this lovely personage?' I asked *De C****, for it was impossible for me to determine her age merely by examining her, even with the most scrupulous attention.

'Ah! Now you are asking. How old is she? That is a mystery, and the Lord alone knows. As for myself, who am proud of my skill in assigning an age to women, to the nearest hour, I have never been able to make out hers. I estimate, only roughly, that she may be between eighteen and thirty-six years of age. I have seen her in her finest dress, in her negligée, and beneath the linen, yet cannot tell you a thing in that regard. My science is at fault; the age she most often seems to be is eighteen, and yet that cannot be it. She has the body of a virgin and the soul of a courtesan, and to corrupt oneself so deeply and so comprehensively, takes a deal of time or innate genius; it requires a heart of bronze in a breast of steel: she has neither. So, I admit her to be thirty-six years old, but deep down know nothing.'

'Has she not a close friend, who might grant you an insight on the matter?'

‘No. She arrived in the city two years ago. She came from the provinces or from abroad, I forget which, an admirable situation for a woman who knows how to turn it to advantage. With a face like hers, she can claim herself to be any age she wishes, and dates only from the day she arrived here.’

‘How pleasant in the extreme, especially when no impertinent wrinkle contradicts it, and when time, the great destroyer, is kind enough to lend itself to a falsification of the baptismal record.’

He pointed out a few more women, who, according to him, would favourably receive any request I might be pleased to address to them, and treat me with a particular show of philanthropy. But the woman in pink in the corner of the chimney, and the modest dove who served as her antithesis, were incomparably more worthwhile than all the others; and, if they did not have all the qualities which I seek, they had some of them, at least in appearance.

I conversed with them all evening, especially with the last I mentioned, and took care to cast my ideas in the most respectful mould; though she barely looked at me, I thought I saw her eyes gleam sometimes under the veils of her eyelashes, at some rather lively gallantries of mine, though dressed in the most modest gauze I dare risk, and a small, contained and stifled blush pass over her cheeks, two or three times, rather like that produced by a pink liqueur poured into a half-opaque glass. Her answers, in general, were sober, measured, but nevertheless acute and full of character, and indicated deeper thought than they expressed. All this was intermingled with reticence, part-phrases, and indirect allusion, each syllable having its intention, each silence its import; nothing in the world was more diplomatic and charming. And yet, however much pleasure I may have momentarily taken in it, I was unable to endure such conversation for long. One must be perpetually alert and on one’s guard, and what I like best in conversing is abandon and familiarity. We spoke first of music, which led us quite naturally to speak of opera, and then of women, then of love, a subject in which it is easier than in any other to find transitions from the general to the particular. We paid each other *heartfelt compliments*; you would have laughed to hear me. In truth, *Amadis on the Hermitage Rock* (*see the chivalric romance ‘Amadis de Gaula’*) was only a dull pedant compared to me. There were generous speeches, self-deprecations, and words of praise and devotion to make that Roman of the later Empire, Quintus Curtius, blush with shame. I had thought myself quite incapable of such transcendent and pathetic gibberish. I, exhibiting the most quintessential Platonism; does not that seem to you one of the most comical of things, the finest parody that could be seen? And then my air, sugared to perfection, those silly little playful touches you and I know! Good heavens! I had the appearance of scarcely intending a thing, and any mother who had listened to my addresses would not have hesitated to let me sleep beside her daughter; any husband would have entrusted his wife to me. It was the one evening of my life when I most displayed the appearance of being virtuous, and when I was the least so, in thought. I had deemed it more difficult to play the hypocrite, and utter things that were not meant to be believed. It must be quite an easy thing, in fact, or I must have a natural disposition for it, to have succeeded so agreeably at my first attempt. Indeed, I achieved some very fine moments.

As for the lady, she said many things, very delicately put, which, despite the air of candour with which she did so, proved a most consummate experience; one cannot form an idea of the subtlety of her discourse. The woman could split a hair in three lengthwise, and make fools of all the angelic and seraphic theologians. Moreover, from the manner of her conversation, it is impossible to believe she has even the shadow of a corporeal body. It is so immaterial, vaporous, ideal enough

to weary one; and, if *De C**** had not warned me of the creature's ways, I would certainly have despaired of success in the matter, and would have remained at a pitiful distance. How on earth, also, when a woman informs you, for two hours and with the most detached air in the world, that love only lives on privation and sacrifice and other beautiful things akin to them, can you hope, in all decency, to persuade her to one day join you between the sheets, rouse your complexion, and discover whether you are made for each other? In brief, we parted on good terms, congratulating each other on the elevation and purity of our feelings.

The conversation with the other lady was, as you can imagine, of a completely opposite kind. We laughed as much as we talked. We mocked, most wittily, all the women who were present; in saying 'we' I am in error. I should have said 'she' mocked; a man never mocks at women well. I listened and approved, for it would be impossible to have drawn their figures more vividly, or colour the sketches more ardently; she created a more curious gallery of caricatures than I have ever seen. Yet despite the exaggeration, one senses the truth beneath; *De C**** was quite right: this woman's mission is to disenchant the poets. There is about her a prosaic atmosphere in which poetic ideas cannot thrive. She is charming, and sparkles with wit, and yet, beside her, one thinks only ignoble and vulgar thoughts. While talking with her, I felt a host of incongruous desires, impracticable of execution in the place where I found myself, such as having wine brought to me and getting drunk, while sitting her on one of my knees and kissing her throat; or lifting the hem of her skirt to see if her garter was above or below the knee; or singing a filthy refrain at the top of my voice; or smoking a pipe and breaking a few windows: or whatever. The whole animalistic part, the brute entire, rose in me; I would very willingly have spat on Homer's *Iliad* and fallen on my knees before a whole ham. I now understand perfectly that allegory by which Circe changed Ulysses' companions into swine. Circe was probably just such a temptress as my little woman in pink.

Shamefully, I felt great delight in feeling myself overcome by stupefaction; I did not struggle against it, I aided it with all my strength, so natural is corruption to Man, and so much mud is there in the clay from which he is made.

However, for a moment, I was afraid of the gangrene taking hold, and sought to quit my corrupter; but the floor seemed to have risen to my knees, and I was as if enshrined in place.

At last, I took it upon myself to depart, and, the evening being well advanced, returned home most perplexed and troubled, not knowing quite which I should choose. I hesitated between the prudish and the gallant. I had found voluptuousness in the one, and piquancy in the other; and, after a very detailed and thorough examination of my conscience, realised not that I loved them both, but that I desired them both, one as much as the other, with enough vivacity to induce reverie, and preoccupy my thoughts.

According to all appearances, my friend, I shall possess one of these two women, perhaps both, and yet I confess that the thought of possessing them only half-satisfies me: it is not that they are not very pretty, but at the sight of each of them nothing cried out within me, nothing quivered, nothing said: 'It is she.' I 'recognised' neither. However, I do not believe I will meet with any finer, as regards birth and beauty, and *De C**** advises me to rest content. Assuredly, I will do so, and one or the other shall be my mistress, or the Devil take me, before too long; yet deep in my heart, a secret voice reproaches me for traducing my love, and accepting the first smile of a

woman I love not, instead of searching tirelessly, the Earth over, in cloisters, dark corners, palaces and inns, for the one who was made for me, and whom the Lord destined for me, whether she be princess or servant, nun or woman of the world.

Then I tell myself that I am deluding myself; that, in the end, it is all the same whether I sleep with this woman or another; that the earth will not deviate from its course by one iota, nor the four seasons reverse their order in consequence; that nothing in the world is less important, and I a fool to torment myself with such nonsense: that is what I tell myself. But whatever I think, I am neither calmer nor more resolute.

Perhaps that is because I spend too much time alone, and the smallest details in a life as monotonous as mine acquire too great an importance. I listen to myself living, and thinking, far too much: I hear every beat of my arteries, every pulsation of my heart. By dint of close attention, I free my most elusive ideas from the murky vapour in which they float, and grant them a body. If I embraced action more, I would not perceive all these minor things, and would lack the time to observe my soul beneath the microscope, as I do all day long. The tumult of action would scatter the swarm of idle thoughts that flutter inside my brain, and deafen me with the buzzing of their wings: instead of chasing phantoms, I would grapple with realities; I would only ask of women what they can give, namely pleasure, and not seek to embrace I know not what fantastic idealisation adorned with cloudy perfection. This relentless attention of the eye of my soul to an invisible object has distorted my vision. I know not how to see what is, by dint of having gazed at what is not, and, tuned to the ideal, am completely myopic when faced with reality; thus, I have known women whom everyone assures me are ravishing, and who seemed to me far less so. I have admired paintings that are generally considered bad, while bizarre or unintelligible verses have given me more pleasure than the most gallant productions. I should not be surprised if, after having addressed so many sighs to the moon, and gazed wide-eyed at the stars, after having penned so many elegies and sentimental strophes, I were to fall in love with the lowliest of street-walkers or an ugly old woman; it would be a fine end. Reality would thus take revenge perhaps for the lack of care I have taken in courting her: would she not be well served, if I were to fall in love with, and display a fine romantic passion for, an old serving-woman or some abominable whore? Can you not see me strumming the guitar beneath a kitchen window, while supplanted by a scullion bearing the lapdog of some old dowager spitting out her last tooth? Perhaps, finding nothing in this world worthy of my love, I will end by adoring myself, like the late Narcissus of egoistic memory. To defend myself from so great a misfortune, I observe myself in all the mirrors and ponds I come across. In truth, with all my daydreams and aberrations, I suffer from the enormous fear of falling into the monstrous and the unnatural. It is a serious matter, and I must be careful. Farewell, my friend; I am going at once to the lady in pink, for fear of giving way to my usual contemplation. I think we shall not be much concerned with entelechy (*study of the soul*), and I believe that, if we indulge in something, it will certainly not be spiritualism, though she is very spirited: I have carefully rolled up, and placed in a drawer, the pattern of my ideal mistress, so as not to try its fit to my lady in pink. I wish to enjoy the beauties and merits the latter has in peace. I prefer to see her dressed in a garment that suits her, without trying to adapt that which I have, after all, tailored in advance for the lady of my thoughts. These are wise resolutions, I know not if I shall keep them. Once more, farewell.

Chapter 3: D'Albert to Silvio

I am head to toe the lover of the lady in pink; it is almost a state of being, a post, and it grants the world substance. I no longer appear like a schoolboy seeking an affair amidst aged women, one who dare not recite a madrigal to a woman, unless she is a hundred years old: I notice, since I settled on her, that I am much more respected, that other women speak to me with a jealous show of coquetry, and go to great lengths to encourage me. The men, on the contrary, are colder, and there is something hostile and constrained in the few words we exchange; they feel that they possess a rival in me, one already formidable, who might become more so. I recall many of them bitterly criticising my attire, claiming that I dressed in a way that was far too effeminate: that my hair was smoothed and curled with more care than was proper; that this, together with my beardless face, gave me a most ridiculously gentlemanlike air; that I affected rich and brilliant materials that smacked of the theatre, and that I resembled an actor more than a real human being: all the banalities that one utters so as to affirm one's right to a lack of cleanliness, and the wearing of poor, ill-cut clothes. But all is mere jealousy, since the ladies find my hair the finest in the world, my garments in the best taste, and seem most willing to compensate me for the expenses that I incur on their behalf, for they are not foolish enough to believe that this degree of elegance has for its aim only my private beautification.



A portrait of a young lady in pink dress
Emile Eisman-Semenowsky (French, 1853 - 1918)

[Artvee](#)

The lady of the house seemed a little piqued by my choice, at first, which she had thought would necessarily fall on her, and she retained, for a few days, a certain bitterness (towards her rival only; for she still conversed with me in the usual manner), which manifested itself in a few little expressions of ‘my dear’, said in that dry, clipped manner that only women display, and by a few disparaging remarks about her rival’s dress uttered as loudly as possible, such as: ‘Your hairstyle is much too elevated, and not at all in keeping with your face’, or: ‘Your bodice is baggy under the arms; who on earth made that dress for you?’ or ‘Your eyes seem quite swollen; I find you utterly changed’, and a thousand other minor observations to which the other did not fail to retort with all the malice required whenever an opportunity presented itself, while, if the opportunity was

delayed, creating one for herself, in which to return, and more, what had been dealt to her. But soon, another object having diverted the attention of our disdained Infanta, this little war of words ceased, and everything returned to normal.

I told you, briefly, that I am head to toe the lover of the lady in pink; that is insufficient for a man as punctilious as yourself. You will doubtless ask what her name is: as for that, I shall not tell you; but if you wish, for ease in telling the tale, and in memory of the colour of the dress in which I saw her for the first time, we shall call her Rosette; it is a pretty name: my little dog was named so.

You will desire to know, point by point, since you love precision in such matters, the story of my love for this beautiful Bradamante, and by what successive gradations I passed from the general to the particular, and from the state of simple spectator to that of actor; how, from the mere onlooker that I was, I became her lover. I shall satisfy your wish with the greatest of pleasure. There is nothing sinister in the tale; it is rose-coloured, and none sheds a tear, other than tears of pleasure; it will be neither tedious nor repetitious, and draws to an end with the haste and rapidity recommended by Horace (*see Odes Book IV: I, verse 2*); it is a true French romance. However, do not imagine that I took the citadel at the first assault. The princess, though very humane towards her subjects, is not as lavish with her favours as one might at first believe; she knows their worth too well not to make you work for them; She is also aware that a measure of delay adds liveliness to desire, and a degree of resistance adds spice to pleasure, and so knows better than to give herself to you at once, however lively the interest you have inspired in her.

To tell you the whole tale, I must to go a little further back. I gave you a fairly detailed account of our first meeting. I met her once, or twice, or perhaps three times more in the same house, before she invited me to hers; I had no need to be asked twice, as you can imagine; I visited her, discreetly at first, then a little more often, then even oftener and, finally, whenever the mood took me, and I must admit that it took me at least three or four times a day.

The lady, after only a few hours apart, always received me as if I had returned from the East Indies; an indulgence towards myself to which I could not have been more sensitive, and which obliged me to show my gratitude in a manner marked by the most gallant and tender attentions in the world, to which she responded with a will.

Rosette, since we agreed to call her that, is a woman of great spirit, who understands a man in the most amiable way. Though she delayed the ending to the chapter for some time, I was never once angry with her: which is truly marvellous; for you know the fine fury I enter into when I do not immediately achieve what I desire, and when a woman exceeds the period of time I have assigned in my head for her surrender. I know not how she managed it so; from the first interview she gave me to understand that her yielding was assured, and I was surer of the fact than if I had held the promise of it, written and signed by her own hand. It will perhaps be said that her boldness and ease of manner left the field free for the temerity of hope. I doubt that was the real reason: I have seen some women whose prodigious freedom of manner excluded, in its way, even the shadow of a doubt, yet who did not produce that effect on me, and before whom I felt a shyness and anxiety that was, to say the least, misplaced.

What renders me often far less amiable to the women I desire than to those who are indifferent to me is the passionate expectation of opportunity, and the feeling of uncertainty I possess

regarding the chances of success of my project: it makes me gloomy, and casts me into a reverie which robs me of much of my strength, and of my presence of mind. When I witness the hours earmarked for some another occupation slipping away one by one, anger overtakes me, despite myself, and I cannot but utter dry and sour remarks, which sometimes descend into brutality and which set my affairs back a few hundred miles. With Rosette, I felt none of that. Never, even at moments when she most resisted me, did the idea cross my mind that she wished to escape my expressions of love. I allowed her to display all her little coquetries in peace, and rather endured the curb she chose to impose, lengthily, on my ardour: her rigour had something charming about it that consoled one completely, and in her most Hyrcanian cruelties one glimpsed a depth of humanity that hardly engendered any serious degree of fear. Honest women, and even many a less honest one, have a sullen and disdainful manner that I find wholly unbearable. They always seem ready to ring the bell and have you thrown out by their lackeys; and, in truth, it seems to me that a man who takes the trouble to court a woman (which is often not as pleasant a task as one would like to believe) little deserves to be treated in that way. Dear Rosette does not behave so; and I assure you she profits by it; she is the only woman with whom I have been able to be myself, and am conceited enough as to say that I have never felt so well. My mind has revealed itself to her freely; and, by the skill and fervour of her replies, she has made me discover in myself far more than I believed myself to possess, more perhaps than I actually do. It is true that I have acted in a rather unpoetic manner, that being scarcely possible with her; it is not, however, that she does not have her lyrical side, despite what *De C**** has said of her; but she is so full of life, force, and movement, she seems to be so at ease in the environment in which she moves, that one does not wish to leave it so as to ascend to the clouds. She fills life so agreeably, and renders it so amusing to herself and others, that dreaming could offer no more.

A wondrous thing! I have known her for almost two months, and have only been bored when I was absent from her. You will agree that it is the work of no mediocre woman to produce such an effect, for usually women have the opposite effect on me, and please me far more from a distance than near to.

Rosette has the finest character in the world; with men of course, for with women she is as wicked as the Devil; she is cheerful, lively, alert, ready for everything, quite original in her speech, and always has some charming joke to relate unexpectedly: she is a delightful companion, more a pretty comrade with whom one sleeps than a mistress; and, if I were a few years older, and owned to a few less romantic ideas, it would be all the same to me, and I might even consider myself the luckiest mortal alive. But... but... that particle never announces anything pleasant, yet the impish and restrictive little word is unfortunately the one in all human languages that is most used; but... I am an imbecile, an idiot, a real goose, whom nothing ever satisfies, and who is always looking for noon at two o'clock; and, instead of being completely happy, I am only half so; half is already a great deal in this world, and yet I find it insufficient still.

In the eyes of all, I have a mistress that many desire and envy me for, and whom none would disdain. My desire is therefore apparently fulfilled, and I no longer have the right to quarrel with fate. However, it does not seem to me that I have the mistress I require; I understand it to be so rationally, but I feel it not; and, if someone were to ask me unexpectedly if I possessed a mistress, I believe I would answer 'no'. Yet possession of a woman who has beauty, youth, and wit constitutes what, in all times and all countries, has been called, and is called, possessing a mistress,

and I do not think there is any other way of doing so. Yet it does not prevent my having the strangest doubts in that regard, and to such a degree, that, if several people agreed to maintain that I am not Rosette's favoured lover, despite the palpable evidence to the contrary, I would end by believing them.

Please refrain from imagining, given what I say, that I am lacking in love for her, or that she displeases me in any way: on the contrary, I love her greatly, and find her to be what anyone would find: a pretty and piquant creature. I simply don't feel I possess her, that's all. And yet no woman has given me so much pleasure, and if ever I have understood voluptuousness, it is in her arms. A single one of her kisses, the most chaste caress of hers, makes me tremble to the soles of my feet, and makes all my blood flow back to my heart. Make of that what you may. The matter is, however, exactly as I relate. But the human heart is full of such absurdities; and, if it were necessary to reconcile all the contradictions it contains, one would have a deal of work to do.

Whence can it arise? I truly know not. I can see her all day, and even all night, if I wish. I caress her as often as I desire; I can have her naked or dressed, in the city or in the country. She is inexhaustibly accommodating, and enters perfectly into all my whims, however odd they may be. One evening, I had a fancy to take her in the middle of the drawing-room, the chandelier and candles being lit, the fire alive in the fireplace, the armchairs arranged in a circle as for a grand reception, and she in her ball gown with her bouquet and fan, her diamonds on her fingers and about her neck, feathers on her head, and in the most splendid costume possible, while I myself was disguised as a bear. She consented. When all was ready, the servants were most surprised to receive the order to close the doors and let no one enter; they seemed not to understand in the least, and exited with a dazed expression which roused in us a deal of laughter. They assuredly thought their mistress decidedly mad; but what they thought, or did not think, was of little importance to us.

That evening was the most comical of my life. Imagine how I must have looked, with my plumed hat in my paw, rings on all my claws, and a little sword with a silver hilt adorned with a sky-blue ribbon? I approached the lovely girl; and, after making her the most graceful bow, I sat down beside her, and besieged her in every way. The musky madrigals, the exaggerated gallantries I addressed to her, all the phrases appropriate to the occasion, took on a singular tone as they passed through my bear's muzzle; for I had donned a superb painted cardboard mask that I was soon obliged to hurl beneath the table, so adorable was my goddess that evening, and so much did I wish to kiss her hand, and more than her hand. The pelt followed the head in a brief while; for, not being used to being a bear, I felt very stifled, more than was necessary. Her ballroom attire soon followed, as you may imagine; feathers fell like snow around my little beauty, her shoulders emerged from her sleeves, her breasts from her corset, her feet from her shoes, and her legs from her stockings: her necklace rolled about the floor, and I believe a fresher dress was never more pitilessly crumpled and rumped; that dress was of silver gauze, its lining of white satin. Rosette displayed on this occasion a heroism quite beyond that of her sex, which gave me the highest opinion of her. She attended the sack of her toilet like a disinterested witness, not showing for a single instant the least regret for her dress and her lace; On the contrary, she was wild in her gaiety, and she herself helped to tear and break whatever would not untie or unfasten swiftly enough for my liking and hers. Do you not find this a fine thing to add to the historical record, to sit alongside the most brilliant actions of the heroes of antiquity? It is the greatest proof of love that a woman

can give her lover to avoid saying: 'Take care not to crease or stain it', especially if her dress is new. A new dress is a greater means of secure defence on a husband's behalf than is commonly believed. Rosette must adore me, or own to a philosophy superior to that of Epictetus the Stoic.

Be that as it may, I believe I repaid Rosette the price of her dress, and more, in a currency which, though not valid among tradesmen, is nonetheless esteemed and prized. Her heroism well deserved such a reward. Besides, as a generous woman, she granted me what I granted her. I experienced a mad pleasure, almost to the point of convulsion, such as I did not believe myself capable of feeling. Those resounding kisses mingled with bursts of laughter, those quivering caresses full of impatience, all that acrid and irritating voluptuousness, that pleasure incompletely tasted, because of my costume and the situation, but a hundred times more intense than if I had been unfettered, affected my nerves so much I had spasms from which I had some difficulty recovering. You cannot imagine the proud and tender air with which Rosette looked at me while seeking to revive me, and the joyful and anxious manner in which she busied herself about me: her face still radiant with the pleasure she felt at producing a similar effect on me, at the same time as her eyes, all wet with sweet tears, testified to the fear she had of seeing me taken ill, and the interest she took in my health. She never seemed to me so beautiful as at that moment. There was something so maternal and chaste in her look that I completely forgot the more than Anacreontic scene that had just taken place, and knelt before her, asking her permission to kiss her hand; which she granted me with singular gravity and dignity.

Certainly, this woman is not as depraved as *De C**** claims, and as she has often appeared to me; she is only corrupt in mind, not in her heart.

I have cited this scene to you among twenty others: it seems to me that after it one could, without excessive conceit, believe oneself to be the woman's lover. Well! That is what I cannot do. I had scarcely returned home when this thought seized me again and began to work on me as ever. I remembered everything that I had done and seen done, perfectly. The slightest of gestures and poses, all the smallest details, were there, quite clear in my memory; I recalled everything, down to the most minor inflections of voice, the most elusive nuances of voluptuousness: only it seemed to me that it was not to myself, but rather to another, that all these things had happened. I was unsure as to whether or not it was not a mere illusion, a phantasmagoria, a dream, something I had read somewhere, or even some tale I had composed for myself, as I have often done. I feared to be the dupe of my own credulity, the plaything of some mystification; and, in spite of the testimony offered by my weariness, and the material proofs that I had not slept at home, I would have believed, willingly, that I had retired at the usual hour, and slept till morning.

I am most unhappy that I lack moral certainty with regard to something of which I have physical proof. It is usually the reverse, and it is the fact that proves the idea. I seek to prove the fact by virtue of the idea; I cannot; and although the thing is quite singular, it is so. It depends on myself, up to a certain point, whether or not I have a mistress; but I cannot force myself to believe that I possess one, while yet possessing her. If I lack the necessary faith, even for something so self-evident, it is as impossible for me to believe in such a simple fact as it is for me to believe in the Trinity. Faith is not acquired; it is a pure gift, a special grace from heaven.

No one has ever desired to live the lives of others, or to assume another nature as greatly as I have; no one has ever succeeded less. Whatever I do, other men prove little more than phantoms

to me, and I fail to register their existence; yet it is not the desire to know their lives, and participate in them, that I lack. It is a lack of attraction to, or real sympathy for, anything. The existence or non-existence of an object or a person fails to interest me enough for me to be affected by it in a tangible and convincing manner. The sight of a real man or woman leaves no stronger a trace on my soul than the fantastic vision seen in a dream: around me there stirs a pale world of shadows and semblances, false or true, which murmur dully, and in the midst of which I find myself as alone as can be, for none act on me for good or ill, and they seem to me to be of an entirely different nature to mine. If I speak to them and they answer me with something that contains more or less common sense, I am as surprised as if my dog or cat suddenly spoke, and joined in the conversation: the sound of people's voices always astonishes me, and I could willingly believe them to be but fleeting appearances, of which I am the objective mirror. Inferior or superior, I am certainly not of their species. There are times when I recognise only the Lord above me, and others when I judge myself scarcely the equal of the wood-louse under its stone or the mollusc on its sandbank; but in whatever mental state I find myself, elevated or lowered, I have never been able to persuade myself that others are truly my equals. When someone calls me 'sir', or when speaking of me someone says: 'This fellow, here' it seems very odd to me. My very name seems to me a name floating in the air, which is not my true name. However quietly it may be pronounced and amidst the loudest cacophony, I turn around, suddenly, executing a convulsive, feverish, awkward movement for which I have never been able to fully account. Is it the fear of finding in this man, who knows my name and who is now distinguishable from the crowd, my antagonist, or my enemy?

It was especially when I lived with a woman that I felt most deeply how my nature inevitably rejected all association and alliance. I am like a drop of oil in a glass of water. Turn and stir it as much as you like, the oil will never mix with it; it will divide into a hundred thousand little globules which reunite and rise to the surface at the first sign of calm: a drop of oil, a glass of water, such is my story. Voluptuousness itself, that diamantine chain which binds all beings, that devouring fire which melts the rock and metal of the soul, and makes it dissolve in liquid tears, just as material fire, all-powerful as it is, melts iron and granite, has never been able to tame or soften me. However keen my senses, my soul, which is female, is an enemy to my body, and the unhappy couple, like many another couple, legal or illegal, live in a state of perpetual war. A woman's arms, the finest things on earth, they say, are but weak ties where I am concerned, and I have never been further from my mistress than when she held me to her heart. I felt I was suffocating, that is all.

How often I have been angry with myself! How many efforts I have made not to be so! How I have exhorted myself to be tender, loving, passionate! How often I have grasped my soul by the hair, and dragged her to my lips in the midst of a kiss! Whatever I did, my soul always drew back, wiping her metaphorical lips as soon as I released her. What torture for my poor soul to witness my physical debauchery, and be seated, endlessly, at feasts where she is given not a thing to eat!

As regards Rosette, I resolved, once and for all, to determine whether I am or am not wholly unsociable, and whether I could take enough interest in the existence of another, to believe in them. I have pushed the experiment to the point of exhaustion, and have failed to resolve my doubts. With her, my pleasure is so keen that the soul often finds itself, if not moved, at least distracted, which somewhat impairs my accuracy of observation. Despite all, I have recognised that such pleasure fails to penetrate the skin, and that I experience only an epidermal enjoyment,

in which the soul participates merely out of curiosity. I feel pleasure, because I am young and ardent; but this pleasure comes from me and not from the other. The cause is in myself, rather than in Rosette.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not escape myself for a moment. I am still what I was, that is to say, something filled with ennui, and exuding ennui, which displeases me greatly. I have not been able to rouse my brain to the idea of another, my soul to feelings for another, my body to the pain or pleasure the other knows. I am a prisoner within myself, and all flight is impossible: the prisoner desires to escape, the wall asks nothing better than to crumble, the door than to open and grant him passage; I know not what fatality holds each stone, implacably, in place, each bolt in its iron mounting; it is as impossible for me to admit someone to my house as it is for me to enter others' houses myself; I can neither make nor receive visits, and I live in the saddest isolation amidst the crowd: my bed may not be widowed, but my heart ever is.

Ah! Not to be able to change oneself by a single particle, a single atom; not to be able to feel the blood of others flow in one's veins; to see always with one's own eyes, and neither better, nor further, nor otherwise; to hear sounds with the same ears, and experience but the one emotion; to touch with the same fingers; to perceive things that vary with the same invariable organ; to be condemned to the same timbre of voice, to the return of the same tones, the same phrases the same words, and not to be able to flee, to hide from oneself, to take refuge in some corner where one's self cannot follow; to be forced always to guard oneself, to dine and sleep with oneself, to be the same man for twenty new women; to play, in the midst of the strangest situations, in the drama of our life, an obligatory character, whose role is known by heart; to think the same things, to have the same dreams: what torment, what tedium!

I have wished for the magic horn of a Tibetan lama, the hat of Fortunatus, the staff of Abaris, the ring of Gyges; I would have sold my soul to snatch a magic wand from the hand of some fey, and have never desired anything so much as to meet in the hills, like Tiresias the soothsayer, those serpents that change one's sex; and I envy most, as regards the monstrous and bizarre gods of India, their perpetual *avatars* and their innumerable transformations.

I began by wanting to be some other man; then, reflecting that I could, by analogy, foresee more or less what I would feel, and so not experience the hoped-for surprise and change, my preference was to become a woman; this idea always struck me whenever I had a mistress who was not wholly ugly; for an ugly woman is like a man to me, and in moments of pleasure I would have gladly changed roles, for it betrays one's impatience not to be aware of the effect one produces, and to judge the enjoyment of others only by one's own. These thoughts and many others have often given me, at moments when it was quite out of place, a meditative and dreamy air, which has caused me to be accused, quite wrongly, of coldness and infidelity.

Rosette, who fortunately knows nothing of all this, believes me to be the most amorous man on earth; she mistakes impotent fury for passion, and lends herself as best she can to all the experimental whims that pass through my head.

I have done all I could to convince myself that I possess her: I have tried to plunge into her heart, but have always halted at the first step, at her skin, or her lips. Despite the intimacy of our bodily relations, I feel, deeply, that we have nothing at all in common. Never have ideas like mine spread their wings in that young and smiling head; never has that heart full of life and ardour,

which swells a palpitating breast so firm and pure, beaten in unison with mine. My soul has never united with her soul. Cupid, the god with hawk's wings, has failed to kiss Psyche on her lovely ivory brow. No! This woman is not my mistress.

If you knew all I have tried, seeking to force my soul to share the love my body experiences! With what fury I sank my mouth against her mouth, drenched my arms in her hair; how tightly I clasped her curved and supple waist. Like ancient Salmacis, the lover of young Hermaphroditus, I tried to merge her body with mine; I drank her breath and the warm tears that voluptuousness poured from the over-full chalices of her eyes. The more our bodies entwined, and the more intimate our embraces, the less I loved her. My soul, observing sadly, looked with an air of pity on this deplorable union to which she was not invited, or veiled her brow in disgust and wept silently under the hem of her mantle. Perhaps all this is because, I do not love Rosette, in truth, however worthy of being loved she might be, and however much I might want to.

To rid myself of the thought of myself, I haunted circles in which it was improbable that I would encounter myself, and tried, not being able to scatter my individual being to the four winds, to disorient my mind so that I would no longer recognise myself. I met with little success, and my devil of a self follows me obstinately; there is no way of ridding myself of it; I lack the recourse of making it say, as when faced with receiving other importunate people, that I am away from home, or have left for the country.

I took my mistress while bathing, and played Triton as best I could, the sea being a large marble tub. As for the Nereid, what she displayed accused the water, transparent as it was, of not being transparent enough for the exquisite beauty of the things it hid. I took her at night, by moonlight, in a gondola to the accompaniment of music, a thing common enough in Venice, but most unusual here; and in her carriage, galloping along, amidst leaps and jolts and the noise of the wheels, sometimes illuminated by the lanterns, sometimes plunged in deepest darkness, a situation not without a certain piquancy, which I recommend to you: yet I forget, you are a venerable patriarch, and would never yield to such refinements. I entered her house by the window, though the door-key was in my pocket; I had her come to me in broad daylight; and, finally, I compromised her in such a way that no one now (except myself, of course) doubts that she is my mistress.

Because of my inventiveness which, if I were older, would seem like the recourse of a jaded libertine, Rosette adores me, principally, and above all others. She sees in it the ardour of impatient love which nothing can contain, and which is ever the same despite the diversity of times and places. She sees in it the constantly renewed effect of her charms, and her triumphant beauty, and, in truth, I wish she were right, and it were not my fault, nor hers to be fair, that she is not.

The only fault I find with her is that I am but myself. If I were to tell her so, she would quickly reply that it is precisely my greatest merit, in her eyes; which would be a response more obliging than rational.

Once, at the start of our relationship, I thought I had reached my goal: for a moment I thought I had loved. I had loved, my friend! I was alive, in that moment alone, and, if it had been an hour, I would have become godlike. We were out for a ride, I, mounted on my dear Ferragus, she, on a snow-coloured mare with the look of a unicorn, so slender its feet and neck. We were in a great avenue of elms of prodigious height; the sun was setting, pale but warm, its rays filtering through the foliage; ultramarine patches gleamed here and there amidst the dappled clouds; great streaks

of pale blue traced the edges of the horizon, and changed to the tenderest apple-green, where they met the orange glow of the sunset. The sky's appearance was charming and singular; the breeze brought us a scent of wildflowers, that could not have been more ravishing. From time to time a song-bird flew in front of us, crossing our path. The Angelus rang softly, from the bell of some unseen village church, and the silvery sounds which reached us, attenuated by distance, possessed an infinite sweetness. Our mounts walked side by side at equal speed such that one did not outpace the other. My heart expanded; my soul overflowed my body. I had never been so happy. I said nothing, nor did Rosette, and yet we had never understood each other so well. We were so close to each other that my leg touched the flank of Rosette's horse. I leant towards her, and put my arm round her waist; She made a like movement on her side, and threw her head back on my shoulder. Our mouths met. Oh, what a chaste and delicious kiss! Our horses were still walking freely, their loose bridles around their necks. I felt Rosette's arm slacken, and her loins relax more and more. I myself was weakening, and close to fainting. Ah! I assure you that, at that moment, I hardly thought whether I was myself or another. We rode along like this to the end of the path, where the sound of footsteps made us suddenly resume our positions; some acquaintances, were there, also on horseback, who met and spoke with us. If I had possessed my pistols, I think I would certainly have shot them dead.



The Cascades at Tivoli, with a Storm Approaching (1824)

Abraham Teerlink (Dutch, 1776-1857)

[Rijksmuseum](http://rijksmuseum.nl)

I looked at them with a dark and furious air, which must have seemed strange indeed. After all, I was wrong to be so angry with them, for they had unwittingly done me the service of interrupting my pleasure at the very moment when, by its very intensity, it was about to turn to pain or be ruined by its own violence. The science of halting in time is not granted the respect it is due. Sometimes, while lying with a woman, one puts one's arm beneath her waist: it is at first a mounting pleasure to feel the warmth of her body, the soft and velvety flesh of her thighs, the polished ivory of her flanks, and to close one's hand on her chest which swells and quivers. The lovely woman falls asleep in that charming and amorous position; the arch of her loins becomes less pronounced; her throat relaxes; her chest reflects the deeper and more regular breathing of sleep; her muscles relax, her face is lost in her hair. However, she presses against your arm more, you realise that she is a woman and not a sylph, but would not remove your arm for anything in the world, there are many reasons why: the first is that there is risk in waking a woman next to whom one is lying; one must be in a position to substitute for the delightful dream that she is doubtless experiencing an even more delightful reality; the second is that by rousing her, so as to remove your arm, you are implying that she is heavy, and bothering you, which is dishonest, or are giving her to understand that you are weak and tired, an extremely humiliating thing, which will discredit you infinitely in her mind; the third is that, as one has found pleasure in this position, one mistakenly believes that by maintaining it one will be able to experience more of the same. Your poor arm finds itself trapped beneath the mass which oppresses it, the blood stops circulating, the sinews tighten, and numbness grips it accompanied by the prick of its million needles: you are a kind of inferior Milo of Croton, caught in his tree-stump, and the mattress, and your lover's back, accurately represent the two sides of that stump which sprang together. Dawn finally breaks, and delivers you from your martyrdom, and you leap from the rack with greater eagerness than a husband descending from the nuptial scaffold. Such is the history of many a passion, and that of every pleasure.

Nonetheless, despite the interruption caused by these acquaintances, or because of it, never have I felt such delight: I truly felt myself to be another. Rosette's soul had plunged, entire, into my body. My soul had left me, and entered her heart, as her soul had entered mine. Doubtless, they had met in passing, during that long equestrian kiss, as Rosette has since called it (most annoyingly, by the way), and had twined and merged, as intimately as the souls of two mortal creatures can do on this grain of perishable mud. Angels must surely kiss in this way, and true paradise lie not in heaven, but rather on the lips of a loved one.

I waited in vain for another such moment, and prompted its return, but without success. We often went for rides in that wooded avenue, attended by fine sunsets; the trees were as leafy, the birds sang the same tunes, but we found the sunlight dull, the foliage yellowed: the birdsong seemed harsh and discordant, there was no longer harmony within us. We reined in our horses to a walk, and tried the same kiss. Alas! Our lips alone were joined, and it was but a ghost of the former one. The beautiful, sublime, divine, and only true kiss I had ever given and received had fled forever. Since that day, I have always, on returning from a ride through the woods, felt an inexpressible depth of sadness. Rosette, as cheerful and playful as she ever is, cannot escape the feeling either, and her reverie is betrayed by a delicately-creased little pout, which is at least a match for her smile.

Only the wine's bouquet, and the bright glow of the candles, can recall me from my melancholy. We both drink like folk condemned to death, silently, beside each other, till we have reached the degree of inebriation we require; then we begin to laugh, and mock what we term our 'sentimentality' with all our hearts. We laugh, because we cannot cry. Ah! What could make a tear spring from the depths of my moisture-less eye?

Why did I attain so great a degree of pleasure that evening? It is difficult to say. Yet I was the same man, Rosette the same woman. It was not the first time she and I had ridden there. We had already viewed the sunset before, and that spectacle affected us no more than the sight of a painting that one admires, according as the colours seem more or less brilliant. There are plenty of avenues lined with elms and chestnut-trees in the world, and this was not the first we had ridden down; what, then, had led us to find such sovereign charm there? What had metamorphosed the dead leaves to topaz gems, the green leaves to emeralds; had gilded all the quivering motes of dust; had changed to pearls the drops of dew scattered over the lawn; and wrought such sweet harmony from the sounds of the usually discordant bell, and the chirping of I know not what fledgling birds? There must have been some penetrating form of poetry in the air, something our very horses seemed to feel.

Yet nothing in the world, however, could have been more pastoral, and commonplace: a few trees, a few clouds, five or six sprigs of wild thyme, a woman, and a shaft or two of sunlight, each like a golden chevron on a coat of arms. I felt, moreover, neither surprise nor astonishment. I recognised it all. I had never visited the place, but I remembered to perfection the shape of the leaves, the disposition of the clouds, that white dove that crossed the sky, flying in the same direction; that particular little silver bell, which I yet heard for the first time, had often tinkled in my ear, and its voice seemed to me the voice of a friend; I had, without ever having passed that way, travelled the path many times with a princess mounted on her unicorn; the most voluptuous of my dreams rode there every evening, and there my desires had exchanged kisses identical to that which Rosette and I exchanged. The kiss was nothing new to me; it was just as I had imagined it to be. It is perhaps the one time in my life I have not been disappointed, and reality has seemed to me as beautiful as the ideal. If I could but find a woman, a landscape, a work of architecture, something that responded to my innermost desire as perfectly as that moment corresponded to the moment I had dreamed of, I would have nothing to envy the gods, and I would very willingly renounce my place in paradise. But, in truth, I cannot believe a creature of flesh and blood could endure such penetrating pleasure for an hour; two kisses like that would consume an entire existence, and create an utter void in soul and body. Which is not a consideration that would stop me from repeating it, however; for, since I cannot prolong my life indefinitely, it is the same to me whether I live or die, and I would rather die of pleasure than of old age or ennui. But such a woman does not exist. And yet, she must; I am perhaps only separated from her by a thin wall. I may have rubbed shoulders with her yesterday or today.

What does Rosette lack that prevents her being that woman? She lacks my belief in her being so. What fatality is it that makes me forever take, as mistress, a woman I do not love? Her neck is polished enough to hang the most exquisitely crafted necklace from it; her fingers are slender enough to do honour to the finest and richest rings; a ruby would blush with pleasure if it could shine at the vermilion tip of her delicate ear; her waist would suit Venus' girdle; but Amor alone knows how to tie his mother's sash.

The merit Rosette possesses is her own, I have lent her nothing. I have not veiled her beauty with that perfect love which envelops the beloved; the veil of Isis is transparent compared to it. Only satiety can lift its corner.

I feel no love for Rosette; or at least the love I have for her, if I do possess any, bears no resemblance to the idea I had formed of love. Perhaps my idea is unjust. I dare not probe it. Notwithstanding that, she renders me completely insensible to the merit of other women, and I have desired no one else, in any consistent manner, since I possessed her. If she has reason to be jealous, it is of a phantom only, which can trouble her little, and yet the product of my imagination is her most formidable rival; something which, with all her subtlety, she may never realise.

If women only knew! How many infidelities the least fickle of lovers commits, however he adores his mistress! It is to be presumed that women repay the compliment many times over; that they do as we do, but say nothing. A mistress is an obligatory accessory who ordinarily vanishes beneath the flourishes and embroideries. Very often the kisses one grants her are not intended for her; it is the idea of some other woman that is embraced in her person, and she benefits more than once (if it can be called a benefit) from desire inspired by another. Ah! How many times, poor Rosette, you have served to embody my dream, and granted reality to your rival; how many were the infidelities to which you have been, involuntarily, the sole accomplice! What if you had known, at the moment when my arms clasped you so strongly, when my mouth was pressed most closely to yours, that your beauty and love had naught to do with it, that the thought of you was a thousand miles from me; what if you had been told that the lids of these eyes, veiled by amorous languor, were lowered so as not to see you, and so dispel the illusion you served only to complete, and that instead of being a mistress you were merely an instrument of voluptuousness, the means of my achieving, through self-deception, a desire impossible to realise!

O celestial creatures, beautiful, frail, diaphanous virgins, who lower eyes like periwinkles, and join your lily-white hands, on the golden ground of paintings of the old German masters; saints of the stained-glass windows; martyrs of the missals; who smile so sweetly amidst the scrolled arabesques, and who emerge so blonde and fresh from the bells of flowers! O you, beautiful courtesans, lying naked, tangled in your hair, and strewn with roses, before wide purple curtains, with your bracelets, and necklaces of rare pearls, your fans, and your mirrors to the shadows of which the sunset brings a glimpse of fire! Dark daughters of Titian, who so voluptuously display your undulating hips to us, your firm, hard thighs, your polished bellies, your supple, muscular loins! Ancient goddesses, white phantoms rising in the garden's shade! You are all part of my seraglio; I have possessed each of you in turn. Saint Ursula, I have kissed your hands in kissing those beautiful hands of Rosette's; I have toyed with the dark tresses of *La Muranese* (a Venetian courtesan, from the isle of Murano, who posed for Titian. See also Alfred de Musset's poem 'Portia': III), and never has Rosette had so much trouble re-arranging her hair; virginal Diana, I have viewed you more often than Actaeon did, and yet have not been changed into a stag; it is I who took the place of your beautiful Endymion! How many rivals a woman fails to guard herself against, and on whom she can exact no revenge! And they are not always painted or sculpted!

Women, when your lover appears more tender than usual, and embraces you with extraordinary emotion; when he buries his head in your lap, and raises it to look at you with moist, unfocussed eyes; when pleasure only increases his desire, and he stifles your speech with his kisses, as if he feared to hear your voice, you may be certain that he scarcely knows you are there; that he

has, at that moment, rendezvoused with a chimera that in you is rendered palpable, and whose part you play. Many a chambermaid has profited from the love inspired by a queen. Many a mere woman has profited from the love inspired by a goddess, vulgar reality serving as a base for the adored ideal. That is why poets commonly take little nobodies for mistresses. One can sleep with a woman for ten years without ever noticing her; such is the story of many a great genius whose ignoble or obscure relationships have astonished the world.

I have only been unfaithful to Rosette in that way. I have only betrayed her for paintings and statues, and she has been half-complicit in the betrayal. I have not the slightest material sin on my conscience with which to reproach myself. I am, in this respect, as white as the snowy Jungfrau, yet, without being in love with anyone, I long to be in love with someone. I am not seeking the opportunity, yet, equally, would not be sorry if it presented itself; if it appeared, I would fail to take advantage of it perhaps, for I possess the deep conviction that all would be the same with another woman, and I prefer to have it be so with Rosette than anyone else; for, marriage being out of the question, at least a pretty companion remains, full of wit, and most agreeably free of moral constraint; and that consideration is not one of the least which curbs my restlessness, since, in losing the mistress, I would be sorry to lose the friend.

Chapter 4: D'Albert to Silvio

Do you know, for almost five months now — yes, five whole months, equalling five eternities — I have been Madame Rosette's *Céladon* (see Honoré d'Urfé's pastoral novel *L'Astrée*, 1607-27) completely? It is the finest thing. I would never have believed myself capable of such constancy, she neither, I wager. We are in truth a pair of clipped pigeons, for only turtledoves display such tenderness. Have we not cooed, and pecked at each other! What ivy-like twining! What a life as one! Nothing in the world could prove more touching, and our poor little hearts could have been set on a plinth, threaded on the same needle, beside an eternal windblown flame.

Five months, alone together so to speak, for we saw each other every day, and almost every night — the door forever closed to others; isn't the thought of it enough to make one's skin crawl! Well! This must be said in praise of the incomparable Rosette, I was not too bored, and that time we had together will doubtless be recalled as the period of my life spent most pleasantly. I cannot believe it possible to occupy the time of a man who lacks all passion in a more sustained and amusing manner, and Lord knows how terrible the idleness is that stems from an empty heart! You have no idea of that woman's resources. They spring from her mind, and then from her heart, for she treats me with adoration. With what art she profits from the slightest spark, and knows how to kindle a fire! How skillfully she capitalises on the slightest tremor of one's spirit! How readily she can turn one's languor into a tender reverie! And by how many devious paths does she draw back to herself the spirit retreating from her! It is wondrous! And I admire her as one of the greatest living geniuses.

I could arrive at her house, sullen, in a bad mood, and seeking a quarrel; I know not how the witch managed it, but after a few minutes she had obliged me to speak in a gallant manner, though

I had not the slightest desire to do so, to kiss her hands, and to laugh whole-heartedly, despite my dreadful anger. Can you imagine such tyranny? Yet, however clever she proves, our tête-à-tête could not last for ever, and in this last fortnight, I happened quite often to open one of the books on her table, something she had not seen me do before, and to read a few lines when the conversation faltered. Rosette noted this, and was filled with terror, an emotion which she had difficulty in concealing, and she had all the books removed from her study in consequence. I confess I regret their absence, though I dare not request them again. The other day — a frightening symptom — a visitor arrived while we were together, and, instead of waxing furious as I had at first, I felt a flicker of joy. I was almost kind: I maintained the conversation with him, which Rosette was trying to put an end to so as to oblige the gentleman to depart, and after he had left, I claimed he showed no lack of wit, and that I had found his company quite pleasant. Rosette reminded me that only two months ago I had found him utterly stupid, the most annoying fool on earth, to which I had no answer, for in truth I had said exactly that; and yet I was right, despite the apparent contradiction: for on the first occasion he had disturbed our charming tête-à-tête, but on the second he had interrupted a tired and languid conversation (on my side at least), and spared me, for that day, a scene of tenderness that was exhausting to maintain.

There we are; the situation is serious, especially when one of the two is still enamoured and desperately clings to the remnants of the other's love. I am greatly perplexed. Though I am not enamoured of Rosette, I have a very great affection for her, and would not wish to do anything that would cause her pain. I would wish her to believe, for as long as possible, that I do indeed love her.

In gratitude for all these hours to which she has granted wings, in gratitude for the love she has been pleased to show me, I will act so. It will deceive her; but is not a pleasant deception better than a distressing truth? And I will never have the heart to tell her that I love her not. The idle shadow of love on which she feeds seems so adorable, so dear to her, that she embraces the pale spectre with such intoxication and effusiveness I dare not cause it to vanish; however, I am afraid she will realize, in the end, that it is, after all, only a phantom. This morning, we carried on a conversation, which I will report in dramatic form, for greater accuracy; one which made me fear I will not be able to maintain the liaison much longer.

The scene is that of Rosette's bed. A shaft of sunlight penetrates the curtains: it is ten o'clock. Rosette has one arm beneath my neck, and refrains from stirring for fear of waking me. From time to time, she raises herself a little on her elbow, and leans her face over mine, holding her breath. I see all this through the mesh of my eyelashes, for I have not slept for the last hour. Rosette's nightgown has Mechlin lace at the neck which is all torn: the night has been stormy; her hair escapes confusedly from her little cap. She is as pretty as a woman can be whom one does not love, and beside whom one is lying.

Rosette (*finding I am no longer asleep*). — 'Oh, you cheat!'

Myself (*yawning*). — 'Ahhhhh!'

Rosette. — 'Don't yawn like that, or I won't kiss you for a week.'

Myself. — 'Pffff!'

Rosette. — 'It seems, sir, that you prefer me not to kiss you?'

Myself. — ‘Yes, indeed.’

Rosette. — ‘How casual you are! Fine; count on me not touching your lips for a week. Today is Tuesday: so, till next Tuesday.’

Myself. — ‘Bah!’

Rosette. — ‘Bah?’

Myself. — ‘Yes! Bah!’ Kiss me before this evening, or I’ll die.’

Rosette. — ‘You’ll die! What conceit! I’ve spoiled you, sir.’

Myself. — ‘I’ll live then. I’m not conceited, and you’ve not spoiled me; on the contrary. Firstly, the suppression of that ‘sir’ is requested; I know you well enough for you to call me by my name, and address me informally.’

Rosette. — ‘I’ve spoiled you, D’Albert!’

Myself. — ‘Good. Now bring your mouth closer.’

Rosette. — ‘No, not till next Tuesday.’

Myself. — ‘Come, now! Are we going to caress each other with the calendar in our hands? We are far too young for that. Here; your mouth, my dear, or I’ll get a stiff neck.’

Rosette. — ‘No.’

Myself. — ‘Ah! You want to be taken by force, my darling! You may be, though perhaps you’ve never experienced it before.’

Rosette. — ‘Impertinent!’

Myself. — ‘Note, my darling, that I have shown you the courtesy of a ‘perhaps’; which is most honest of me. But we stray from the subject. Show me your face. Let me see: what is this, my favourite Sultana? What a sullen expression is there! I like to kiss a smile, not a pout.’

Rosette (*bending down to kiss me*). — ‘Why should I smile? You speak so harshly!’

Myself. — ‘I didn’t intend to. Why do you think I do?’

Rosette. — ‘I don’t know, you tell me.’

Myself. — ‘You mistake harmless pleasantries for harshness.’

Rosette. — ‘Harmless! You call them harmless? Everything may harm love. I’d rather you beat me than laugh at me as you.’

Myself. — ‘So, you’d rather see me cry?’

Rosette. — ‘You always run from one extreme to the other. I’m not asking you to cry, simply to speak rationally and leave off that mocking tone; it suits you ill.’

Myself. — ‘It’s impossible for me to speak rationally, and not mock; so, I’ll beat you instead, if that’s what you prefer.’

Rosette. — ‘Do, then.’

Myself (*patting her shoulders gently*). — ‘I’d rather cut off my own head than mar your adorable body, and bruise the whiteness of that charming back. My goddess, however much pleasure you may take in being beaten, in truth, I cannot.’

Rosette. — ‘You don’t love me anymore.’

Myself. — ‘That doesn’t follow at all; it’s as logical as saying: it’s raining, don’t hand me my umbrella, or: it’s cold, open the window wide.’

Rosette. — ‘You don’t love me; you never have.’

Myself. — ‘Ah! The matter grows complicated: *you no longer love me, you never have*. That’s rather contradictory: how can I cease doing something I never began? You see, my queen, you haven’t a clue what you’re saying; you’re being utterly absurd.’

Rosette. — ‘I longed to be loved by you so much, I chose to delude myself. One easily believes what one wants is true; but now I see I was clearly mistaken. You deceived yourself; you had a taste for loving, a desire for passion. It happens every day. I can’t blame you: it wasn’t your fault you weren’t in love; it’s my lack of charm I must blame. I should have been lovelier, more playful, more coquettish; I should have tried to ascend to your level, my poet, instead of trying to make you descend to mine: I was afraid of losing you in the clouds, and I feared your mind would steal your heart from me. I imprisoned you with love, and thought, by giving myself to you entirely, that you yet would feel something ...’

Myself. — ‘Rosette, lean back a little; your thigh is burning me, you’re a scorching coal.’

Rosette. — ‘If I’m bothering you, I’ll quit the bed. Oh! Heart of stone; drops of water pierce rock, but my tears can’t penetrate you. (*She weeps.*)’

Myself. — ‘If you weep like that, you’ll definitely turn our bed to a bath. What am I saying, a bath? An ocean. Can you swim, Rosette?’

Rosette. — ‘Scoundrel!’

Myself. — ‘Come now, I, a villain! You flatter me, Rosette, I have not deserved that honour: I’m a good-natured member of the bourgeoisie, alas, and I’ve never committed the smallest crime; I’ve done one foolish thing perhaps, which is to have loved you madly: that’s all. Would you have me repent at all costs? I’ve loved you, and I love you, as much as I’m able. Since I’ve been your lover, I’ve always walked in your shadow: I’ve spent all my time with you, my days, my nights. I’ve not uttered fine sentences with you, because I only like to write them down; but I’ve given you a thousand proofs of my tenderness. And of the most perfect fidelity; that goes without saying; and then, I’ve lost several pounds since you’ve been my mistress. What more do you want? Here I am, in your bed; I was here yesterday, I’ll be here tomorrow. Is that how one behaves with people one cannot love? I do all that you want. Say go, and I’ll go; stay and I’ll stay; I’m the most admirable lover in the world, it seems to me.’

Rosette. — ‘That is precisely what I complain of — the most perfect lover in the world, in fact.’

Myself. — ‘What have you to reproach me for?’

Rosette. — ‘Nothing, yet I’d rather have something to complain of.’

Myself. — ‘Here’s a strange quarrel, indeed.’

Rosette. — ‘The truth is much worse. You don’t love me. I can’t do a thing about it, nor can you. What could we do? Certainly, I’d prefer to forgive you for some fault or other. I’d scold you; you’d apologise as best you could, and we’d make up.’

Myself. — ‘The benefit would be all yours. The greater the crime, the greater the reparation.’

Rosette. — ‘You know very well, sir, t I am not yet reduced to using that resource, even if I wished to right now, even though you do not love me, and we quarrel...’

Myself. — ‘Yes, I agree it’s your clemency that prevails... Please me, a little; that would be better than endless syllogising.’

Rosette. — ‘Ah, you’d like to cut short a conversation that’s embarrassing you; but, my fine friend, we will content ourselves with talking, if you please.’

Myself. — ‘That’s a cheap trick. I assure you. You’re wrong; you’re ravishingly pretty, and I do have feelings for you...’

Rosette. — ‘Which you’ll only speak of another time.’

Myself. — ‘Darling, what a little Hyrcanian tigress you are today, a creature of unparalleled cruelty! Have you a craving to become a Vestal Virgin, an original whim, to be sure?’

Rosette. — ‘Why not? There have been stranger ones; but I’ll indeed become a Vestal Virgin where you’re concerned. Know, sir, I only give myself to people who love me, or by whom I believe I’m loved. You are neither of those two cases. Allow me to rise.’

Myself. — ‘If you do, then I will too. You’ll have gained the trouble of retiring again: that’s all’.

Rosette. — ‘Leave me, sir!’

Myself. — ‘Certainly not!’

Rosette (*struggling*). — ‘Oh! Let me go!’

Myself. — ‘I dare assure you, madam, I shall not’.

Rosette (*finding she is the weaker*). — ‘Well! I’ll stay. You’re holding my arm too tight! What do you want from me?’

Myself. — ‘I think you know. I dare not say what I’ll do; I respect basic decency far too much.’

Rosette (*unable to defend herself*). — ‘On condition you’ll love me deeply... I surrender...’

Myself. — ‘It’s a little late to capitulate, when the enemy’s already within.’

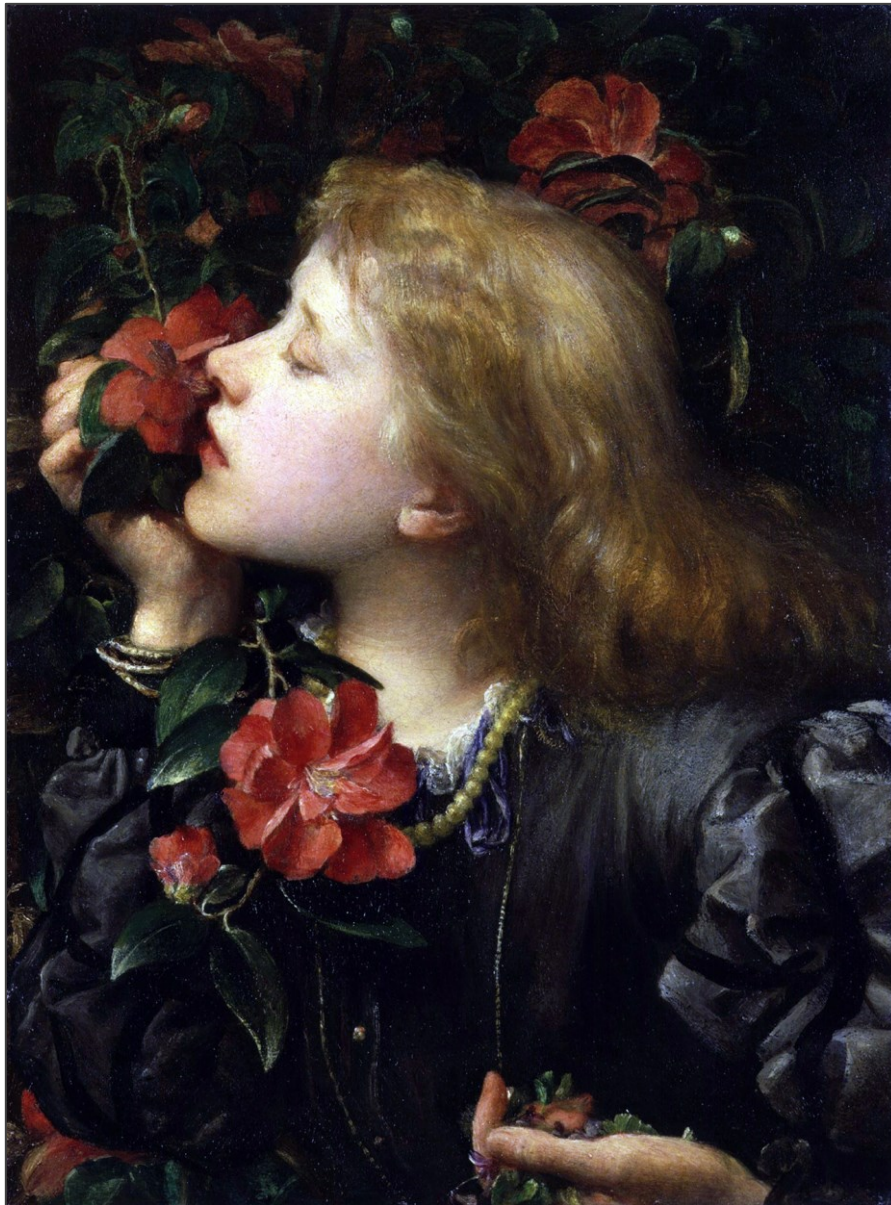
Rosette (*throwing her arms around my neck, half swooning*) ... unconditionally!... I trust in your generosity.’

Myself. — ‘That’s good.’

Here, my dear friend, I think it would not be out of place to set a line of dots, since the rest of this dialogue could hardly be translated except by onomatopoeia.

Since this scene began, the shaft of sunlight, has had time to make its way around the room. A sweet and penetrating scent of lime-blossom enters from the garden. The weather is the most beautiful imaginable; the sky is as blue as an Englishwoman's eyes. We rise, and, after having breakfasted with great appetite, take a long walk in the countryside. The transparency of the air, the splendour of the countryside, and the sight of joyful nature infuse my soul with enough sentiment and tenderness for Rosette to agree that, after all, I possess a heart of some kind, just like everyone else.

Have you noticed how woodland shade, the fountains' murmur, birdsong, smiling perspectives, the scent of the foliage and the flowers, all the descriptive trappings of eclogue we have agreed to ridicule, nevertheless exercise over us, however depraved we may be, an occult power which it is impossible to resist? I will confide, under the seal of greatest secrecy, that I surprised in myself, quite recently, a most provincial feeling of tenderness towards the nightingale which was pouring out its song. It was in the garden at ***; the sky, though completely dark, possessed a clarity almost equal to that of the finest day; it was so deep and transparent that my gaze easily penetrated the heavens. It seemed to me that I saw the last folds of angels' robes floating on the white sinuosities of the Milky Way. The moon was up, though a large tree hid it entirely, whose black foliage was riddled with a million little luminous holes, and to which were attached more bits of glitter than a marquise's fan ever bore. A silence full of sounds, and stifled sighs cloaked the garden (a touch of pathos, but that is not my fault). Though I saw nothing but the bluish light of the moon, I seemed to be surrounded by a population of adored but unnamed phantoms, and though no one else occupied the terrace but myself, I felt I was not alone. I ceased to think, I dreamed no dream, I simply merged with the natural world about me. I felt myself shivering with the leaves, shimmering with the water, shining with the moonlight, blossoming with the flowers; I was, myself, no more than tree, water, nocturnal beauty. I was all of those things, and I think it impossible to be more absent from oneself than I, at that moment. As if something extraordinary was occurring, the leaves suddenly ceased to tremble on the branch, the fountain's water-drops remained suspended in the air and ceased to fall. The silvery threads, which the moon shed, seemed suspended in the air: my heart alone beat on, with a sonority that seemed to fill the vastness of space. My heart missed a beat, and such a silence fell that one might have heard the grass growing, or caught a word whispered a hundred miles away. Then the nightingale, which had, probably, awaited that very moment to begin its song, uttered a note so high-pitched, so resonant, from its little throat that I heard it in my chest as well as my ears. It pierced the silent, crystalline sky, creating an atmosphere in which the notes that followed fluttered harmoniously, beating their wings. I understood what the bird was singing, perfectly, as if I possessed the secret of its language. It was the tale of a love I had never experienced. Never was a story truer or more exact. It omitted not the smallest detail, the most imperceptible nuance. It spoke what I had not been able to tell myself, it explained all I had lacked the power to understand; it gave voice to my reveries, and allowed the phantom, mute till then, a response. I knew I was loved, and those languid flourishes assured me I would find happiness and soon. It seemed to me that I saw, in a ray of moonlight, amidst the trilling of that song, beneath the rain of notes pouring over me, the white arms of my beloved. She appeared, slowly, perfumed like the heart of a many-petalled rose. I will not try to describe her beauty. There are things no words can express. How to say the unsayable? How to paint that which has neither form nor colour? How to record a voice without words or timbre?



Dame (Alice) Ellen Terry ('Choosing') (1860s)
George Frederic Watts (English, 1817 - 1904)

[Artvee](#)

Never have I felt so much love in my heart; I could have pressed all Nature to my breast, I could have clasped the void in my arms as if I embraced a virginal waist; I could have kissed the air that flowed over my lips; I could have swum in the perfume that issued from my radiant body. Ah! If only Rosette had been there! What adorable gibberish I would have spouted! But women never know how to arrive at the perfect moment. The nightingale ceased to sing; the moon, which could stay no longer, drew a veil of cloud over her eyes, and I departed the garden; for the night chill was beginning to grip me.

Feeling the cold, I naturally thought I would be warmer in Rosette's bed than my own, sleeping beside her. I entered using my master-key, as everyone there was asleep, Rosette as well, and had the satisfaction of seeing that an uncut volume of my latest poems lay next to her on the bed. Her two arms stretched above her head, her mouth smiling, half-open, and with one leg extended, the other slightly bent, her abandoned pose was yet full of grace; she looked so well thus that I felt a mortal regret at not being more deeply in love with her.

Gazing at her, I felt stupid as an ostrich. I possessed what I had desired for so long, a mistress as much my own as my horse or my sword; a mistress young, pretty, amorous, and witty, without the encumbrance of a highly-principled mother, or a much-decorated father, a surly aunt, or a brother skilful with the blade, but possessing the ineffable charm of having owned to a husband now duly nailed and sealed in a fine oak, lead-lined coffin, and covered with a large cut-stone block, a thing not to be disdained; since it is, after all, scarcely diverting to be caught in the midst of a voluptuous act, and forced to complete one's performance on the pavement, having described, in one's fall, a greater or lesser arc according to the floor one was on; a mistress as free as the mountain air, wealthy enough to command the most exquisite forms of refinement and elegance, and lacking, moreover, a single moralistic thought; never speaking to you of her virtue while attempting a new posture, nor of her reputation any more than if she had never possessed one; intimate with no other women, and despising them all almost as much as if she were a man; thinking little of Platonism, and not hiding the fact, and always entering whole-heartedly into the game; a woman who, if she had been placed in another sphere, would undoubtedly have been the most admirable of courtesans in all the world, such as to eclipse the glory of an Aspasia (*Pericles' mistress*) or an Imperia Cognati (*a famous early sixteenth-century courtesan, in Rome*)!

Now, this accomplished woman was mine. I did with her as I wished; I had a key to her room and her chest of drawers; I unsealed her letters; I had erased her own name, and endowed her with another. She was my 'thing', my property. Her youth, her beauty, her love, belonged to me. I used and abused them. If the fancy took me, I obliged her to sleep all day and rise at night, and she obeyed, simply, without it seeming a sacrifice, and without taking on the resigned air of a victim. She was attentive, caressing, and (a monstrous thing), wholly faithful. All this is to say, that if, six months ago, when I was lamenting not having a mistress, someone had granted me a glimpse, even distantly, of such happiness, I would have been mad with joy, and would have sent my hat flying to the sky in delight. Well! Now it is won, my happiness leaves me cold; I barely feel it, I fail to feel it, and the situation in which I find myself means so little to me I often doubt whether I have changed my state at all. If I were to leave Rosette, my inner conviction is that, after a month, perhaps less, I would have forgotten her so thoroughly and completely I would no longer recall if I had known her or not! Would she feel the same on her part? — I think not.

Reflecting on all this, and with a sort of feeling of repentance, I placed the most chaste and melancholy kiss a young man has ever granted a young woman at the stroke of midnight, on the forehead of my beautiful sleeper. She gave a little movement; the smile on her mouth became a little more pronounced, but she remained asleep. I undressed slowly, and, slipping beneath the covers, stretched myself out beside her like a snake. The coolness of my body startled her; she opened her eyes and, without speaking, pressed her mouth to mine, and twined herself so tightly around me that I was warmed in less than no time. All the evening's lyricism turned to prose, but

a poetic prose at least. That night was one of the finest, sleepless nights I have spent: I cannot hope for the like again.

We still share pleasant moments, but they have to be brought about, and to unfold, due to some external circumstance of that sort, while before I never needed to be inspired by moon-gazing or hearing the nightingale sing to win all the pleasure one can when one is not truly in love. There are no broken threads in the weft yet, but there are knots here and there, and the warp is not nearly so smooth.

Rosette, who is still in love, does what she can to ward off these irritations. Unfortunately, there are two things in the world that are impossible to control: love and ennui. For my part, I make superhuman efforts to overcome the drowsiness that overcomes me in spite of myself, and, like those provincials who fall asleep at ten o'clock in city salons, I open my eyes as wide as possible, and raise my eyelids with my fingertips! Nothing works, and I descend into a marital torpor that could not be more unpleasant. The dear girl, finding herself face to face with my rural state, carted me off to the countryside yesterday.

It may not be out of place for me to give you a short description of the aforementioned countryside, which is quite pretty; it would relieve us a little of all this grey metaphysics, and besides, a background is necessary on which to place figures, and figures lack prominence set against the void, or that vague brown tint with which painters fill the field of their canvasses.

The approach to our destination was most picturesque. We arrived, via a wide road lined with ancient trees, at a starlike intersection whose centre was marked by a stone obelisk surmounted by a gilded copper ball: five tracks run from the points of the star. Our road descended suddenly, and plunged into a narrow valley, the bottom of which was occupied by a small river spanned by a bridge with a single arch, then rapidly climbed the opposite slope, on which the village is situated, whose slate bell-tower can be seen rising between thatched roofs and the rounded tops of apple trees. The horizon is not very open, being bounded, on both sides, by the crest of the ridge but it is pleasant, and restful on the eye. Next to the bridge, are a mill, and a building in red sandstone in the form of a tower. Endless barking, and a few pointers and young basset-hounds, their legs outspread warming themselves in the sun before the door, inform you that this is the gamekeeper's lodge, if the buzzards and weasels nailed to the shutters have failed to resolve your uncertainty. Here begins an avenue of rowan-trees whose scarlet fruits attract flocks of birds; as no one passes that way often, there is merely a white strip in the centre, the rest being covered with short, fine moss, while, in the double rut traced by the wheels of the carriages, small green frogs like lumps of chrysoprase hop about and croak. After walking awhile, one finds oneself in front of an iron gate which has been gilded and painted, and whose two halves are wrought with artichoke-leaf decorations and display spiked frames. The track then heads towards the château, which is as yet invisible, buried in greenery like a bird's nest, without hurrying you along too swiftly however, as it often winds about to visit a stream or a fountain, an elegant kiosk or a fine viewpoint, crossing and recrossing the river on rustic or Chinese bridges. The unevenness of the terrain, and the presence of dams built to feed a mill, means that in several places the river drops four or five feet, and nothing is more pleasant than to listen to these waterfalls murmuring beside you as you go, most often unseen, since the willows and elderberry trees which line the bank form an almost impenetrable curtain. Yet all this section of the park is, in a way, only the antechamber to the other part: a wide road which transects the property unfortunately cuts it in two, a disadvantage which

has been remedied in a most ingenious way. Two high crenellated walls, filled with barbicans and loopholes in imitation of a ruined fortress, rise on either side of the road; and from a tower, on the château side, to which a gigantic covering of ivy clings, hangs a real drawbridge, lowered every morning, on iron chains. We passed through a beautiful ogival arch to the interior courtyard of the keep, and from there into a second enclosure, where the trees, which have not been trimmed for more than a century, are of extraordinary height, their gnarled trunks swaddled with parasitic plants, and are the most beautiful and singular I have ever seen. Some have foliage only at the crown, and end in large umbrellas while others taper to plumes: yet others, on the contrary, have near their trunk a large tuft from which the stripped bole rises towards the sky like a second tree planted on the first; they look like the foreground of a landscape painting, or the wings of a theatre decoration, so curiously deformed are they; ivies, which stretch from one to the other, and embrace them to the point of suffocation, mingle their dark leaves with the green of the trees, and seem to form their shadows. Nothing in the world is more picturesque. The river widens at this point to form a small lake, and its shallowness allows you to distinguish, through translucent water, the lovely aquatic plants which carpet its bed. There are water-lilies and lotuses floating nonchalantly in the pure crystal among the reflections of clouds, and weeping willows that lean from the bank. The château is located on the far side of the river, and a little boat painted apple-green and bright red saves you from making a rather long detour seeking a bridge. The château consists of an assemblage of buildings, constructed at different times, with unequal gables and a host of small pinnacles. The main pavilion, constructed of brick with stone corners, is of a rustic order, covered with bossages and vermiculation. A second pavilion is completely modern, with a flat Italianate roof, a tiled balustrade with stone vases, and a tent-shaped canopy of ticking: the windows are of different sizes, and fail to correspond; they are of all kinds: there are even trefoils and ogives, for the chapel is Gothic. Certain portions are latticed, like Chinese houses, with screens painted in various colours, over which honeysuckle, jasmine, nasturtiums and Virginia creeper climb, their twigs entering familiarly into the rooms, and seeming to reach out their hands to you in welcome,

Despite this lack of regularity, or rather because of it, the appearance of the whole is charming: at least, there is always more to see, and plenty to choose from, and one is forever finding some feature one had not noticed. This dwelling, of which I had not known previously, since it is some fifty miles away, pleased me at first, and I was grateful to Rosette for the excellent idea of choosing such a nest for our amours.

We arrived at nightfall; and, since we were tired, and after having supped with a great appetite, we had nothing more urgent to do than to seek our separate beds, intending to sleep undisturbed.

I was lost in a rose-coloured dream, full of birds, flowers, and perfumes, when I felt a warm breath on my forehead, and a kiss descending there with fluttering wings. The touch of sweet lips, and a soft, moist sensation made me judge myself awake. I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was Rosette's fresh, white neck bowed over the bed, as she kissed me. I threw my arms round her waist, and returned her kiss more lovingly than I had for a long time.

She went to draw the curtain, and open the window, then returned to sit on the edge of the bed, holding my hand between hers, and toying with my rings. Her dress was of the most coquettish simplicity. She was free of corset, and petticoat, and had absolutely nothing on but a large cambric peignoir, milk-white in colour, worn quite loose, and densely pleated; her hair was fastened, on top of her head, with a small white rose of the kind whose leaflets only have three or

four leaves; her ivory feet were clad in tapestry slippers, in bright and variegated colours, as neat as possible though still too large, and backless, like those of young women in Rome. I regretted, seeing her so, being her lover already, and not about to become one.

The dream that occupied my brain, when she came to wake me so pleasantly, was not so distant from reality. For my room overlooked the little lake I described. Jasmine framed the window, its stars like a silver shower falling to the parquet floor: the urns of large alien flowers swung beneath my balcony as if to drown me in incense; a sweet, vague odour, composed of a thousand different perfumes, penetrated to my bed, from where I could see the water shimmering and trembling in thousands of glittering points; the birds piped and chattered, chirped and whistled, making a harmonious but confused noise like the hum of a festival. Opposite, on a hill slope lit by the sun, spread a golden green lawn, over which some large oxen, scattered here and there, grazed under the guidance of a little boy. High above and further away, one could see immense patches of woodland of a darker green, from which rose, in spirals, bluish smoke from the charcoal-burners' pits.

All in this scene was calm, fresh and smiling, and wherever I looked, I saw nothing but youth and beauty. My room was hung with Persian carpets, mats covered the floor, on which sat blue Japanese pots with rounded bellies and tapering necks, full of rare flowers. Flowers were also artistically arranged on all the shelves and above the fireplace of Turkish marble; the door panels represented scenes of a rural or pastoral nature in bright colours and of charming design, and there were sofas and divans in every corner. Here too was the lovely woman, all in white, whose form delicately pressed against her translucent dress where it touched: one could imagine nothing more sweetly designed to please the spirit, as well as the eyes.

Thus, my idle and satisfied gaze passed, with equal pleasure, from a magnificent pot painted with dragons and mandarins to Rosette's slippers, and from there to the angle of her shoulder which gleamed beneath the cambric; fixed itself next, on the trembling stars of jasmine, the blonde leaves of the weeping-willows on the shore, then crossed the water and scanned the hillside, and returned to the room to attach itself to the rose-coloured bows of some shepherdess's full corset.

Through the shreds of foliage, the sky opened its thousands of blue eyes; the water gurgled gently, and I, I let myself be carried away by joy, plunged in quiet ecstasy and unspeaking, my hand always pressed between Rosette's two little hands.

No matter what one thinks, happiness is pink and white; it can hardly be represented in any other manner. Soft colours belong to it by right. It has on its palette, otherwise, only the green of water, the blue of the sky, and the yellow of straw: its paintings are all daylight, like those of the Chinese masters. Flowers, gentle light, sweet perfumes, and soft silky skin touching yours, a veiled harmony from who knows where; with all that one is perfectly happy; and one can be happy in no other way. I myself, who abhor the commonplace, who dream only of strange adventures, strong passions, delirious ecstasies, strange and difficult situations, I must find happiness thus, and whatever I do can find no other way to achieve it.

Please believe none of these thoughts occupied my mind at the time; it was after the fact, and while writing to you, that they came to me; at the time, I was only occupied with enjoying myself, the only worthwhile occupation of a rational man.

I shall not describe the life we lead here; it is easy to imagine. Walks in the depths of the woods, violets and strawberries, kisses and little blue flowers, picnics on the grass, all books and reading forgotten beneath the trees; — parties on the water, with a trailing scarf or a white hand dipping in the current, drawn-out songs and drawn-out laughter echoing along the shore; the most Arcadian life imaginable!

Rosette smothers me with attentive caresses; cooing more than a dove in the month of May, she hangs about me, and her body folds itself about me; she seeks to ensure that I have no other air to breathe than her breath, and no other horizon than her eyes; her blockade is strict, she lets nothing enter or leave without her permission; she has built a guardhouse next to my heart, from which she keeps watch night and day. She utters delightful things; she writes me most gallant madrigals; she sits by my knee and behaves exactly like a humble slave before her lord and master: which suits me well enough, for I like such submissive ways and am inclined towards Oriental despotism. She does not the smallest thing without taking my advice, and seems to have completely renounced her own wishes and will; she seeks to divine my thoughts and anticipate them; she wearies me with her wit, tenderness, and complaisance; she is so perfect one wishes to hurl her from the window. How the Devil can I break with such an adorable woman without seeming to be a monster? It would be enough to discredit me forever.

Oh! How I wish to find fault with her, to prove her in the wrong! How impatiently I await the opportunity for an argument! But there is no danger of the little rogue providing one! When I speak to her abruptly and harshly, so as to start one, she answers me in so gentle a tone, so silvery a voice, with such moist eyes, and so sad and loving an air, that I seem to myself a tiger, or at least a crocodile, and, though furious, am forced to ask her forgiveness.

She is literally killing me with love; she torments me, and every day tightens the net in which I am caught. She will force me to tell her I hate her, that she bores me to death, and, if she will not leave me alone, to lash her face with my whip. Heavens! She may succeed, and, if she continues behaving so amiably, Devil take me, it will not be too long before she does.

Despite appearances, Rosette is sated with me as I with her; but, as she has committed stupendous follies for me, she seeks not to incur, in the eyes of the company of honest and sensitive women, the fault of having caused a rupture. Every great passion pretends to be eternal, and it is useful to command the benefit of such pretence without being disadvantaged. Rosette reasons thus: 'Here is a young man who has only the remnants of feeling towards me, but, being rather good-natured and naive, he dares not show it openly, and knows not how to bring the affair to an end; it is obvious he finds me boring, but he would sooner die of pain, than take it upon himself to leave me. As is the poet's way, his head is filled with beautiful phrases regarding love and passion, and he feels obliged, in conscience, to be a Tristan or an Amadis. Now, as nothing in the world is more unbearable than the caresses of a person you have fallen out of love with (and to love a woman no longer is to hate her violently), I shall lavish the like on him, in such a way as to cause him indigestion, and force him, whatever happens, to send me to the Devil, or love me again as he did on the first day, a thing which he will studiously avoid.

Nothing could be better. Will it not be charming to play Ariadne, abandoned on her isle? People take pity on you, they admire you, they lack a sufficient supply of imprecations to heap on the infamous person who has been so monstrous as to abandon so adorable a creature; one

assumes a resigned and sorrowful air, one places one's hand on one's chin, and props one's elbow on one's knee, so as to highlight the pretty blue veins in one's wrist. One does one's hair as if in mourning and dresses, for a while, in darker colours. One avoids pronouncing the name of the ungrateful person, but may make indirect allusions to it, while uttering admirably-modulated little sighs.

A woman so good, so beautiful, so passionate, who has made such endless sacrifices, who cannot be reproached for the slightest thing, a chosen vessel, a pearl of love, a spotless mirror, a shower of milk, a white rose, an ideal essence to perfume a life; a woman whom a man should worship on his knees, and who should be cut into little pieces after her death, so as to fashion relics: to quit her, iniquitously, fraudulently, villainously! Why, a Corsair could do no worse! Deal her the death blow, for she will surely die of it! A lover would have to have a stone in his chest, instead of a heart, to behave so. Oh, Men! Men! I tell myself so; and yet perhaps it is not true.'

However fine women naturally prove as actresses, I find it hard to believe that they are so to that extent; and, in the end, are not all Rosette's outpourings only an exact expression of her feelings for me? In any event, to continue our tête-à-tête is no longer feasible, since the château's lovely mistress has sent out invitations to her acquaintances in the neighbourhood. We are busy making preparations to receive those worthy provincials, male and female. Farewell, dear friend.

The End of Part II of Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin'

Part III: Chapters 5 to 9

Chapter 5: D'Albert to Silvio

I was mistaken. My wicked heart, incapable of love, had found a reason to free itself from the weight of a gratitude it does not wish to bear; I joyfully seized on the idea in order to excuse myself to myself; I became attached to it, but nothing in the world is falser. Rosette was not playing a role, and if ever a woman is true, it is she. Well! I almost resent the sincerity of her passion which is an additional bond and which makes severance more difficult and less excusable; I would prefer her false and fickle. What a singular position I maintain! One would like to leave, and yet one stays; one would like to say: 'I hate you', and yet one says: 'I love you'; the past drives one on, and prevents one turning around or quitting. One is faithful yet regrets being so. I know not what kind of shame prevents one from giving oneself to other acquaintances, and coming to terms with oneself. We give a single person all we deny to others, only to save appearances. The time and opportunities to see each other that once presented themselves so naturally are now found only with difficulty. We begin to recall that we have important affairs to see to. The situation, full of tension, is most painful, but it is not yet as much so as the one in which I find myself. When it is a new friendship that draws you away from the old one, it is easier to extricate yourself. Hope smiles at you gently from the threshold of the house that contained your early love. A fairer and rosier illusion flutters with its white wings over the barely closed tomb of its sister who has died; another flower, more blooming and more fragrant, in which trembles a heavenly tear, has sprouted suddenly from amidst the withered calyxes of the old bouquet; beautiful azure perspectives open before you; moist paths framed by discreet hornbeams extend to the horizon; gardens with a few pale statues or a bench against a wall clothed with ivy; lawns starry with daisies; narrow balconies on which one leans to gaze at the moon; shadows broken by furtive gleams; days of some drawing room stifled under ample curtains; all the darkness and isolation that love seeks when it dares show itself. It is as if one gained youth afresh. One experiences, moreover, a change of place, habits, people; one feels a kind of remorse; but the desire that hovers and buzzes about your head, like a bee in spring, prevents you from hearing the voice of that remorse; the emptiness of your heart is filled, and your memories fade beneath fresh impressions. But it is not the same with me: I love no one, and it is only out of weariness and boredom, due rather to myself than her, that I would like to be able to break with Rosette.

My old ideas, which slumbered, have awakened wilder than ever. I am, as before, tormented by the desire to possess a mistress, and, as before, in Rosette's very arms, I doubt ever having had one. I see, once more, the beautiful lady at her window, in that park of the time of Louis XIII, and the huntress, on her white horse, traverses the forest avenue at the gallop. My ideal beauty smiles

at me from the height of her nest of clouds, I think I recognize her voice in the song of the birds, in the murmur of the leaves; it seems to me I am summoned on all sides, and that the daughters of the air brush my face with the fringe of their invisible scarves. As in the days of my first agitation, I imagine that, if I were to leave at once and go somewhere, very far, very quickly, I would arrive in some place in which things are being done that concern myself, and where my destiny is being decided. I feel I am awaited, impatiently, in some corner of the earth, I know not which. A suffering soul calls to me, ardently, and dreams of me yet cannot seek me; this is the cause of my anxiety, and is what prevents me from being able to remain here; I am violently drawn away from my inner centre. My nature is not one of those to which others are led, one of those fixed stars around which planets gravitate; I must wander the field of the heavens, like a stray meteor, until I encounter the planet of which I must be a satellite, the Saturn to which I must add a ring. Oh, when will that marriage take place? Until then I cannot hope for rest or stability, and I must imitate the directionless, wavering needle of a compass seeking the pole.

I allowed my wings to be caught in treacherous lime, hoping to lose only a feather there, believing I could fly whenever I wanted: yet nothing could be more difficult; I find myself covered by an imperceptible net, more difficult to break than that forged by Vulcan, its mesh so fine and tightly woven there is no way to escape. The net, however, is spacious, and one can move about with an appearance of freedom; it is scarcely tangible, except when one tries to break through it; then it resists and becomes as solid as a wall of bronze.

How much time I have wasted, my ideal, without making the slightest effort to render you real! How cowardly I have been in giving myself over to the voluptuousness of a night! And how little I deserve to find you!

Sometimes I think of forming some other connection; but have no one in mind: more often I resolve, should I succeed in breaking free, never to engage in such ties again, and yet nothing justifies my resolution: for this affair has been to all intents and purposes, highly successful, and I have not the least complaint to make regarding Rosette. She has always been good to me, and behaved herself as well as she could; she has been exemplary in her loyalty, and never given rise to even a suspicion: the most active, and restless jealousy would have nothing to say, and would be obliged to slumber once more. I could be jealous of her past; and, it is true, I would have ample reason to be so. But fortunately, jealousy of that sort rarely afflicts me, since I own to quite enough in the present, without rummaging amidst the ruins of her former affairs, extracting vials of poison and cups of gall. What woman could one ever love, if one thought of such? One is vaguely aware that the woman has had several lovers before one; but one says to oneself, a man's pride being capable of so many turns and twists, that one is the first she has truly loved, and that it was through some combination of fateful circumstances that she found herself tied to people unworthy of her, or else that some vague desire in her heart sought to satisfy itself, which was quenched because it had not done so.



The Swing (1767)
Jean-Honoré Fragonard (French, 1732-1806)

[Artvee](#)

Perhaps one can only truly love a virgin; one who is virgin, that is, in body and mind, a frail bud that has not yet been caressed by the zephyr and whose closed heart has received neither a drop of rain nor a pearl of dew, a chaste flower that unfolds its white robes for you alone, a beautiful lily in a silver urn that has drunk of no desire, and has been gilded only by your sun, swayed only by your breath, watered only by your hand. The radiance of noon cannot match the divine pallor of dawn, and all the ardour of a soul that has experienced life yields to the heavenly innocence of a young heart awakening to love. Ah! What a bitter and shameful thought it is that one wipes away the kisses of some other, that there is perhaps not a single place on that brow, those lips, that throat, those shoulders, on that whole body, now yours, which has not been

reddened and marked by alien lips; that those divine murmurs, which come to the aid of a tongue which no longer has words, have been heard before; that these senses, aroused anew, have not learned their ecstasy, their delirium from you, and that deep, deep, in one of those recesses of the soul which are seldom visited, an inexorable memory lurks, leading the soul to compare the pleasures of the past to those of today!

Although my natural indifference leads me to prefer the highway to untrodden paths, and public watering holes to a mountain spring, I must yet seek out and love, absolutely, some virginal creature as white as snow, as trembling as a sensitive plant, one who knows only how to blush and lower her eyes: perhaps, from that limpid pool into which no diver has yet plunged, I will gather a pearl of the finest water, worthy of being a counterpart to that of Cleopatra's earring; but to do so, I would first have to break the bond that binds me to Rosette, for in all probability it is not with her that I may realise this desire, and in truth I feel I lack the strength to do so.

And then, I confess, there is deep within me a mute and shameful motive that dares not reveal itself, which I must nonetheless divulge, since I have promised to hide nothing; and, for a confession to be meritorious, it must be entire; a motive that has a great deal to do with my uncertainty. If I break with Rosette, it will necessarily be some time before she can be replaced, however easy the woman may be whom I make her successor, and then I have acquired with Rosette habits, regarding pleasure, that it will be painful for me to break. It is true that one may have recourse to courtesans; I enjoyed them enough in the past, and never failed to do so in a like situation; but today they disgust me utterly, and the thought renders me nauseous. So, there is no point in considering it. I'm so softened by pleasure; the poison has sunk so deeply into my marrow; that I can no longer bear the idea of existing for a month or two without a woman. It is selfishness, of the basest kind; yet I believe that, if they wished to be frank, the most virtuous of men could confess to similar things.

Here is where I am stuck, and most firmly, and, were it not for this, Rosette and I would have long since fallen out irrevocably. And then, in truth, it is such a mortally tedious thing to court a woman whose feelings I cannot yet be certain of. To say again all the charming nonsensical phrases I have said so many times before, to play the game of adoration again, to write notes and reply, to escort some beauty, in the evening, miles from home; to catch cold, on frozen feet, before the window, while spying on a beloved shadow; to calculate, on a sofa, how many layers of fabric separate you from your goddess; to carry bouquets, and run to balls to remain where I am already! Is it worth it? One may as well keep to one's rut. To rise from it only to fall back into another, exactly the same, after a lot of fuss and bother, what's the point? If I were in love, the thing would go forward by itself, and all would seem ravishing to me; but I am not, though I have the strongest of desires so to be; for, after all, there is only the power of love in this world; and, if pleasure which is only its shadow has so many attractions for us, what must the reality not bring? In what floods of ineffable ecstasy, in what lakes of pure delight, must swim those whom Amor has struck to the heart with his gold-tipped arrows, and who burn with the loving ardour of a mutual flame!

I experience, when beside Rosette, that flat calm, a kind of lazy well-being, which results from the satisfaction of the senses, but nothing more; and that is insufficient. Often that voluptuous numbness turns to torpor, and tranquility to ennui; and then I seek out aimless distractions, and fall into I know not what insipid daydreams, which weary me and exasperate me. It is a state from which I must escape at all costs.

Oh, if I could but be like some of my friends who kiss an old glove in their intoxication, who are happy to receive a handshake, who would not exchange for a Sultana's casket a few crumpled flowers obtained slyly at the ball, who cover with tears and sew into their shirt, over their heart, a note written in poor style, stupid enough to have been copied from 'The Perfect Secretary' (*compiled by Paul Jacob, first edition 1646*), and who adore women with large feet and justify it on the grounds that they have beautiful souls! If I could but follow, trembling, the train of a dress; or wait for a door to open to glimpse a dear, white, apparition pass by me in a flood of light; if a word spoken in a whisper could make me change colour; if I had the ability to forgo dinner in order to arrive earlier at a tryst; if I were capable of stabbing a rival, or fighting a duel with a husband; if, by heaven's special grace, I were capable of finding ugly women witty, and those who are both ugly and foolish good; if I could bring myself to dance a minuet, or listen attentively to a sonata played by a young lady on the harpsichord or the harp; if I had a capacity for learning card-games like Ombre and Reversis; or, finally, if I were a mere man and not a poet, I would certainly be much happier than I am; I would be less bored and less boring.

I ask only one thing of women: beauty. I will willingly do without wit and soul. For me, a woman who is beautiful also possesses wit; she has the wit to be beautiful, and that is worth everything. A host of brilliant phrases and scintillating bon mots is worth less than the gleam of a lovely eye. I prefer pretty lips to a pretty word, and a finely-modelled shoulder to any virtue, even a theological one; I would give fifty souls for a well-turned foot, and all of poetry, and all the poets, for Joanna of Aragon's hand (*see the Raphael portrait, 1518, in the Louvre*) or the brow of the 'Madonna di Foligno' (*see Raphael's painting, 1511/12, in the Vatican*). Above all things, I adore the beauty of form; beauty is for me the divine made visible, it is palpable happiness, it is heaven descended to earth. There are certain undulations of contour, certain delicately-shaped lips, certain curves of the eyelids, certain inclinations of the head, certain elongations of the face, which delight me beyond all expression, and absorb me for hours on end.

Beauty; the only thing that cannot be acquired, forever inaccessible to those who do not already possess it; an ephemeral, fragile flower that grows without being sown, the pure gift of heaven! O Beauty, the most radiant diadem with which chance can crown a brow, you are admirable and precious like everything that is beyond the reach of mankind, like the azure hue of the firmament, like the golden light of the sun, like the perfume of the seraphic lily! One can exchange one's chair for a throne; one can conquer the world, and many have done so; but who would not kneel before you, pure personification of divine thought?

I ask only for beauty, it is true; yet so perfect a beauty that I will probably never encounter it, on this Earth. I have, indeed, seen admirable portions of it here and there, in various women, parts of a mediocre whole, and loved them for what they possessed, ignoring the rest; it is, however, a somewhat arduous task, a painful operation, to suppress half of one's mistress thus, and mentally amputate from her what is ugly or commonplace, by limiting one's eyes to her finer aspects. Beauty? It requires harmony; such that a person equally ugly overall is often less disagreeable to view than a woman only partially beautiful. Nothing hurts my eyes like an unfinished masterpiece, or like beauty that lacks something; an oil stain is less shocking on coarse sackcloth than on some rich fabric.

Rosette is very passable; she may even be considered beautiful, but she is far from realising my ideal; she is like a statue several parts of which have been carved to perfection. Other parts are less

cleanly cut from the block; some are marked by great finesse and charm, some executed in a freer and less careful manner. To the untrained eye, the statue appears entirely finished, and wholly beautiful; but the more attentive observer soon discovers areas where the execution is not thorough enough, contours which, to attain the purity proper to them, need the sculptor's file to pass over their surface a host of times; love must polish the marble and render the work complete; which is enough to say that it will not be I who will see it finished.

And then, beauty is not circumscribed by this or that sinuous line. For me, air, gesture, gait, breath, colour, sound, scent, everything that is life enters into the composition of beauty; everything that perfumes, sings, or radiates belongs to it by right. I love rich brocades, and other splendid fabrics with wide, ample folds; I love large vases of flowers, the transparency of running water, the glittering brightness of fine weapons, purebred horses, and large white dogs like those in the paintings of Paolo Veronese. I am a true pagan in that respect, unable to worship any ill-formed god: though at heart I am not exactly what one calls irreligious, no one is in fact a worse Christian. I do not understand the mortification of matter at the heart of Christianity. I deem it a sacrilegious act to strike at divine creation, and cannot believe that the flesh is evil, since God himself kneaded it with his fingers, and in his image. I little approve those long, dark-coloured robes from which only a head and two hands emerge, and those canvases where everything is drowned in shadow except for a gleaming forehead. I want the sun to enter everywhere, for there to be as much light and as little shadow as possible, for colour to sparkle, the line to meander, for nakedness to be displayed proudly, and matter not to hide its existence, since, as well as the spirit, it is an eternal hymn in praise of God.

I understand, wholly, the ancient Greeks' intense enthusiasm for beauty; and, for my part, find nothing absurd in that law which obliged judges to hear lawyers' pleas in a darkened room, for fear that their good looks, and graceful gestures and attitudes, might produce too favourable an impression, and tip the scales of justice.

I would not buy anything from an ugly shopkeeper; I give more willingly to beggars whose rags and leanness render them picturesque. I know a feverish little Italian, green as an unripe lemon, his eyes, with large black pupils and prominent whites, occupying half his face; he looks like a Murillo or an Espagnolet (*Jusepe de Ribera*) painting without a frame, that some second-hand dealer has propped against a post: he always receives two sous more than the others. I would never strike a fine horse or dog, and prefer a friend or a servant to possess a pleasant exterior. It is a real torment for me to view ugly things or people. Architecture in bad taste, and badly-designed furniture prevent my taking pleasure in a house, however comfortable and attractive it may be. The finest wine in a badly-made glass seems to me no better than a mediocre one, and I confess I would prefer the most Spartan meal on a rustic-ware platter by Bernard Palissy to the finest game served on an earthenware plate. Externals have always affected me strongly, and that is why I avoid the company of old men; it saddens me and affects me disagreeably, because they are wrinkled and deformed, though some have a particular beauty; and, mingled with the pity I have for them, there is also a deal of disgust: of all the ruins in the world, the ruin of man is assuredly the saddest to contemplate.

If I were a painter (and I have always regretted not being one), I would only want to populate my canvases with goddesses, nymphs, madonnas, cherubs and cupids. To devote one's brushes to portraiture, unless the paintings are of beautiful people, seems to me a crime against art; and, far

from wanting to duplicate ugly or ignoble figures, insignificant or vulgar heads, I would rather see them excised from the original. Caligula's ferocity, diverted to that task, would have seemed to me almost praiseworthy.

I consistently envy only handsome people. By handsome I mean as handsome as Paris or Apollo. To lack deformity, to possess more or less regular features, that is to say, to have a nose in the centre of one's face, to be neither snub-nosed nor hooked-nosed, to possess eyes that are neither reddened nor veined, and a suitably-shaped mouth, that is not to be handsome: if that were true, I myself would be so, and I find myself as far removed from the ideal I have formed of virile beauty as if I were one of those Jacquemart statues that strike the hour on church towers. I am as close to being handsome as if had a hump between my shoulders, the crooked legs of a basset-hound, and the nose and muzzle of a monkey. Many a time, I gaze at myself in the mirror for hours on end, with unimaginable fixity and attention, to search for some improvement in my features; I hope for their lines to alter, to straighten or round themselves with greater finesse and purity, for my eyes to brighten, and bathe in more lively fluid, for the arc that separates my forehead from my nose to become fuller, and for my profile to take on the calmness and simplicity possessed by a Greek statue, and am always very surprised when that fails to occur. I dream that someday or other I will shed the form I inhabit, as a snake sheds its former skin. Why, it would take so little for me to be beautiful, though I never shall be! What is needed! A tenth of an inch, I think, or a hundredth, or a thousandth or less, added in one place or another, a little less flesh on this bone, a little more on that; a painter, or a sculptor could adjust all in half an hour. Why did the atoms that compose me arrange themselves in this particular way? Why does this contour protrude here and retreat there. What chance determined that I should be formed this way and not otherwise? In truth, if I could grip Fortune by the forelock, I believe I would strangle her. Because it pleased those miserable particles of I know not what to distribute themselves I know not how, and coagulate dumbly to produce the awkward figure that is myself, must I be eternally unhappy! Is it not the most foolish and miserable thing in the world? How is it that my soul, full of ardent desire, cannot abandon the poor carcass that it causes to stand on two feet, and instead animate one of the statues whose exquisite beauty both saddens and ravishes it? There are two or three people any one of whom I could cheerfully assassinate, taking care not to bruise or spoil their exterior, if I only possessed the spell that allows souls to transmigrate from one body to another. It has always seemed to me that, in order to achieve what I wish (scarcely knowing what I wish), I need great and perfect beauty of form, and I imagine that, if I possessed it, my life, which is so tattered and tangled, would be neat and orderly.

In paintings, one sees so many beautiful figures! Why is not one of them mine? So many charming heads are fading beneath the dust and smoke of time, in the depths of old galleries! Would it not be better if one quit its frame and rested on my shoulders? Would Raphael's reputation suffer greatly if one of those angels who fly in swarms over the ultramarine of his canvases were to lend its face to me for thirty years? So many of the finest of his frescoes, in so many locations, have peeled and disintegrated from old age, no one would notice! What beauty is silently affixed to those walls, on which people scarcely bestow a distracted glance, and why does God or chance not have the wit to do what an artist can do with a few animal hairs at the end of a stick, and various blobs of colour set on a board?

My first sensation before one of those wondrous heads, whose painted gaze seems to pass through you and extend to infinity, is amazement, accompanied by a feeling of admiration not free of terror: my eyes fill, my heart beats; then, as I become more familiar with it, and enter more deeply into the secret of its beauty, I tacitly compare it to my own; jealousy, in the depths of my soul, twists in knots more tangled than a viper's, and I find it takes all my strength not to hurl myself at the canvas, and tear it to pieces.

To be beautiful, that is to say, to possess a charm which makes all smile at you and welcome you; which, before you have even spoken, already prejudices everyone in your favour and renders them disposed to accept your opinion; which only requires you to pass by in the street, or show yourself on a balcony, to attract friends or mistresses to you from the crowd; that obviates the need to be lovable or be loved; and that exempts you from all the mental effort and compromise which ugliness demands; and from those thousand moral qualities which one needs in order to compensate for a lack of bodily beauty; what a splendid and magnificent gift!

And he who could join supreme beauty to supreme strength, who, beneath the skin of Antinous, could possess the muscles of Hercules, what more could he desire? I am sure that with these two attributes, and the soul within me, before three years were out, I would be emperor of the world! One more thing I desire, almost as much as beauty and strength, is the gift of transporting myself, as swiftly as thought, from one place to another. The beauty of an angel, the strength of a tiger, and the wings of an eagle, and I might deem the world not so badly organised as I first thought. A beautiful face to fascinate and seduce the prey, wings to swoop down and bear it away, and nails to tear it; as long as I lack those, I shall be less than happy.

All the passions and tastes I have displayed only served to mask that triple desire. I loved weapons, horses, and women: weapons, to replace the nerve I lacked; horses, to serve as wings; and women, so as to possess, in one at least, the beauty I myself lack. By preference, I sought the most ingenious and deadly weapons, the wounds from which are incurable. I have never found an opportunity to use any of those kriss or yatagans: nonetheless, I like to have them near me; I draw them from their scabbards with an inexpressible sense of strength and security. I fence with them, at random, most energetically, and, if by chance I happen to catch the reflection of my face in the mirror, I am astonished by its ferocious expression. As for the horses, I overwork them so much that they must die or I shall know why not. If I hadn't left off riding Ferragus, he would have died long ago, and that would be a shame, for he is a brave creature. What Arabian ever had legs as swift and as agile as I desire? In women I have only sought the external, and since, so far, those I have seen are far from corresponding to the idea I have formed of beauty, I have relied on paintings and statues; which, after all, are a rather pitiful resource when one has senses as keen as mine. Yet, there is something fine and noble in loving a statue, in that such love is so perfectly disinterested that one fears neither satiety nor the disgust that follows conquest, while not expecting, in all reason, a second prodigy like that of the Pygmalion myth. Impossibility always reassures and pleases me.

Is it not strange that I, who am still in the prime of youth, who, far from having abused it, have not even employed it in the simplest of ways, have attained this degree of jadedness, of no longer being moved except by the strange or difficult?

Satiety follows pleasure; that is a natural and wholly understandable law. No actions are easier to explain than those of a man who having eaten from every dish at the feast, and in vast quantity, is no longer hungry, and seeks to waken his idle palate with a thousand piercing spices, or rousing wines; but that a man who only sits down at table, and who has barely tasted the first few dishes, should be seized already by overwhelming disgust, and is only able to touch without vomiting strongly flavoured dishes, and favours gamey meat, blue-veined cheese, truffles, and wines that smell of gunflint, is a phenomenon that can only result from a particular internal organisation; it is as if a six-month-old child found his nurse's milk insipid, and cried for brandy. I am as weary as if I had performed all Sardanapalus' prodigious deeds, and yet my life has been very chaste and tranquil outwardly: it is a mistake to believe that indulgence is the only path that leads to satiety. One may, also, arrive at it through desire alone, and abstinence is more exhausting than excess. A desire such as mine is something far more wearisome than possession. Its gaze searches and penetrates the object of its desire, an object that forever shines beyond it, and more brightly than if it were near at hand: what more could possession teach? What experience could equal the constant, passionate act of contemplation?

I have experienced so much, though I have travelled so little, that only the steepest peaks tempt me. I am attacked by that disease which grips nations and powerful men in their old age: the impossible. All that I can do has lost its attraction for me. Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, great Romans of the Empire, O you, whom one so misunderstood, you whom the pack of rhetoricians pursues with its yapping, I suffer from your illness, and I pity you with all the pity remaining in me! I too would like to build a bridge over the sea, and pave the waves; I too have dreamed of burning cities to illuminate my festivities; I too have wished to be a woman to know new pleasures. Your Golden House, Nero, was merely a muddy stable beside the palace I have built for myself; My wardrobe is better arranged than yours, Heliogabalus, and far more splendid. My Circuses are louder and bloodier than yours, my perfumes more pungent and penetrating, my slaves more numerous and better-built; I too have harnessed naked courtesans to my chariot, I too have trodden men under my heel, as disdainfully as you. Colossi of the ancient world, there beats, beneath my weak side, a heart as great as yours, and what you did I would have done in your place, and perhaps more. How many Babels have I not piled one upon the other to reach the sky, to strike the stars, and from there spit on all Creation! Why then am I not God, since I cannot be man?

Oh, I believe I will need a hundred thousand centuries of nothingness to rest from the fatigue of these twenty years of life. God in heaven, what stone will you roll above me? Into what shadow will you plunge me? From which Lethe will you have me drink? Beneath what mountain will you bury the Titan? Am I destined to breathe a volcano's flames from my mouth, and cause earthquakes in turning from side to side?

When I think, that I was born of so gentle and resigned a mother, with such simple tastes and manners, I am astonished I did not burst from her womb while she carried me. How is it that none of her calm, pure thoughts have passed into my body with the blood she transmitted? Why must I be a son only of her flesh and not her spirit? The dove bore a tiger that seeks the whole of creation for its prey.

I was raised in the calmest and most chaste of surroundings. It would be difficult to dream of an existence more purely sheltered than mine. My years passed in the shadow of my mother's chair, with my little sisters, and the family dog. I saw around me only the good, quiet, gentle, faces of

aged servants, the colour of whose hair had faded to white in a service seemingly inherited; grave and sententious friends and relatives, dressed in black, who set down their gloves one after the other on the brim of their doffed hats; a few aunts of a certain age, plump, clean, and discreet, with dazzling linen, grey skirts, netted mittens, their hands on their belts like religious folk; furniture severe to the point of bareness, raw oak woodwork, leather hangings, interiors wholly of a sober, muted colour, such as certain Flemish masters painted. The garden was always damp and dark; the boxwood that outlined its rectangles, the ivy that covered the walls, and a few fir trees with naked arms were intended to provide greenery and succeeded rather poorly; the brick house, with a high roof, though spacious and well-maintained, had something of a gloomy somnolent air about it. Certainly, nothing was more suited to an isolated, austere, and melancholy life than such a dwelling. It seemed impossible for the children raised in such a house not to end by becoming priests or nuns. Well, in that atmosphere of purity and rest, in that meditative shade, I rotted little by little, without it showing, like a medlar in straw. In the bosom of my honest, pious, holy family, I acquired a dreadful degree of depravity. It was not through contact with the world, since I had not viewed it; nor the fire of passion, since as yet I was shivering, bathed in the icy sweat that oozed from those brave walls. The worm had not crawled from the heart of some other medlar to mine. It had hatched of its own accord, in the very depths of my flesh, which it gnawed and furrowed through and through: nothing appeared, outwardly, to warn of my being spoiled. I showed neither blemish nor puncture; yet I was utterly hollow inside, and all that was left was the thin, brightly-coloured outer rind, which the slightest shock could have burst. Is it not an inexplicable thing that a child born of virtuous parents, raised with care and discretion, kept far from all evil, should so pervert himself, as to arrive where I have arrived? I am sure that if I traced my lineage back six generations, I would fail to find in my ancestors a single atom akin to those of which I am formed. I am not born of my family, I am not a branch of its noble trunk, but a poisonous mushroom raised in some stormy night, between its mossy roots; and yet none has felt a greater aspiration, a stronger impulse, towards the beautiful than I, none has tried more stubbornly to spread his wings; but each attempt brought only a steeper fall, and that which was supposed to save only ensured I was lost.



Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House (1670)
Pieter de Hooch (Dutch, 1629-1684)

[Artvee](#)

Solitude is worse for my spirit than society, though I desire the former more than the latter. Everything that draws me out of myself is salutary where I am concerned: people bore me, but drag me away, of necessity, from this empty reverie, whose spirals I ascend and descend, head bowed, arms outstretched. Also, since Rosette's and my tête-à-tête is now interrupted, and there are others here before whom I am forced to restrain myself somewhat, I am less prone to yield to my dark moods, and am less exercised by those extreme desires which descend on my heart like a flock of vultures as soon as I am unoccupied for a moment. There are a few rather pretty women here, and one or two young men who are quite amiable, and full of gaiety; but, amidst this provincial swarm, I am most charmed by a young cavalier who arrived a few days ago; his

appearance instantly pleased me. I took a liking to him, on merely seeing him dismount from his horse. It would be impossible to display more grace; he is not very tall, but is slender and well-built; he has something soft and undulating in his gait and gestures, which could not be more pleasing; many women would envy his hands and feet. His only fault is that of being too handsome, with features almost too delicate for a man. He is equipped with a pair of the finest and darkest eyes in the world, which have an indefinable expression and whose gaze is difficult to endure; but, as he is young and has no sign of a beard, the softness and perfection of the lower part of his face somewhat tempers the vivacity of his aquiline eyes; his brown, glossy hair floats on his neck in large curls, and grants his head a particular character. So here at last is one of those types of beauty I dreamed of realising, alive before me! What a pity he is a man, what a pity I am not a woman! This Adonis, who to his handsome face joins a very full and lively mind, further enjoys the privilege of having, at the service of his witticisms and jests, a voice of a clear and silvery timbre, that it is hard to listen to without being stirred. He is truly perfect. It seems that he shares my taste for beautiful things, for his clothes are of a richness much sought after, his horse is a dashing thoroughbred; and, so that everything might seem complete and of a match, behind him, mounted on a little horse, came a page of fourteen or fifteen years old, blond, pink, pretty as a seraph, who was half-asleep, so tired from the journey he had just completed that his master was obliged to lift him from his saddle, and carry him in his arms to his room. Rosette gave the former a warm welcome, and I think that she has formed the design of employing him to rouse my jealousy and so waken the little flame of nigh-extinguished passion, still lingering beneath my ashes. However formidable such a rival may be, I am little disposed to be jealous, rather I feel so drawn towards him that I would quite willingly abandon my love to win his friendship.

Chapter 6: The Story Continued

At this point, if the good reader will allow me, I will abandon to his reveries, for a while, the worthy character who, until now, has alone occupied the stage while soliloquising, and return to the usual form of the novel, without however prohibiting myself from subsequently adopting the dramatic style, if necessary, and while reserving for myself the right to draw again on the kind of epistolary confession that the aforementioned young man addressed to his friend, persuaded that, however penetrating and full of sagacity I may be, I must, of necessity, know less about it all than he himself does.

The little page was so exhausted that he slept in his master's arms, his dishevelled little head swaying back and forth as if he were a corpse. It was quite a distance from the steps to the room that had been assigned to the newcomer, and the servant who preceded him offered to carry the child himself; but the young cavalier, for whom, moreover, his burden seemed light as a feather, thanked him and would not part with the lad: he placed him on a sofa very gently, taking a thousand precautions not to wake him; a mother could not have been gentler. When the servant had withdrawn, and the door was closed, he knelt before him, and tried to pull off his boots; but the lad's little swollen, aching feet made the operation rather difficult, and the pretty sleeper uttered from time to time a few vague and inarticulate sighs, like a person about to wake. Then the young

rider would pause, and wait for sleep to overtake him. The boots finally yielded, that was the essential thing; the stockings offered little resistance. This operation completed, the master returned the child's feet to the velvet of the sofa; side by side, they were truly the two most adorable feet in the world, small, and white as new ivory, though a little pink now from the pressure of the shoes in which they had been imprisoned for seventeen hours, feet too small for a girl, and which seemed never to have walked; what one saw of each leg was round, plump, polished, transparent and veined, and of the most exquisite delicacy; a leg worthy of its foot.

The young man, still kneeling, contemplated those two little feet with attentive and loving admiration; he bent down, took the left one and kissed it, then the right one and kissed that too; and then, from kiss to kiss, he moved up the leg to where the material began. The page lifted his eyelid a little, and gave his master a kindly and drowsy look, in which no surprise showed. 'My belt is bothering me', he said, passing his finger under the ribbon, and fell asleep again. The master unbuckled the belt, placed a cushion beneath the page's head to raise it, and carefully wrapping the lad's feet, which were a little cold, after the heat they had experienced, in his cloak, he drew up an armchair, and seated himself as close as he could to the sofa. Two hours passed in this way, the young man watching the child sleep, observing the shadows of dreams that furrowed his forehead. The only sound heard from the room was his steady breathing, and the tick of the clock.

It was certainly a very graceful picture. Here was the contrast between two forms of beauty, an effect which a skilled painter might have made good use of. The master was as beautiful as a woman, the page as beautiful as a young girl. The latter's rounded, rosy face, framed by the hair, had the appearance of a peach beneath its leaves; it possessed the same freshness and velvety softness, though the fatigue of the journey had robbed it of some of its usual brilliance; his half-open mouth revealed small milk-white teeth, and his full and shining temples were crisscrossed by a network of azure veins; the eyelashes of his eyes, like those golden threads which bloom in missals around virginal heads, reached almost to his cheeks; his long, silken hair was both gold and silver, gold in the shadows, silver in the light; his neck was at the same time full and frail, betraying nothing of the gender indicated by his clothes; two or three buttons of his jerkin, undone to facilitate breathing, allowed one to glimpse, through the gap in his shirt of fine Holland cloth, an area of plump, rounded flesh of an admirable whiteness, and the beginning of certain curvatures hard to explain on the chest of a young boy; on closer inspection, one might also have found that the hips were a little too developed. My readers may think what they will; these are simply conjectures I offer: I know no more about it than they, but hope to learn more in time, and promise to keep them faithfully informed of my discoveries. Let the reader, with better eyesight than mine, look beneath the lace of the chemise, and decide in all conscience whether the contours seem too prominent or not sufficiently so; but be warned that the curtains are drawn, and there is only a half-light, in the room, most unfavourable to this kind of investigation.

The horseman, his master, was pale, but of a golden pallor, full of strength and life; his pupils were a moist crystalline blue; his straight, thin nose endowed his profile with wondrously proud vigour, and the flesh was so delicate that, at the edge of its contours, light gleamed; his mouth had the sweetest smile at certain moments, but was mostly curved only at its corners, as in some of those faces one sees in the paintings of the old Italian masters, rather reserved than outgoing; which endowed him with an adorable expression of disdain, a *smorfia* that could not be more piquant, an air of childlike sulkiness and ill-humour most singular and charming.

What were the ties that joined master to page, and page to master? Assuredly there was more between them than the affection that may exist between master and servant. Were they friends or brothers? Then why the pretence? It would have been difficult, indeed, for anyone who witnessed the scene I have just described, to believe that these two personages were in truth only what they appeared to be.

‘The dear angel, how he sleeps!’ the young man whispered to himself. ‘I think he has never travelled so far in his life. Fifty miles on horseback, he who is so delicate! I am afraid he’s ill with fatigue. But no, it won’t come to aught; tomorrow he’ll not be the worse; he’ll have regained his fine colour, and be fresher than a rose after the rain. Does he not look handsome, so! Were I not afraid of waking him, I’d devour him with kisses. What an adorable dimple he has on his chin! How fine and white his skin! Sleep well, my treasure. Oh! I’m truly jealous of your mother, and wish I had made you. He’s not ill? No; his breathing is regular, and he’s quiet. But I think I hear someone at the door...’

In fact, someone had tapped as gently as possible on the door-panel, twice. The young man rose to his feet, and, thinking he was in error, waited till there was another knock before opening the door. Two more taps, a little louder, were heard, and a soft, female voice said, in a very low tone: ‘Théodore, it’s me.’

Théodore allowed her to enter, but with less vivacity than a young man might show when opening his door to a woman with a sweet voice who tapped mysteriously at his door at nightfall. The half-open door gave way, to guess whom? To the mistress of our perplexed D’Albert, to Princess Rosette herself, rosier even than her name, her breathing as tremulous as ever a woman displayed on entering a handsome gentleman’s room at eve. — ‘Théodore!’ said Rosette.

Théodore raised his finger, placed it on his lips like the statue of silence, and, pointing to the sleeping child, led her into the next room.

‘Théodore,’ resumed Rosette, who seemed to find a singular sweetness in repeating the name, and at the same time sought to rally her ideas, ‘Théodore,’ she continued without letting go of the hand which the young man had offered so as to guide her to an armchair, ‘you’ve returned, at last? Where have you been? What have you been doing all this time? Do you know it’s nearly six months since I saw you? Ah! Théodore, it’s not right; we owe people who love us, even when we do not love them, a little consideration and pity.’

Théodore. — ‘Where have I been, what have I been doing? I know not. I’ve left and returned; I’ve slept and watched, I’ve sung and cried, I’ve hungered and thirsted; I’ve been too hot and too cold; I’ve been bored; I’ve less wealth, and aged six months, I’ve lived, that’s all. And you, what have you been doing?’

Rosette. — ‘Thinking of you, with love.’

Théodore. — ‘And that’s all?’

Rosette. — ‘Yes, indeed. I’ve spent my time ill, have I not?’

Théodore. — ‘You might have employed it better, my poor Rosette; for example, in loving someone who could return your love.’

Rosette. — 'I'm as disinterested in love, as in all else. I never lend love at interest; it's purely a gift, which I grant.'

Théodore. — 'You display a rare virtue then, one that can only arise in select souls. I've often wished to possess the power to love you, at least as you would like me to; but there's an insurmountable obstacle between us, one that I cannot speak of. Have you taken another lover since I left?'

Rosette. — 'One that I still have.'

Théodore. — 'And what kind of man is he?'

Rosette. — 'A poet.'

Théodore. — 'The Devil! Who is this poet, and what has he penned?'

Rosette. — 'I know not, a kind of volume no one has heard of, that I tried to read one evening.'

Théodore. — 'So, you've an unknown poet for a lover. That must be intriguing. Does he have holes at his elbows, dirty linen, and wrinkled stockings?'

Rosette. — 'No; he dresses quite well, washes his hands, and lacks an ink stain on the end of his nose. He's a friend of De C***; I met him at Madame de Thémynes'; you know, that tall woman who acts in an innocent childlike manner, and gives herself little airs.'

Théodore. — 'And may I know the name of this glorious personage?'

Rosette. — 'Oh! Lord, yes! He's called the Chevalier d'Albert!'

Théodore. — 'The Chevalier d'Albert! I think he is the young man who was standing on the balcony, as I dismounted.'

Rosette. — 'Precisely.'

Théodore. — 'And who gazed at me so attentively?'

Rosette. — 'Himself.'

Théodore. — 'He's fine enough. Has he caused me to be forgotten?'

Rosette. — 'No. You are unfortunately not a person one can forget.'

Théodore. — 'He loves you very much, no doubt?'

Rosette. — 'In truth, I know not. There are times when one might think he loves me deeply; but at heart he does not; he's near to hating me; he resents me because he's unable to love me. He did as do many others more experienced than he; he mistook a lively taste for passion, and found himself quite surprised and disappointed once his desire was sated. It's a mistake to think that, because one has slept with someone, one must adore them.'

Théodore. — 'And how do you intend to treat this aforementioned lover, who is nevertheless not one?'

Rosette. — 'How one treats past weeks, or last year's fashions. He is not strong enough to quit me before I quit him, and, though he does not love me in the true sense of the word, he clings to me through pleasurable habit, and such habits are the most difficult to break. If I do not aid him,

he is quite capable of being studiously bored beside me, till the Day of Judgment, and beyond; for he has the germ within him of every noble quality; and the flower of his soul only asks to bloom in the light of eternal love. Truly, I am sorry not to have shone for him. Of all my lovers I scarcely loved, he's the one I love the most; and, if I were not as kind as I am, I'd refuse him his freedom, and keep him yet. That I will not do; I am at this moment completing the process of wearing him down.'

Théodore. — 'How long will it take?'

Rosette. — 'A fortnight, three weeks perhaps, but certainly less than it would have taken if you'd not arrived. I know I'll never be your mistress. There is, you say, a hidden reason for it, which I might concede if you were allowed to reveal it. So, all hope in that direction must be forbidden me. Yet I cannot resolve to be another's mistress now you are here: it would seem a profanation, and that I no longer had the right to love you.'

Théodore. — 'Keep him, for my sake.'

Rosette. — 'If it pleases you, I will. Ah! If you could only have been mine, how different my life would have been from what it has been! The world has a false idea of me, indeed, and I shall die without anyone suspecting what I was, except you, Théodore, the only one who has ever understood me, though you have been cruel to me. I have never desired anyone but you for a lover, and yet have failed to win you. Oh, if only you had loved me, Théodore, I would have been virtuous and chaste, I would have been worthy of you: instead of that, I shall leave (if I am remembered) the reputation of a gallant woman, that of a courtesan of sorts who differed from those of the gutter only in rank and fortune. I was born with the noblest of inclinations; but nothing depraves like being unloved. Many despise me who know not what I had to suffer to arrive where I am. Being sure of never belonging to the one I preferred above all, I let myself float with the stream, I neglected to take the trouble to defend this body that could not be yours. As for my heart, no one has possessed it and never can. It is yours, though you've broken it; and, unlike most women who think themselves honest if they've not drifted from one bed to another, though I've prostituted my flesh, I have always been faithful, in heart and soul, to my dreams of you. At least, I shall have rendered a few people happy, I will have made a white-robed phantom dance round a few bedsides. I've deceived, in all innocence, more than one noble heart. I was so miserable at being repelled by you I was always terrified at the thought of forcing another to undergo such torture. That is the sole motive for many an adventure that has been attributed to a pure spirit of licentiousness! I! Licentious! O world! If you knew, Théodore, how deeply painful it is to feel one has missed out on life, on happiness; to find that everyone misunderstands you, and that it's impossible to alter the opinion that others have of you; that your finest qualities are deemed faults, your purest essence a fatal poison; that only the ill in you has breathed from your lips; to have found the door always open to your vices, and forever closed to your virtues; and to have failed to bring good, among so many hemlocks and aconites, to a single lily or a single rose! This you have not known, Théodore.'

Théodore. — 'Alas! Alas! That tale, Rosette, is everyone's story; the best part of us is that which remains within, and which we cannot display. Poets know that same. Their most beautiful poem is the one they have not yet written; and they bear more poems away in the coffin than they leave in the library.'

Rosette. — 'I will bear away my poem with me.'

Théodore. — 'And I, mine. Who has not composed one in their life? Who is so happy or unhappy as not to have created theirs in their mind, or heart? Perhaps even executioners have dreamed poems moistened by the sweetest most sensitive tears; perhaps the poets have fashioned some suitable even for executioners, crimson and monstrous'

Rosette. — 'Yes. White roses should be placed on my grave. I have had ten lovers, but am a virgin still, and will die a virgin. Many virgins, on whose graves jasmine and orange perpetually snow their blossoms, were in truth Messalinas.'

Théodore. — 'I know your worth, Rosette.'

Rosette. — 'You alone in the world have perceived what I am; for you have seen me in the light of a love that is deep and true, since hope is absent; and he who has not seen a woman when she's in love cannot say what she is; that is what consoles me in my bitterness.'

Théodore. — 'And what does this young man think of you, who, in the eyes of the world, is now your lover?'

Rosette. — 'A lover's thoughts are a chasm deeper than the Bay of Portugal, and it's hard indeed to say what lies in the depths of a man's mind; a sounding line could be fixed to a rope a hundred thousand fathoms long, and it would be uncoiled to the end, and paid out, without encountering anything solid. However, I have sometimes touched the bed of this one of mine in a few places, and the lead has sometimes returned me mud, sometimes lovely sea-shells, but most often mud and bits of coral mixed together. As for his opinion of me, it has varied greatly; he began where others end, by despising me; young people with lively imaginations are subject to such a thing. There is always a violent stumble at the first step they take; their passage from fantasy to reality cannot be undertaken without a jolt.

He despised me, while I amused him; now he esteems me, and I bore him. In the early days, he saw only my banal side, and I think the certainty of not meeting with resistance had much to do with his determination. He seemed immensely eager for an affair, and I thought it at first one of those outpourings from a heart which only seeks to overflow, one of those vague loves one has in one's youth, in the month of May, and which in the absence of a woman lead a lad to clasp the trunks of trees in his arms, and kiss the grass and the flowers of the meadow. But it was not that; he only travelled via myself, to arrive at something else. I was a path for him, not his goal.

Beneath the fresh look of his twenty years, beneath the first down of adolescence, hid a deep corruption. He was stung to the heart; here was a fruit full of nothing but ashes. In that young and vigorous body stirred a soul as old as Saturn's, a soul as incurably unhappy as ever has been. I confess to you, Théodore, I was frightened and almost dizzied as I bent over those dark living depths. Your pain and mine are nothing compared to that. If I had loved him more intensely still, I might have killed him. Something not of this world nor in this world attracts him, calls to him irresistibly, and he can find no rest day or night; and, like a heliotrope in a cavern, he twists and turns towards the hidden sun. He is one of those men whose soul was not dipped enough in the waters of Lethe before being bound to his body, and who retains from the heaven from which he came reminiscences of eternal beauty which work in him and torment him; one who remembers that he once had wings, and now has only feet. If I were God, I would deprive of poetry, for all

eternity, the angel guilty of such negligence. Instead of requiring a castle of brightly coloured cards to be built to house a fair young product of fantasy for a single Spring, a ziggurat higher than the eight-stepped temple of Belus needed to be raised. I was not strong enough, I feigned not to have understood him, and I let him crawl on his wings, and seek a summit from which he could launch himself into the immense void.

He thinks I saw none of this, because I lent myself to all his whims without seeming to divine their purpose.

Not being able to cure him, for which I expect one day to be held accountable before God, I wished to give him at least the happiness of believing that he was passionately loved. The pity and interest he aroused in me was enough to allow me to adopt a ready tone and manner tender enough to deceive him. I played my part like a consummate actress; I was teasing, melancholic, sensitive, voluptuous; I feigned anxiety and jealousy; I shed false tears, and summoned to my lips a host of artificial smiles. I adorned the mannequin of love I made of myself, with the most brilliant fabrics; I had it walk the paths of my parks; I invited all my birds to sing as it passed, and all my flowers, my dahlias and nightshades, to bow their heads; I had it cross my lake on the silver back of my beloved swan; I hid myself within, and lent it my voice, my wit, my beauty, my youth, and gave it an appearance so seductive that the reality was inferior to the illusion. When the time comes to smash the hollow statue to pieces, I will do it in such a way that he will believe all the fault on my side, and so spare him the remorse. It is I who must burst the balloon and let the air escape. Is this not holy prostitution, and an honourable deception? I keep, in a crystal urn, liquid tears, caught at the very moment they were about to fall. Here is the urn, these are my diamonds, and I will present them to the angel who will gather me to God'.

Théodore. — 'They are the most beautiful that a woman's neck can bear. A queen's glittering finery is not their equal. For my part, I think that what the Magdalene poured over Christ's feet were the ancient tears of those she had consoled, and that the road to Compostela is moistened with such, and not, as has been claimed, with drops of Juno's milk (*The mythical origin of the Milky Way, for which El Camino de Santiago, the pilgrim route to Compostela de Santiago, is the Spanish name*). Who will do for you, what you have done for him?'

Rosette. — 'No one, alas, since you cannot!'

Théodore. — Oh, my dear! If only I could! But do not lose hope. You are still young and beautiful. You have many an avenue of lime trees and flowering acacias to traverse before you reach that muddy road, lined with box-hedges and leafless trees, which leads from the porphyry tomb in which your lovely past years will rest, to the tomb of rough stone, coated with moss, in which they will hasten to bury the remains of all that was you, along with the days that comprised your wrinkled, tottering old age. You still have much of the mountain of life to climb, and it will be long before you reach the snow-covered zone. You are merely in the region of aromatic plants, of limpid waterfalls over each of which the tricoloured arch of a rainbow is suspended, of beautiful holm-oaks and fragrant larch-trees. Climb a little higher, and, amidst the wider scene unfolding at your feet, you may see bluish smoke rising above the roof of that house where he, who is destined to love you, dwells. We should not despair of life too soon since fate may reveal a perspective we failed to anticipate. I have often thought the life of a human being is akin to ascending the spiral staircase inside a Gothic tower. The long granite serpent twists its coils amidst the darkness, of

which each scale is a step. After a few convolutions, the little daylight that shone from the doorway fails. The shadows of those houses whose height you have not yet surpassed prevent the air-vents admitting the sun's rays: the walls are blackened, oozing damp; you seem rather to be descending to a dungeon from which you can never emerge than climbing the turret which, from below, seemed so tall and slender, adorned with stone lace-work as if it were about to leave for the ball. You hesitate whether to ascend higher, the moist darkness weighs on your brow so heavily. The staircase winds again, rising step by step, and windows trace their golden trefoils on the opposite wall more frequently. You view the jagged house-gables, the entablatures' sculptures, the curious shapes of chimneys; a few steps more, and your gaze overlooks the entire town; a forest of needles, spires, and towers bristling on all sides, indented, pierced, perforated, hollow, the daylight shining through their thousand openings. The domes and cupolas are curved like the breasts of a giantess, or the skull of a Titan. The isles of houses and palaces rise in shadowy or luminous levels. A few more steps, and you reach the platform; there you can see, beyond the city walls, the green of crops, blue hills, and white sails on the river's moiré ribbon. Dazzling sunlight bathes you, as the swallows fly to and fro around you, uttering their joyous cries. The distant sound of the city rises, like a friendly murmur or a beehive's buzzing; while all the bell-towers scatter their peals of echoing pearls in the air; the wind brings you the scents of the neighbouring forest and mountain flowers: all is light, harmony, perfume. If your legs had wearied, or discouragement taken you, had you remained seated on a lower step, or descended once more, this spectacle would have been lost to you. Sometimes, however, the tower has only a single opening in the middle or at the summit. The tower of your life is constructed so; well then, it demands a more courageous stubbornness, perseverance armed with fingers equipped to cling, in the shadow, to its projecting stones, so as to reach the shining clover-leaf opening through which sight can escape, and view the landscape below; if every loophole has been filled, or none have been pierced at all, then one must ascend to the summit; and the higher one has risen without glimpsing the view, the more immense the horizon will seem, and the greater your pleasure, and surprise.'

Rosette. — 'Oh Théodore, God grant that I may soon reach that window! I've been climbing that spiral stair in the depths of night for a long while now, but I fear that the opening has been walled up, and I must climb to the summit; and what if the stair with its innumerable steps only ends at a blocked door, or a vault of hewn stone?'

Théodore. — 'Don't say that, Rosette; don't think it. What architect would build a staircase leading nowhere? Why suppose the silent architect of the world more stupid and improvident than an ordinary one? God never errs, and He forgets nothing. One cannot believe He would have amused Himself, to thwart you, by imprisoning you in a long stone stair without exit or opening. Do you expect Him to dispute with poor insects like ourselves our wretched transient happiness on the imperceptible grain, called Earth, that is ours in this vast creation? He would have to possess the ferocity of a tiger or the most severe of judges; and, if we displease Him so much, he need only direct a comet from its course a little, and smother us all in its tail. Think you that God amuses Himself by threading us one by one on a golden pin, as the Emperor Domitian threaded flies? God is no doorkeeper or churchwarden, and, though He is ancient, He is not yet in His dotage. All such petty nastiness is beneath him, and He is not so foolish as to exercise his wit on us, or play tricks to baffle us. Courage, Rosette, courage! If you are hard pressed, stop a moment, and

catch your breath, and then continue your climb: there may be but twenty steps left before reaching the portal from which you shall view your happiness.’

Rosette. — ‘Never! Oh, never! If I reach the summit of the tower, it will be but to throw myself down.’

Théodore. — ‘My poor afflicted one, chase away those sinister ideas which flutter around your head like bats, and cast on your beautiful brow the opaque shade of their wings. If you would have me love you, be happy, don’t weep.’ (*He draws her gently to him and kisses her on the eyes.*)

Rosette. — ‘What a misfortune for me to have known you! And yet, if I had to live it all over again, I would still desire to have done so. Your restraint has been sweeter to me than others’ passion; and, though you have made me suffer greatly, all the pleasure I have had has derived from you; through you, I have glimpsed what I might have been. You have been a ray of light in the night, you have illuminated many a dark place in my soul; you have opened fresh perspectives on my life. To you I owe the knowledge of love; love, that is true, and there is even a profound and melancholy charm in loving without being loved, and a beauty in remembering those who seem to forget us. It is already a happiness to love even when that love is unrequited. Many will die without finding it, and those who love are as often as not those who should be most pitied.’

Théodore. — ‘They suffer and feel their wounds, but at least they live. They hold to something; they have a star around which they gravitate, a pole towards which they may ardently move. They have something to wish for; they can say to themselves: “If I reach it, if I win it, I’ll be happy.” They experience dreadful agony, but in dying they can at least say to themselves: “I died for that.” To die so is to be reborn. The only truly and irreparably unhappy wretches are those who madly embrace the universe entire, those who wish for everything yet desire nothing, those whom the angel or fey, if one descended suddenly and said to them: “Wish for one thing, and you shall have it” would find embarrassed and speechless.’

Rosette. — ‘If the fey arrived, I know very well what I would ask her.’

Théodore. — ‘You do, Rosette, and that is why you are happier than I, for I do not. Many vague desires stir within me, which merge and give birth to others which devour them. My desires are like a flock of birds whirling and fluttering aimlessly; your desire is an eagle with its gaze fixed on the sun, which only the lack of air prevents from rising on outstretched wings. Ah! If I could but know what I need; if the ideal which ever haunts me emerged, clear and exact, from the fog which surrounds it; if the favourable or fateful star appeared in the depths of my sky; if the light which I should follow only shone in the night, whether treacherous will-o’-the-wisp or friendly beacon; if a column of fire marched before me, even though it were through a desert devoid of manna, bare of oases; if I knew where I was going, even if my path ended only at a precipice! I would prefer a senseless, accursed chase through quagmire and thicket, to this absurd, monotonous traipsing. To live like this is to exist like those blindfolded horses, doomed to turn some well-wheel or other, and plod thousands of miles without seeing anything new, or changing place. I’ve been plodding so long the barrel should have surfaced by now.’

Rosette. — ‘You and D’Albert have many points of resemblance, and, when you speak, it sometimes seems to me that it is he who is speaking. I have no doubt, when you know him better, you will become very attached to him; you cannot fail to agree. He is stirred, like you, by aimless

impulses; he loves immensely without knowing what, he would like to climb the heavens, for the Earth seems to him a platform scarcely fit to support his feet, and possesses more pride than Lucifer before his fall.’

Théodore. — ‘I was afraid, at first, that he was one of those poets, like so many who have driven poetry from the world, a threader of strings of false pearls who sees in this world only the last syllables of words, and who, once he has rhymed ‘night’ with ‘flight’, ‘soul’ with ‘whole’, and ‘God’ with ‘rod’, conscientiously crosses his arms and legs, and allows the spheres to complete their revolutions.’

Rosette. — ‘He is not one of those. His verses are less than he is, and fail to contain him. One would gain a very false idea of his person from his work so far; his true poem is himself, and I know not if he will ever write another.’

He has deep within his soul a seraglio of beautiful ideas, which he surrounds with a triple wall, and of which he is more jealous than ever a Sultan was of his odalisques. He only employs in his verse those which he cares little for, or which he is repelled by; it is the exit through which he ejects them, and the world sees only what he no longer desires.’

Théodore. — ‘I understand both the jealousy and the modesty. Similarly, many people only admit the love they once possessed when they no longer possess it, and their mistresses only once the latter are dead.’

Rosette. — ‘It is so difficult to keep something one’s own in this world! Every flame attracts so many moths, every treasure so many thieves! I love those silent folk who bear their thoughts to their grave, not wishing to deliver them to the foul embrace and shameless handling of the crowd. I prefer those lovers who fail to carve the name of their mistress on trees, or confide it to the air, and who are pursued by the fear that, asleep, some dream will make them pronounce it. I am one of their number; I have not spoken my thoughts, and no one will know of my love... But now it is almost eleven, my dear Théodore, and I’m preventing you from taking the rest you must need. When I’m obliged to leave you, I always feel a pain in my heart, as if I’ll not see you again. I linger as long as I can; but must leave in the end. Come now, farewell; I am afraid that D’Albert will seek me; farewell, my friend.’

Théodore put his arm round her waist, and led her to the door: there he halted, following her for a long time with his eyes; the corridor was pierced here and there with small windows with narrow panes, through which the moon shone, enchantingly, creating alternating patches of light and shade. As she passed each window, Rosette’s clear white form gleamed like a silvery phantom; then faded away to reappear less brightly a little further on; finally, it disappeared entirely.

Théodore, as if lost in deep thought, remained motionless for a few minutes with his arms crossed, then he passed his hand over his forehead, and tossed his hair back with a movement of his head, re-entered the room, and retired to bed after kissing the page, who was still asleep, on the brow.

Chapter 7: The Story Continued

As soon as it was light, D'Albert announced himself at Rosette's with unusual eagerness. — 'Here you are,' cried Rosette, 'And very early, I may say, for one who never arrives early. To reward you for your gallantry, I give you my hand to kiss.' And she proffered, from beneath the Flanders sheet trimmed with lace, the prettiest little hand ever seen at the end of a smooth, round arm.

D'Albert kissed her without compunction: — 'And the other, its sister, shall I not kiss that too?' — 'Lord, yes! Nothing's denied you. I'm in my Sunday mood today; look.' And she proffered her other hand tapping him lightly on the mouth: 'Am I not the most accommodating woman in the world?'

— 'You are grace itself, and white marble temples should be built to you amidst groves of myrtle. Truly, I fear that what happened to Psyche will happen to you; Venus will become jealous,' said D'Albert, joining her two lovely hands and raising them together to his lips.

— 'You uttered all that in a single breath, as if it were a phrase you'd learned by heart,' said Rosette, with a delightful little pout.

— 'Not at all: you are well worth a phrase being turned expressly for you, and were made to gather virgin roses to the sound of madrigals,' replied D'Albert.

— 'Oh, really! What has roused you today? Are you ill, that you appear so gallant? I fear you're dying. Surely you know that when someone suddenly changes character for no apparent reason, it's a dark omen? Now, it is noted, by all the women who have taken the trouble to love you, that you're usually very gloomy, while it's no less certain that you are extremely charming at this moment, and quite inexplicably amiable. There, truly, I find you pale, my poor D'Albert: give me your wrist, so I can feel your pulse,' and she rolled up his sleeve, and counted the pulses with comic gravity. 'No, you are fine, without the slightest symptom of fever. So, I must be madly pretty this morning! Go and fetch my mirror, so I can see whether your gallantry is in error or no.'

D'Albert retrieved a small mirror from her dressing-table and placed it on the bed.

— 'In fact,' said Rosette, 'you are not entirely wrong. Why don't you write a sonnet about my eyes, Sir Poet? You've no reason not to. See, how unhappy I am! To possess eyes like these, and a poet like you, and lack sonnets, as if one squinted and had a mere porter for a lover! You don't love me, sir; you've never even written an acrostic sonnet to me. And my mouth, how do you like it? Yet I've kissed you with this mouth, and perhaps will kiss you again, my dark and handsome one; though in truth it's a favour of which you're hardly worthy. I do not mean today however; today you're fit for everything and, not to always talk of myself, you appear, this morning, to be of unparalleled beauty and freshness, you have the air of a brother of Aurora; and, though it's barely day, are already festooned and adorned as if for a ball. Do you have designs on me, perchance? Are you plotting an attack on my virtue? Would you like to possess me? But I forget: you have and all that's ancient history.'

— 'Rosette, don't tease like that; you know very well I love you.'

— 'That's as may be. I'm not sure of it; are you?'

— 'Perfectly, and to such an extent that if you'd be so kind as to defend the door, I'll seek to demonstrate it to you, and, I dare to flatter myself, in a winning manner.'

— ‘As for that, no: however much I might need to be convinced, the door shall stay open; I’m too pretty to be shut behind closed doors; the sun shines for all, and my beauty will shine like the sun, if that sits well with you.’

— ‘Upon my honour, it sits ill indeed; yet I’ll act as if I found it excellent. I’m your most humble slave, and I lay my wishes at your feet.’

— ‘So much the better; hold to that sentiment, and leave the key in the door of your room this evening.’

The large round face of a smiling African servant, appeared, suddenly, in the doorway: ‘Madame, the Chevalier Théodore de Sérannes, asks to pay his respects, and begs you deign to receive him.’ ‘Let the Chevalier enter,’ said Rosette, pulling the sheet up to her chin.

Théodore went first to Rosette, to whom he made the deepest and most graceful bow, which she returned with a friendly gesture, and then he turned to D’Albert, whom he greeted with a free and courteous air.

— ‘What were you speaking of?’ asked Théodore. ‘Forgive my interrupting your conversation; on a subject of some interest no doubt: please continue, and allow me to participate.’ — ‘No, no!’ replied Rosette with a mischievous smile, ‘We were merely talking business.’

Théodore sat at the foot of Rosette’s bed, since D’Albert had taken his place at her bedside, by right of being the first to have arrived; the pleasant, witty, and most lively conversation meandered for some time from subject to subject, and thus I shall give no account of it; it would lose too much in the transcription. The air, the tone, the fire of the words and gestures, the thousand ways of pronouncing a word, the wittiness, like bubbling foam on a glass of Champagne that sparkles and evaporates on the spot, are things impossible to capture and reproduce. I leave my readers, who will acquit themselves better than I, to fill the gap; let them imagine, here, five or six pages filled with all that is finest and most capriciously, whimsically, interesting, elegant and effervescent. I am more than aware that my ploy is somewhat reminiscent of that of the artist Timanthes, who, despairing of being able to render the figure of Agamemnon to his satisfaction, threw a sheet over its head; but I prefer to be timid rather than imprudent.

It might not be out of place to inquire into the reason for D’Albert having risen so early, and what had spurred him on to arrive at Rosette’s room so promptly, much as if he had still been in love with her. It seems likely he was driven to do so by a pang of hidden, and unacknowledged, jealousy. Assuredly, he now cared little for Rosette, and would even have been glad to be rid of her, but he wished to leave her, and not be left, the latter being something which always wounds a man’s pride deeply, however close to extinction his prior affection might be. Théodore was so fine a gentleman that D’Albert found it hard to witness his appearance without fearing what had, indeed, occurred many times before, that is to say, that all eyes would turn in Théodore’s direction, and hearts would follow eyes. Strangely enough, though the latter had won many a woman over, none of their lovers had retained that enduring sense of resentment one usually feels against someone by whom one has been supplanted. There was, in his every manner, such a winning charm, such natural grace, something so sweet and yet so proud that even men were sensitive to it.

D'Albert, who had arrived at Rosette's with the desire to speak most sharply to Théodore, if he were to meet him there, was surprised not to feel the least twitch of anger in his presence, and to have yielded so easily to the advances the latter made. At the end of half an hour, you'd have thought them childhood friends, and yet D'Albert was inwardly convinced that, if ever Rosette was to fall in love, it would be with this man, and he had every reason to be jealous, as regards the future at least, since he suspected nothing at present. What would he have thought if he had seen the fair one in her white dressing gown slip, like a moth in a moonbeam, into the handsome young man's room, and not leave till three or four hours later while taking many a precaution? He might, in truth, have believed himself more unhappy than he was, for one rarely finds a pretty and amorous woman leaving the room of a no less handsome gentleman exactly as she has entered it.

Rosette listened to Théodore with great attention, as one listens to one's beloved; yet what he said was so amusing and varied that her degree of attention was wholly natural and readily explicable. So D'Albert took no offense. Théodore's tone toward Rosette was polite and friendly, but nothing more.

— 'What shall we do today, Théodore?' said Rosette. Shall we go for a sail? What think you? Or shall we go hunting?' — 'Let's hunt,' she replied, 'that's less melancholy than gliding over the water side by side with some idle swan, parting the water lilies to left and right. Do you not agree, D'Albert?' — 'I'd rather lounge in a boat on the river,' D'Albert answered her 'than gallop madly in pursuit of some poor wild creature; but wherever you go, I'll go. It's simply a matter of permitting Madame Rosette to leave her bed, now, and attire herself in suitable style.' Rosette nodded her assent, and rang for someone to help her dress, while the other two went off arm in arm. One might have rightly conjectured, seeing them so well matched, that one was the titular lover and the other the beloved, of the same woman.

Soon all was ready. D'Albert and Théodore were already seated on horseback in the inner courtyard, when Rosette, dressed as an Amazon, appeared on the top step of the porch. In hunting costume, she displayed a light-hearted, deliberate air that could not have suited her better: she mounted with her usual agility, and gave her horse a tap with the whip-handle that seemed like a caress. D'Albert spurred forward, and soon was beside her. Théodore let them advance a little, being sure to catch up as soon as he wished. He seemed to be waiting for something, and often turned towards the castle. — 'Théodore! Théodore! Hasten! Is that steed of yours made of wood?' Rosette cried.

Théodore put his mount to the gallop for a while, and reduced the distance between them, without however closing the gap. He looked again towards the castle, which would soon be lost from sight; a small whirlwind of dust, in which something barely discernible was stirring vigorously, appeared at the end of the track. In a few moments the whirlwind was beside Théodore, and revealed, on settling, like the classical clouds in the Iliad, the fresh and rosy face of the mysterious page. — 'Théodore, hasten!' cried Rosette a second time, 'Spur your tortoise a little, and ride beside us.'

Théodore's mount was pawing and rearing impatiently. He loosened the reins, and in a short while had overtaken Albert and Rosette by several yards. 'Whoever loves me, follow me,' cried Théodore, and attempted a four feet high fence. 'What, Sir Poet,' he called, once he was over,

‘won’t you leap? Poets’ mounts are winged, they say.’ — ‘Well, I myself would rather go round,’ replied D’Albert, smiling; I’ve only one head to break, after all. If I’d several, I’d try.’

— ‘No one loves me, then, since no one follows,’ said Théodore, the curved corners of his mouth tightening even more than usual. The little page raised his large blue eyes, regarded him with a reproachful air, and clapped his two heels to his horse’s belly. The horse made a prodigious leap. — ‘Yes!’ cried Théodore, ‘Up and over!’ Rosette cast a strange look at the lad and blushed to the eyes; then, giving her mare a furious blow of the whip, she leapt the apple-green wooden fence which barred the path. — ‘And I, Théodore, think you I don’t love you, now?’

The page gave her a surreptitious sideways glance, and drew close to Théodore. D’Albert who was already in the depths of the ride, saw none of this; indeed, since time immemorial, fathers, husbands and lovers have possessed the privilege of seeing nothing.

— ‘Isnabel (*the name of the page, and an anagram of the epithet ‘Lesbian’*),’ cried Théodore, ‘you are a madman, and you, Rosette, a madwoman! ‘Isnabel, you took too few strides, and you, Rosette, you almost caught your dress on the post. You could have killed yourself.’ ‘What matter?’ replied Rosette, in a tone of voice so sad and melancholy that Isnabel forgave her for having jumped the barrier too.

They rode at walking pace for some time, and arrived at a circle, where the pack and the huntsmen were to be found. Six branched archways, piercing the dense trees, led to a small hexagonal stone tower on each of which was engraved the name of the track that ended there. The trees were so tall they seemed as if carding the patches of woolly cloud that a fairly brisk breeze floated above their crowns, while dense high grass, and well-nigh impenetrable bushes offered prey a retreat and defence, such that the hunt promised of success. It was a true forest of times past, with ancient oaks far more than a century old, such as one no longer sees, now that trees are rarely planted, and people lack the patience to wait for those that are planted to grow; a hereditary forest, established by great-grandfathers for their great-grandsons, and maintained by them for their great-grandsons in turn, with alleys of prodigious width, an obelisk surmounted by a ball, a fountain bordered by rocks, and an obligatory pond; one guarded in far-off days by men in powdered wigs, leather breeches of yellow hue, and sky-blue coats; one of those dense, dark forests against which the satiny white rumps of those great horses Philips Wouwerman painted stand out admirably, and the broad covers of those hunting-horns à la Dampierre (*designed by Marc-Antoine de Dampierre, c1723*), which Joseph Parrocel loves to delineate on huntsmen’s backs. A multitude of curving hounds’ tails, like crescents or billhooks, were wagging in a dusty cloud. The signal was given, the hounds, straining at their leads as if they would strangle each other, were freed, and the hunt began. I will not describe the deer’s twists and turns through the forest precisely; I am even unsure whether or not it was a stag of ten points, and, despite the information I’ve gathered, am still uncertain, which is truly distressing. Nonetheless, I think that in such a noble, ancient, and shadowy forest, there can only be ten-tined stags, and see no reason why the one after which the four principal characters of my illustrious romance galloped, on horses of different colours, and unequal pace, should not have been one.

The stag ran true, while the fifty hounds at its heels were no small spur to its natural speed. The race was so swift that only a few rare yelps were heard.



View of the château de Vincennes or The Departure of Louis XIV for the hunt
Adam-François van der Meulen

[Artvee](#)

Théodore, as the best mounted and the finer horseman, spurred hot on the heels of the pack with incredible ardour. D'Albert followed close behind him. Rosette and the little page, Isnabel, followed, separated by a gap that increased by the minute, which was soon large enough that there was no hope of the group reforming.

— 'Shall we halt for a moment,' asked Rosette, 'to let the horses breathe? The hunt is heading towards the pond, and I know an alley by which we can arrive at the same time as they do.'

Isnabel tugged on the bridle of his little mountain pony, which lowered its head, shaking its fulsome mane over its eyes, and began to paw the sand with its hooves. The little horse formed the most perfect contrast with Rosette's; the former was black as night, the latter satin white: the one was all shaggy and dishevelled; the other's mane was plaited with blue ribbon, and its tail was combed and curled. The latter looked like a unicorn, and the former like an untrimmed poodle.

The same antithetical difference was as noticeable in the riders as in their mounts. Rosette's hair was as black as Isnabel's was blonde; her eyebrows were clearly marked and apparent; those of the page had little more colour than his skin, and resembled the down of a peach. Rosette's complexion was bright and clear as the light of noon; the complexion of the other had the blush and transparency of the breaking dawn.

— ‘Shall we try to overtake the rest?’ said Isnabel to Rosette, ‘The horses have had time to catch their breath.’

— ‘On, then!’ replied the pretty Amazon, and they galloped down a narrow side-alley that led to the pond; the two mounts ran abreast, occupying well-nigh the whole width.

On Isnabel’s side, a twisted and gnarled tree thrust out a thick branch like an arm, seeming to shake its fist at the riders. The lad failed to see it. — ‘Take care!’ cried Rosette, ‘Lie flat! You’ll be unseated.’

Her warning was uttered too late; the branch struck Isnabel in the middle of his body. The violence of the blow made him lose his stirrups, and, given his horse continued to gallop and the branch was unbending, he found himself lifted from the saddle, and hurled backward fiercely. The lad fainted instantly. Rosette, fearful, threw herself from her horse, and ran to the page, who showed no sign of life.

His hat had flown off, and his beautiful blond hair streamed everywhere, scattering over the sand. His small unclenched hands seemed as if made of wax, they were so pale: Rosette knelt beside him and tried to revive him. She had neither smelling-salts nor water-flask with her, and her embarrassment was great. Finally, she noticed a deep rut in which clear rainwater had collected; she dipped her fingers, to the great fright of a little frog, the naiad of this runnel, and shook a few drops onto the young page’s bluish temples. He seemed not to feel them, and beads of water rolled down his white cheeks like a sylph’s tears down a lily leaf. Rosette, thinking his clothes might be bothering him, unbuckled his belt, undid the buttons of his jerkin, and opened his shirt so that he might breathe more freely. What she then found, would have surprised a man most agreeably, but seemed to give her little pleasure, for her eyebrows drew together, and her upper lip trembled slightly, that is to say, she had revealed a pure white throat and breasts, still barely rounded, but with admirable promise, and already offering much; smooth, rounded, ‘ivory’ breasts, to speak like one of Ronsard’s disciples, delightful to view, and yet more delightful to kiss. ‘A girl!’ she cried, ‘A girl! Oh! Théodore!’

Isnabel, for I retain that name for her, though it was not her own, began to breathe a little, and raised her long eyelids languidly; she was not injured in any way, but only dazed. She soon sat straight, and, with Rosette’s help, was able to rise to her feet and remount her horse, which had stopped as soon as it no longer felt the weight of its rider.

They walked on slowly to the pond, where the pair found the rest of the hunt. Rosette told Théodore, in a few words, what had happened. Théodore changed colour several times during Rosette’s story, and all the rest of the way rode his mount beside Isnabel’s.

They returned to the château early! The day, which had begun so joyfully, ended rather sadly. Rosette was dreamy, and D’Albert also seemed deep in thought. The reader will soon learn the reason why.

Chapter 8: D’Albert to Silvio

No, my dear Silvio, no, I have not forgotten you. I am not one of those who pass through life without ever looking back; my past remains with me, and encroaches on my present, and well-nigh my future too. Your friendship is one of the sunlit spaces that stand forth most clearly on the already darkening horizon of my latter years; often, from the heights where I stand, I turn to contemplate our friendship with a feeling of ineffable melancholy. Oh, how beautiful the weather was, then! How angelically pure we were! Our feet scarcely touched the earth; we had as it were wings on our shoulders, our passions lifted us, and the spring breeze set trembling the fine halos of adolescence about our brows.

Do you remember that little island planted with poplars at that point where the river branches? To reach it, one was obliged to traverse a long narrow plank, which bent fearfully in the middle; a real goats' bridge, which in fact was hardly used by any other creatures: it was delightful. A dense lawn of short grasses, where blue forget-me-nots opened their pretty little yellow, dark-pupiled eyes; a straw-coloured path like a strip of nankeen, providing a belt for the island's green dress and cinching its waist; and the ever-changing shadows of the aspens and poplars were not the least charms of that paradise. Large pieces of linen which the local women sold were spread there to whiten in the dew; they were like squares of snow. And that little girl, brown and tanned, her large wild eyes shining with such lively brilliance beneath her long tresses, who chased after the goats, scolding them and waving her willow-wand, when they tried to cross the linen in her care. Do you remember her? And those sulphur-yellow butterflies, with their faltering, tremulous flight, and the kingfisher we tried to catch so many times, whose burrow was between the roots of those alders? And those slopes to the river with their rough-cut steps, their posts and stakes all green at the base, and almost always covered by a tangle of plants and branches? How limpid and shimmering the water was! How golden the gravel bed it revealed! And what pleasure we found, seated on the river-bank, feet dangling! The water lilies, their gilded flowers gracefully unfurling, looked like green tresses flowing over the agate-patterned back of a bathing nymph. The sky gazed at itself in that mirror. Its smiling azures and transparent pearly greys could not have been more ravishing; and, at all hours of the day it displayed sheets of turquoise, clouds like cotton-wool or rippling seascapes, in inexhaustible variety. How I loved the squadrons of mallards with emerald heads and necks, sailing incessantly from one shore to the other, wrinkling the pure and ice-cold surface!

How well suited we were to figure in that landscape! How we fled to Nature, so gentle and restful, and how easily we felt ourselves in harmony with her! Spring without, youth within, light on the lawns, smiles on our lips, snowy flowers on every bush, white phantoms blossoming in our souls, modest blushes on our cheeks and on the sweetbriars, poetry alive in our hearts, songbirds chirping amongst the bright leaves, pigeons cooing, scents rising, a thousand confused murmurs, our hearts beating, water stirring the pebbles, blades of grass flickering, thoughts stirring, a droplet rolling from some flowery chalice, a tear overflowing an eyelid, a sigh of friendship, a rustling of leaves... what evenings we spent there walking slowly, so close to the shore that often we walked with one foot on shore and the other in the flow.

Alas! That scene failed to last, at least for me. As for you, in acquiring mature knowledge, you yet knew how to retain a child's candour. The germ of corruption within me developed swiftly, and its gangrene mercilessly consumed all that was pure and healthy. The only good thing that remained was our friendship.

I am accustomed to hiding nothing from you, neither actions nor thoughts. I have laid bare the most secret fibres of my heart; however strange, however ridiculous, however eccentric the movements of my soul, I describe them to you; but, in truth, those I have been experiencing, for a while now, are of such strangeness that I hardly dare admit to them myself. I have told you, somewhere, that I was afraid, by dint of seeking the beautiful and of struggling to realise it, of falling in the end into the unachievable or the monstrous. I have almost reached that point. When will I escape from these fierce conflicting currents that drag me left and right? When will my vessel cease to shudder beneath my feet, driven on, as it is, by the stormy waves? Where shall I find harbour, drop anchor, and attain an unshakeable shore beyond the reach of the waves, where I can dry my body, and wring the foam from my hair?

You know with what ardour I have sought physical beauty, what importance I attach to outward form, and how deep a love I feel for the visible world: it must be that I am too corrupt, too jaded, to believe in moral beauty, or pursue it with any consistency. I have lost all knowledge of good and evil, utterly, and, in my depravity, have well-nigh returned to the state of ignorance of a savage or a child. In truth, nothing appears praiseworthy or blameworthy to me, and the strangest actions surprise me but little. My conscience is deaf and mute. Adultery seems to me the most innocent thing in the world; I find it unsurprising that a young girl should prostitute herself; it seems to me I could betray my friends without the least remorse, and possess not the slightest scruple about pushing whoever troubles me from the cliff, if I were walking with them along its brink. I could watch the most atrocious murders in cold blood, and there is even something in the sufferings and misfortunes of humanity that does not displease me. I feel, when I see some calamity fall upon the world, the same feeling of bitter and acrid pleasure that one feels when one finally takes revenge for an old insult.

O world, what have you done to me that I hate you so? What has roused me so against you? What did I expect of you that I should bear such resentment for your having deceived me? What high hope have you dashed? What eagle's wings of mine have you clipped? What doors are you supposed to have opened that remain closed, and which of us has failed the other?

Nothing touches me, nothing moves me. I no longer feel, on hearing the tale of heroic deeds, those sublime tremors which formerly coursed through me from head to foot. All that even seems somewhat foolish to me. No voice is profound enough to tighten the slackened fibres of my heart, and make them quiver. I see human tears flow with the same casual air as I observe the rain, unless that is they appear beautiful, the light is reflected from them in a picturesque manner, and they run down a lovely cheek. It is only the animal kingdom for which I have a small remnant of pity. I would happily let a peasant or a servant be beaten, yet could not, with any degree of patience, endure the same being done to a horse or a dog, in my presence; and yet I am not wicked, I have not harmed a single person in the world, and likely never will; rather I put it down to the indifference, the sovereign contempt, I feel for all who displease me, which prevents my caring about their fate, and would even allow me to harm them. I abhor people en masse, yet, amidst the crowd, I judge only one or two worthy of being especially hated. To hate someone is to concern oneself about them almost as much as if one loved them; it is to distinguish them, to isolate them, from the throng; it is to be aroused because of them; it is to think about them by day, and dream about them by night; it is to bite one's pillow and grind one's teeth at the thought that they exist; what more does one do if one is in love? Would one take as many pains, exercise as much effort,

to please a mistress as one does to destroy an enemy? I doubt it; to hate someone profoundly, one must love another deeply. Every great hatred serves to counterbalance a great love: then whom should I hate, I who love nothing?

My hatred is like my love a confused, general feeling that seeks to grasp something and cannot; I have within me a wealth of love and hatred I know not what to do with, and that weighs me down horribly. If I cannot find a way to pour forth one or the other, or both, I shall burst, like a bag so overstuffed with money it bursts at the seams. Oh! If I could but abhor someone; if one of these stupid dolts among whom I live could only insult me in such a way as to make the ancient viper's blood boil in my icy veins, and stir me from this gloomy drowsiness in which I stagnate; if, only, old witch with quivering head, you would bite me on the cheek with your rat's teeth, and transmit to me your venom and your rage; if only the death of another could grant me life; if only the last heartbeat of some enemy writhing beneath my foot, could send its delicious tremor through my hair, and the smell of his blood seem sweeter to my nostrils than the aroma of flowers; oh, how willingly I would renounce love, and how happy I would think myself!

A deadly embrace, the jaws of a tiger, the grip of a boa-constrictor, the foot of an elephant shattering and compressing a human chest, the pointed tail of a scorpion, the irritant milky juice of the euphorbia, a wavy Javan kriss, a blade that gleams in the night, and bathes in blood, it is you that will replace for me the rose petals, moist kisses, and embraces of love!

I said that I love nothing. Alas! I am afraid now of loving someone. It would be a hundred thousand times better to hate than to love like this! The type of beauty I have dreamed of for so long, I have encountered. I have found the bodily incarnation of my ghost; I have seen it, it has addressed me; I have touched its hand, it exists; it is no chimera. I knew I could not be mistaken, and that my presentiments were never false. Yes, Silvio, I am close to the dream of my life: my room is here, my ideal's is there. From mine, I see those window-curtains and the tremulous light of the lamp. A shadow passed across the curtains but now: in an hour we will dine together.

Those beautiful Turkish eyelids, that clear, deep gaze, that warm pale amber complexion, long lustrous black hair, that proud and refined nose, those delightful slender fingers in the manner of Parmigianino (*Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola*), those delicate contours, that pure oval of a face, which grants a head such elegance and nobility, all that I wished for, all that I would have been happy to find scattered among five or six women, I find united in a single person!

What I adore most of all things in the world is a lovely hand. If you could see those! What perfection! How perfectly white! What softness of skin! How warm and moist! How admirably tapered the fingertips! How clearly outlined the fingernails! What polish; what brilliance! They look like the inner petals of a rose. The hands of Anne of Austria, so praised, so celebrated, compared to these, were only those of a goose-girl, or a washerwoman. And then what grace, what art, the slightest movements of that hand reveal! How delightfully the little finger bends and stands a little apart from its longer companions! The thought of that hand drives me mad, and makes my lips shudder and burn. I close my eyes so as to see it no more, but, with the tips of those delicate fingers, it seizes my eyelashes and opens my eyelids, causing a thousand visions of ivory and snow to pass before me.

Ah! Doubtless Satan's claw has gloved itself in that satin skin and some mocking demon toys with me; there is enchantment here. It is all too monstrously impossible.

That hand... I shall travel to Italy to view the paintings of the great masters, to study, compare, draw, and become an artist in the end, so as to be able to render that hand as it is, as I see it, feel it; perhaps it will be a way to rid myself of my species of obsession.

I desired beauty; I knew not for what I asked. Such a desire seeks to look full gaze at the sun, to touch its fire. I suffer horribly. Not being able to assimilate such perfection, not being able to sink within it, and feel it pass into myself, having no means of rendering or touching it! When I see something beautiful, I long to clasp it with all of myself, everywhere, at the same instant. I would like to sing and paint it, sculpt it, and write of it, and be loved by it as I love; I long for what cannot be, and could never be.

Your letter did me ill, a great ill, if I say so myself. All the peace and happiness you enjoy, those walks in the autumnal woods, these long conversations, so tender and intimate, that end with a chaste kiss on the forehead; that serene and secluded life; those days so quickly passed that night seems to draw towards you, make the inward agitation, with which I live, seem even more tempestuous. Then, you are to be married in two months; all obstacles are removed, you are sure now of belonging to each other forever. Your present happiness is increased by the thought of happiness to come. You are happy, and certain of soon being happier still. What a destiny is yours! Your friend is beautiful, but what you love in her is not a dead, palpable beauty, a merely material beauty, it is invisible and eternal beauty, the beauty that does not age, a beauty of the soul. She is full of grace and candour; she loves you as such souls know how to love. You do not seek to know if the gold of her hair is close in tone to that painted by Rubens or Giorgione; it pleases you, because it is hers. I would wager, happy lover that you are, that you are even unaware of whether your mistress is of the Greek or Asiatic, English or Italian type. Oh, Silvio! How rare are those hearts content with love pure and simple, who desire neither a hermitage in the depths of some forest, nor a garden on an isle in Lake Maggiore.

Had I the courage to tear myself away from here, I would visit, and spend a month with you; perhaps I might purify my spirit amidst the air you breathe, perhaps the shadows over your paths would with their freshness ease my burning brow a little; but no, yours is a paradise in which I must not set foot. I should scarcely be allowed to gaze from afar, over its wall, at the two beautiful angels walking hand in hand there, eyes locked together. The Devil may only enter Eden in serpent form, and, dear Adam of mine, for all the happiness of heaven, I would not want to play serpent to your Eve.

What terrible thoughts have been passing through my mind these last days? What has turned my blood to venom? Monstrous thoughts, spreading your pale green branches, and your hemlock flowers, amidst the icy shadows about my heart, what poisonous wind has deposited there the germ from which you hatched! So, this was the fate reserved for me, this is where all those so desperately-attempted paths were doomed to end! O destiny, how you mock us! All those eagle-like flights towards the sun, those pure heavenly flames of aspiration, this divine melancholy, this deeply-contained love, this worship of beauty, these curious and elegant fancies, the inexhaustible endlessly-welling flow from the inner fountain, this ecstasy with ever-open wings, this reverie blossoming more fully than hawthorns in May? All the poetry of my youth, all my gifts so fine and rare, served only, it seems, to place me in the lowest ranks of mankind!

I sought to love. I ran about like a madman summoning and invoking love; I writhed with rage at my feelings of impotence, my blood inflamed; I dragged my body through the mires of pleasure; I pressed against my arid heart, to the point of suffocation, a woman who was young and beautiful, and who loved me; I chased the passion that fled from me. I prostituted myself, like a virgin haunting some den in the hope of finding a lover among those whom debauchery has driven there, instead of waiting, patiently, in discreet and silent shadow, for the angel, whom God had reserved for me, to appear in a radiant half-light, with a heavenly flower in her hand. All the years I have wasted in childish agitation, running here and there, trying to take Nature and Time by force, I should have spent in solitude and meditation, in seeking to make myself worthy of being loved; that would, indeed, have been wise; but scales were over my eyes, and I walking straight towards the precipice. One foot is already dangling over the void, and I believe that it will soon be joined by the other. I have resisted, in vain, I feel; I must plunge into the depths of this fresh abyss that has opened within me.

Yes, this is indeed how I imagined love to be. I feel, now, all I have dreamed. Yes, here indeed occur the delightful yet terrible passages of insomnia amidst which roses seem thistles, and thistles roses; here indeed are the sweet pain and wretched happiness, the ineffable tremors, that surround you with a golden cloud, and make the form of objects tremble as if you were intoxicated; that buzzing in the ears in which the last syllable of the beloved name ever sounds, the pallor, the blushes, the sudden frissons, the burning and icy sweat: this is love indeed; the poets do not lie.

When I am about to enter the drawing-room where we usually meet, my heart beats with such violence that one can almost see it through my clothes, and I am obliged to compress it with both hands, for fear it might escape. If I see him at the end of a path, in the park, the distance between us vanishes, and I know not whither the path leads: the Devil must bring us closer, or I must have wings. Nothing can distract me from him: I read, and his image interposes itself between the book and my eyes; I mount my horse, I course at full gallop, thinking I feel in the whirlwind his long hair always mingling with mine, and hear his hurried breathing and his warm breath brushing my cheek. His image obsesses me and follows me everywhere, and I never see it more than when I do not.

You pitied me for not loving, now pity me for doing so, and especially for loving whom I love. What misfortune, what a blow of the axe against one whose life is already so fragmented! What insane, odious, and guilty passion has seized me! The blush of shame will never fade from my brow. This is the most deplorable of all my aberrations. I can make nothing of it, I understand nothing, everything in me is confused and overturned; I no longer know who I am, or what others are. I even doubt whether I am male or female. I feel horror at myself. I experience singular, inexplicable agitations, and there are moments when it seems my reason is leaving me, and the feeling that I exist deserts me completely. I lost faith, a while ago, in my surroundings. I listened to myself and observed myself attentively. I sought to unravel the confused skein that entangled my soul. At last, I discovered the awful truth, behind all the veils that concealed it... Silvio, I love... Oh, I cannot speak the words. I love.... a man!

Chapter 9: D'Albert to Silvio

It is true. I love a man, Silvio. I have long sought to delude myself, given a different name to the feeling I experience, clothed it in the garb of a pure and disinterested friendship, and believed it no more than the admiration I feel for all beautiful people and things. For several days I have wandered the treacherous and smiling paths which thread their way about every nascent passion; but I recognise now what a profound and fearful course I have embarked upon. There is no hiding the matter. I have reflected thoroughly; I have weighed all the circumstances coolly; I have accounted for the smallest detail; I have searched my soul in every aspect with the confidence which the habit of studying oneself gives. I blush to think of and write the words; but the thing, alas, is only too certain, I love this young man, not in mere friendship, but with love... yes, love.

You whom I love so much, O Silvio, my good, my only comrade, you have never made me feel anything akin to this, and yet, if there was ever under heaven a close and lively friendship, if ever two souls, though different, understood each other perfectly, our friendship was so, and our two souls thus. What winged hours we have spent together! What endless conversations, ever too soon ended! How many things we confided to each other, that none have before! We each opened to the other that 'window' Momus would have liked to see opened in the human heart (*see 'Aesop's Fables', Perry 100, 'Zeus, Prometheus, Athena and Momus'*) How proud I was to be your friend, I, younger than you, I so mad, you so rational!

What I feel for this young man is unbelievable: never have thoughts of any woman troubled me so singularly. The sound of his voice, so silvery and so clear, agitates my nerves, and arouses me in a strange way; my soul hangs on his lips, like a bee on a flower, to drink the honey of his words. I cannot brush him in passing without shivering from head to toe, and in the evening when, on leaving us, he extends to me his adorable hand so soft and satiny, my life-blood races to the place he has touched, and an hour later I feel the pressure of his fingers, still.

This morning, I observed him for quite a long time without him seeing me. I was hidden behind my curtain. He was at his window, which is exactly opposite mine. That part of the castle was built at the end of Henri IV's reign; it is half brick, half stone, according to the custom of the time; the window is long and narrow, with a lintel and a stone balcony. Théodore, for you have doubtless already guessed that he is the person in question, was leaning in a melancholy fashion against the balustrade, and seemed to be deep in thought. A half-raised drapery of red damask, with large flowers, fell in broad folds behind him, and served as a backcloth. How handsome he looked, and how marvellously his pale brown head was highlighted against its purple hue! Two large locks of hair, black and glossy, like the bunches of grapes in the myth of Erigone, hung, gracefully, down his cheeks, and framed, charmingly, the fine and correct oval of his lovely face. His neck, round and full, was entirely bare, and he wore a kind of dressing-gown with wide sleeves, almost like a woman's dress. He held a yellow tulip in his hand the petals of which he tore at mercilessly in his reverie, and the pieces of which he threw to the breeze.

The light from an angle of wall, illuminated by the sun, was cast across the balcony, and the scene took on a warm, translucent tone that might have made one envy the most light-filled of Giorgione's paintings.

His long hair gently stirred by the breeze, his marble neck uncovered thus, his long robe drawn tightly about his waist, and those beautiful hands, each emerging from its sleeve like the pistil of a

flower from amidst the petals, gave him the air not of the most handsome of men, but of the loveliest of women, and I said to myself in my heart: 'It is a woman, oh, a woman!' Then I remembered suddenly that half-foolish thing I wrote to you long ago, as you will recall, regarding my ideal, and the manner in which I would, assuredly, meet her: the lovely lady, in a park of the days of Louis XIII, the red and white château, the grand terrace, the avenues of ancient chestnut trees, and the encounter at the window. I described all the details to you. Here it was, in reality; for the scene was a precise realisation of my dream. Here, the architecture was indeed in that very same style, and the effects of light, the nature of its beauty, its colour and character, all that I had wished for; it lacked nothing, except that the woman was, instead, a man; but I confess to you that at that moment I entirely forgot the fact.

Théodore must be a woman in disguise; otherwise, the thing is impossible. Such beauty, excessive even for a woman, is not that of a man, were he Antinous, Hadrian's companion, or Alexis, Corydon's beloved in Virgil's *Eclogues* (*see 'Eclogue' 2*). Théodore is a woman, and I am mad to have tormented myself thus. In this manner all is explained in the most natural way in the world, and I am not such a 'monster' as I believed.

Would God grant such long, brown silken fringes to male eyelids? Would he dye an ugly, hairy, limp male mouth with such a vivid, tender carmine hue? Our masculine bones, carved with billhooks, and rudely jointed, are not worthy of being encased in such delicate white flesh; our lumpy skulls are not made to be bathed by waves of such admirable hair.

Oh, Beauty! We were created only to love you, and to adore you on our knees when we find you, or to seek you eternally, throughout this world, if that happiness is not granted us. But to possess you, to embody you ourselves, is possible only to angels and women. Lovers, poets, painters and sculptors, all seek to raise an altar to you: the lover the form of his mistress, the poet his song, the painter his canvas, the sculptor his work in marble; but eternal despair is the lot of those unable to render palpable the beauty they feel, and to be encased in a body that fails to realise the ideal they believe theirs.

I once saw a young man who had stolen from me the form I should have possessed. This scoundrel was made exactly as I would like to have been. He had the beauty I lacked, rendering me ugly, and beside him I seemed a mere sketch. He was my height, but slimmer and stronger; his figure resembled mine, but with an elegance and nobility not mine. His eyes were of a like shade to my own but with a look and a brilliance mine will never own. His nose had been cast from the same mould as mine, except that it seemed to have been retouched by a skilled sculptor's chisel; the nostrils being more open and more passionate, the planes more clearly marked; and had something of a heroic form, which that respectable part of my being is totally devoid of: one would have said that Nature had tried in my person to create that self-perfection, but that I was the shapeless, half-erased, rough draft of that thought of hers, of which he was the copy in beautifully-formed script. When I saw him walk, stop to greet the ladies, sit or lie down with that perfect grace which results from beauty of proportion, I felt a dreadful sadness and pang of jealousy, such as a clay model might feel, cracked and drying obscurely in a corner of the studio, while the proud marble statue, which without it would not exist, stands proudly on its sculpted pedestal, and attracts the attention and praise of visitors. For after all, this fellow is only myself, a little more accomplished, and cast in a less rebellious bronze, which has insinuated itself more precisely into the mould's hollows. I consider him bold in the extreme, strutting about like that in my shape, and

acting with insolence, as if he were an original type: he is, in the end, a mere plagiarist of my form, for I was born before him, and without me Nature would never have thought of creating him as he is. When women praise his good manners and the charms of his person, I wish nothing more than to rise and say: 'You fools, praise me now, for this gentleman is myself, and it was but a detour to transmit to him what was mine by right. At other times I feel the itch to strangle him, and cast his soul from the body that should belong to myself, and I prowls around with tight lips, and clenched fists, like a lord in his palace in which a family of beggars has settled in his absence, and who knows not how to eject them. This young man, moreover, is stupid, yet he succeeds all the more. And there are times when I envy his stupidity more than his beauty. The prophecy in the Gospel (*see Matthew 5:3*) regarding the poor in spirit is not, as it stands, complete: 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven', though of that I know nothing, and it's all the same to me; but assuredly they possess the kingdom of earth, for they possess wealth and lovely women, the only two desirable things, that is to say, in the world. Do you know of a man of any intelligence who is rich, or a lad owning only his heart and a degree of merit who has a passable mistress? So, though Théodore is handsome indeed, I do not seek his beauty, and prefer that he possesses it, rather than myself.

Those amours, strange to us, of which the elegies of the ancient poets are full, which surprised us so much and which we could not ourselves conceive of, are therefore quite likely and possible. In the translations we have done, women's names replace those which are there in the original text. Juventius has changed his ending and become Juventia, Alexis has become Ianthé. The handsome boys have become beautiful girls, and thus we recompose the monstrous seraglios of Catullus, Tibullus, Martial, and noble Virgil. A gallant occupation which only proves how little we have understood ancient genius.

I am a man of Homeric times; the world in which I live is not my own, and I understand nothing of the society that surrounds me. Christ, to me, has not been born; I am as pagan as Alcibiades or Phidias. I have not sought to gather the flowers of passion on Golgotha, nor has the deep river that flows from the side of the crucified one, and forms a red cincture about the world, bathed me with its wave: my rebellious body refuses to recognise the supremacy of the soul, nor will my flesh accept its mortification. I find the Earth as beautiful as the heavens, and I think virtue to be perfection of form. Spirituality is not my choice, I prefer statues to phantoms, and noon to twilight. Three things please me: gold, marble, and purple, that is: brilliance, solidity, colour. My dreams are formed from them, and all the palaces I build for my chimeras are constructed of such materials.

Sometimes my dreams are otherwise. They are of long cavalcades of pure-white horses, free of harness or bridle, ridden by beautiful naked young men, who parade across a ribbon of dark blue as on the Parthenon frieze, or of choirs of young girls adorned with ribbons, clad in straight-pleated tunics, and shaking ivory *sistra*, who wind it seems around the body of an immense vase. I never dream then of mist or fog, never of anything uncertain and wavering. My sky is free of clouds, or, if a few float there, they are solid ones carved with a chisel, formed from shards of marble cut from some statue of Jupiter. Mountains with peaks, and sharp contours, rise, abruptly, on the horizon, and the sun, over one of the highest spires, opens wide its yellow leonine eye, with golden eyelids. The cicadas buzz and sing, sound clicks in my ear; the shadows, defeated, unable to bear the heat, curl up, and gather at the foot of the trees: all is radiant, shines, and gleams. The smallest detail is accentuated, seeming bold and solid; every object takes on robust form and

colour. No room here for the softness and reflection of Christian art. The Classical world is mine. The founts in my landscape fall in sculpted floods, from sculpted urns; and amidst the tall green reeds, as sonorous as those of the River Eurotas, one glimpses the rounded, silvery hip of some naiad with glaucous hair. In the dark oak forest, Diana passes by with her weapons at her back, her scarf flying, clad in boots tied with intertwined bands. She is followed by her pack of hounds, and her nymphs with harmonious names. My pictures are painted in only four tones, like those of primitive artists, and often are only coloured bas-reliefs; for I like to touch with my finger what I have seen, and pursue its rounded contours even in the most fleeting folds; I consider each object from every angle, moving around it, lamp in hand. I consider a lover, in antiquity's light, as a piece of more or less perfect sculpture. How are the arms formed? Rather well. The hands are not lacking in delicacy. What do I think of this foot? I consider the ankle noble, while the heel is commonplace. But the throat is well set, and its shape is good, the serpentine line undulates, the shoulders are full, and beautifully formed. The woman would make a passable model, and one could cast several parts of her. Then, let me love her.



Diana the Huntress
Guillaume Seignac (French, 1870-1924)
[Artvee](#)

You understand; you were once the same. I have a sculptor's, not a lover's, eye for a woman. All my life I have worried about the flask's exterior, and not the quality of its contents. If I had Pandora's box in my hands, I think I would have kept it shut. A moment ago, I said that Christ, to me, has not been born; nor Mary, the star of our modern heaven, sweet mother of the glorious babe.

Long, and often, have I paused beneath the stone foliage of some cathedral, in the trembling light of its stained-glass windows, at the hour when the organ groans of its own accord, as an invisible finger rests on the keys and the wind blows through the instrument's pipes, and have gazed deeply into the pale azure of the Madonna's long-lidded eyes. I have followed, piously, the

contours of her thin, oval face, and the barely indicated arches of her eyebrows, I have admired her smooth, luminous forehead, her chastely translucent temples, her cheekbones shaded in a sober and virginal hue, more tender than peach blossom; I have counted one by one the beautiful golden eyelashes which cast their quivering shadow upon them; I have unravelled, amidst the half-tones which bathe her, the receding lines of her frail, and modestly-inclined, neck; I have even, with daring hand, raised the folds of her tunic and contemplated a virgin breast, unveiled and swollen with milk, which has never been pressed except by divine lips; I have followed the thin blue veins to their most imperceptible ramifications; I have placed my fingers there to make the celestial ambrosia gush forth in streams of white; I have touched with my mouth the bud of the mystical rose.

Yet, I confess, that all that immaterial beauty, so winged and vaporous that one feels it about to take flight, has affected me only a little. I admire a Venus Anadyomene (*see the paintings by Botticelli, Titian et al*), a thousand times more. Those ancient eyes turned up at the corners; those lips so pure, so firmly outlined, so amorously seeking to be kissed; that low, full forehead; that hair tied carelessly behind the head and wavy as the surface of the sea; those firm, glossy shoulders; that back with a thousand charming sinuosities; that slender neck, lightly curved; all those round, taut contours; that width of hip; that delicate strength; that air of superhuman vigour in a body so adorably feminine; all those features ravish and enchant me to a degree of which you, Christian and wise, can form no idea.

Mary, despite the humble air she affects, seems far too proud to me; the tip of her foot, surrounded by white bandages, barely touches the already darkening globe about which the ancient dragon writhes (*see Rubens, 'The Immaculate Conception', in the Prado*). Her eyes are the most beautiful in the world, but they are always turned towards the sky, or lowered; they never look straight ahead, they have never served as a mirror for the human form. And then, I dislike like those halos of smiling cherubs, which often surround her head in a golden mist. I am jealous of those mighty angels, *ephebes* with flowing hair and robes, who flit about so lovingly in her Assumptions. Those hands which intertwine to support her, those wings which flutter to fan her, displease and annoy me. And those little cherubic masters of the sky, so coquettish and so triumphant, in tunics formed of light, in wigs of golden thread, with their beautiful blue and green feathers, seem to me much too gallant, and, if I were God, I would be careful not to allow my mistress such pages.

Venus rises from the sea to draw close to the world, as befits a divinity who loves humankind, completely naked, and alone. She prefers the Earth to Olympus and has more men than gods for lovers: she does not wrap herself in the languid veils of mysticism; she stands upright, her dolphin behind her, her foot on her mother-of-pearl conch; the sun beats on her gleaming belly, and with her white hand she holds the tresses of her beautiful hair in the air, in which old Ocean has sown his most perfect pearls. One can view her complete: she hides nothing, for modesty is made only to clothe the ugly, and is a modern invention, daughter of the Christian contempt for form and matter.

O ancient world! Thus, all that you have revered is despised; your idols are hurled to the dust; lean anchorites dressed in torn rags; martyrs, bloodied, their shoulders lacerated by the lions of your Circuses perch on the pedestals of your beautiful and charming gods. Christ has wrapped the world in his shroud. Beauty itself must blush, and take the veil. Lovely young men, limbs gleaming with oil, who wrestled in the Lyceum or the Gymnasium, beneath the bright sky, at Attica's full

noon, before the wondering crowd; young Spartan girls who danced the *Bibasis*, or raced naked to the summit of Taygetus, take back your tunics and your *chlamys*: your reign is past. And you, carvers of marble, Promethean chasers of bronze, break your chisels: there shall be no more sculptors. The palpable world is dead. Dark and gloomy mind alone fills the immensity of the void. Cleomenes (*sculptor of the Venus de' Medici*), would have had to visit the weavers, discover how linen folds and drapes forms, and clothe his sculptures.

Virginity, you bitter plant, born in a soil soaked in blood, and whose etiolated and sickly flower strives to open in the damp shade of cloisters, beneath a cold lustral rain; scentless rose bristling with thorns, for us you have replaced the beautiful, joyful roses, bathed in nard and Falernian wine, of the dancers of Sybaris!

The ancient world knew you not, unfruitful flower; you were never part of its garlands, full of intoxicating odours; in that sane and vigorous society, you would have been trampled underfoot, disdainfully. Virginity, Mysticism, Melancholy, three names unknown, three new plagues, brought by Christ, pale spectres drowning our world in icy tears, each, elbow on cloud, hand on brow, crying only: 'Death! Death!', you should not have set foot on this Earth peopled so happily, till then, by playful, indulgent gods!

I consider Woman, in the ancient manner, as a lovely slave destined to serve our pleasures. Christianity has not altered her in my eyes. She is still, to me, something alien and inferior that one adores and plays with, a child's toy rattle more intelligent than one made of ivory or gold, which rises again by itself if one lets it fall to the ground. I have been told, because of my views, that I think badly of women; I claim, on the contrary, that holding such an opinion is to think highly of them.

I know not, in truth, why women are so keen to be treated as men. I understand that one might wish to be a boa-constrictor, lion, or elephant; but that one might wish to be a man, that is quite beyond me. If I had been at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) when this important question was being discussed, namely, whether women were to be regarded highly, as men, I would certainly have voted in the negative.

I have written in my life a few love poems, or at least that had the pretension of passing for such. I have recently reread some. The feeling for modern love is completely lacking in them. If they were written in Latin couplets instead of in French rhymes, one might take them for the work of an inferior poet of Augustus' reign. And I am astonished that the women, for whom they were written, instead of being charmed by them, were not deeply angered. It is true that women understand poetry no more than cabbages or roses do, which is unsurprising and extremely logical, they being themselves poetry, or at least the finest instruments of poetry: the flute neither hears nor understands the air that is played upon it.

In my poems, only the gold or ebony of hair, the miraculous smoothness of skin, the roundness of arms, the smallness of feet, the delicate shape of hands are spoken of, and my verses end with a humble supplication to the divinity to grant us as soon as possible the enjoyment of all those beautiful things. In the elevated passages, there are garlands over the threshold, scatterings of flowers, burnt perfumes, a Catullian addition of kisses (*see Catullus Poems' 5*), pale and enchanting nights, quarrels with Aurora, and injunctions to the aforesaid Aurora to return and hide behind old Tithonus' (*her husband's*) saffron curtains; they reveal a brightness without heat, a sonority

lacking vibrancy. They are exact, polished, created to provide a matching level of interest; but, in all their refinement and veiled expressiveness, one divines the curt, harsh voice of a master trying to soften his speech while addressing a slave. They are wholly unlike those erotic poems written since the Christian era commenced, in which one soul asks another for love, because it loves; here are no azure, smiling lakes, inviting the stream to merge with its waters so as to jointly reflect the stars above; here are no pairs of doves opening their wings at the same instant to seek the same nest.

‘Cynthia (*the name of Propertius’ mistress*), you are beautiful; make haste. Who knows if you will still be alive tomorrow? Your hair is blacker than the lustrous skin of an Ethiopian virgin. Make haste. In a few years’ time, thin silver threads will thread these dense tresses; these roses perfumed today, tomorrow will bear the scent of death and be nothing but wrinkled corpses. Let me breathe the roses’ scent while they yet resemble your cheeks; let me kiss your cheeks while they yet resemble the roses. When you are old, Cynthia, no one will desire you, not even the lictor’s servants though you offer to pay them; you will seek the praise you now reject. Wait till Saturn has scored that pure, shining brow with his nails, and you will find your threshold, so besieged now by supplicants, so warm now with tears, and so flowery, avoided, cursed, and covered by weeds and brambles. Make haste, Cynthia; the slightest wrinkle often serves as a grave for the deepest love.’ This brutal, imperious formula displays the essence of all ancient elegy: the formula to which it forever returns; it is its greatest and most significant theme, it is the Achilles of the elegiac host. Other than this it has little to say, and, once it has promised a robe of twice-dyed *bysus* (*silk*) and a necklace of matched pearls, it has exhausted its resources. Which is well-nigh all that I find in conclusion to such efforts. I do not myself, however, always follow that rather strict regime. I embroider my meagre canvas with a few silk threads of different colours pricked out here and there. But these strands are short in length, or knotted a score of times, and do not mix with the threads of the weft too well. I speak quite elegantly of love, because I have read many fine things on the subject. To do so, only an actor’s talent is required. With many a woman, the mere appearance is enough. Regularly exercising my pen and my imagination means I have plenty to say on these matters, and any mind, by applying itself even minimally, may easily achieve the same result; but I feel not a word of what I say, and repeat quietly, a poet of ancient times: ‘Cynthia, make haste.’

I have often been accused of being secretive and deceitful. Yet none in all the world desires as much as I to speak frankly and pour out all their heart! But, since I lack the ideas and feelings of those around me, since, at the first true word I uttered, there would be catcalls, and a general outcry, I prefer to remain silent, or, if I speak, to spew forth only accepted nonsense with the aplomb the bourgeoisie show. I would be welcomed, indeed, if I spoke to the ladies as I have written to you! I think they would fail to appreciate my manner of viewing, and regarding, love. As for men, I dare not tell them, to their faces, that they should rightly go on all fours; yet, in truth, that is what I think most appropriate for them. I do not wish to start a quarrel at every word. What does it matter, in the end, what I do or do not think; if I am sad when I seem happy, joyful when I appear melancholic? No one finds fault with my not going naked: cannot I veil my face, then, like my body? Why should a mask be more reprehensible than a pair of breeches, or a lie than a corset?

The Earth revolves around the sun, alas; roasted on one side, and frozen on the other! A battle is taking place this hour in which six hundred thousand men are tearing each other to pieces; the

weather is the most beautiful in the world; the flowers are of an unparalleled coquettishness, opening their luxuriant throats, brazenly, even beneath the horses' hooves. Today a fabulous number of good deeds have been committed; it is pouring with rain, it snows and thunders, there are flashes of lightning and showers of hail; it seems as if the world is about to end. The benefactors of humanity are up to their bellies in the mire, and covered in mud like dogs, unless they possess a carriage. Creation mocks the creature mercilessly; bloodily and sarcastically at every moment. Everything is indifferent to the actions of everything else, and lives or vegetates by its own law. Whether I do this or that, whether I live or die, whether I suffer or feel pleasure, whether I dissemble or tell the truth, what does it matter to the sun or the weeds, or even humankind? A straw falls on an ant, and breaks a third leg, at the second joint; a hillside falls on a village and crushes it: I fail to believe that either misfortune wrings more tears from the glittering eyes of the stars than the other. You are my closest friend, if that word does not ring hollow as a bell; were I to die, it is clear that however tearful you might be, you would not go without your dinner for more than a day, and despite the dreadful catastrophe, you would continue, nonetheless, to play backgammon most cheerfully. Which of my friends, which of my mistresses would recall my name, and surname, twenty years from now, or deign now to acknowledge me in the street, if I happened to pass by with a hole in the elbow of my coat? Oblivion and nothingness, that is the sum of mankind.

I feel utterly alone, and all the threads that connected me to things, and they to me, have been snapped, one by one. There are few better examples of a man who, aware of the change that has taken place within him, has reached such a degree of stupefaction. I resemble a bottle of uncorked liqueur, from which the alcohol has completely evaporated. The contents have the same appearance and the same colour; but taste, and you will find only insipid liquid.

When I reflect, I am frightened by the rapidity of decomposition; if it continues thus, I will have to salt myself, or inevitably rot and the worms consume me, since I now lack a soul, and that alone makes the difference between a body and a corpse. A year ago, no more, I was still somewhat human; I was restless, I was searching. One thought I cherished above all others, an aim of sorts, an ideal; I desired to be loved, I experienced the dreams one has at that age, less misty, less chaste, it is true, than those of ordinary youths, but nevertheless contained within proper limits. Little by little, what was incorporeal became detached and dissipated and, in my depths, there remained only a thick layer of coarse silt. The dream became a nightmare; the chimera a succubus; the world of the soul closed its ivory doors to me. I understand only what I touch with my hands. I have stony dreams; everything condenses and hardens around me, nothing floats, nothing hovers, there is not a breath of air; matter presses upon me, invades me and crushes me. I am like a traveller who falls asleep, one summer day, with his feet in the water, and wakes in winter with his legs trapped and encased in ice. I no longer desire love or friendship from any. Even glory, that dazzling halo I so desired to crown my brow, no longer rouses the slightest passion in me. There is, alas, only one thing that throbs within me, and that is the dreadful desire that draws me towards Théodore. This is what all my moral notions have been reduced to. What is physically beautiful is good, everything ugly is evil. If I saw a beautiful woman, whom I knew to have the most wicked soul in the world, both an adulteress and a poisoner, I admit that her character would be a matter of perfect indifference to me, nor would it prevent me from enjoying her, if I found the shape of her nose acceptable.

This is how I conceive of supreme happiness: it presents itself as a large square building with no external windows; the large inner courtyard is surrounded by a colonnade of white marble, and at its centre stands a crystal fountain in the Arab style, with a quicksilver jet of water; there are orange trees and pomegranates in alternately-placed tubs; above, is an intensely blue sky and an intensely yellow sun; and large greyhounds with pike-like snouts, are asleep here and there. From time to time, barefoot African servant-girls, with gold bracelets on their legs, or beautiful white and slender ones, dressed in rich and fanciful garments, pass between the hollowed arches, each with a basket on their arm, or an amphora on their head. As for me, I lie there, motionless, silent, beneath a magnificent canopy, surrounded by heaped cushions, smoking opium in a large jade pipe, a large tame lion propping up my elbow, the bared chest of a young slave acting as my footstool.

I cannot imagine any other kind of paradise; and if God wills that I arrive in heaven after my death, he will have me build in the corner of some planet a little kiosk on that plan. Paradise as it is often described, seems to me much too musical, and I confess, in all humility, that I am utterly incapable of enduring a sonata even one a mere ten thousand years in duration.

Such, you see, is my Eldorado, my Promised Land: a dream like any other, but with this special feature, that I never introduce to it any figure I have known; not one of my friends has crossed the threshold of that imaginary palace; none of the women I have possessed has seated herself beside me on the velvet cushions: I am alone there in the midst of phantoms. All those female figures, all those graceful shadows of young girls with whom I people it, never prompt me to love them; I have never supposed one of them in love with me. I have created no favourite Sultana for myself, in this fabulous seraglio. There are dark-skinned women, mulattoes, pale-skinned, red-haired Jews, Greeks, Circassians, Spanish and English women; but they only represent, to me, symbols of varying colour and form, and I possess them as one possesses all the varieties of wine in one's cellar, or all the species of hummingbird in one's aviary. They are engines of pleasure, paintings that require no frame, statues that come when you call, whenever you wish to examine them closely. A woman has this incontestable advantage over a statue that she turns, by herself, in the direction you want, instead of you yourself having to circle the statue, and select a viewpoint; which is tiring.

You can see that gripped by such ideas I can no longer remain of this age, or on this planet; for one cannot subsist so, beyond one's own time and space. I must find a more substantial object.

Given all this, it is quite simple and logical that one should arrive at the point at which I have arrived. Since I seek only the satisfaction of the eye, the refinement of form, and a purity of lineament, I accept them wherever I find them. Which explains the singular aberrant objects of ancient amours.

Since the beginning of the Christian era, not a single male statue has been created in which adolescent beauty has been idealised, or rendered with the care that characterised ancient sculpture. Woman has become the symbol of moral and physical beauty. Man fell, finally, on the day that little child was born in Bethlehem. Woman is the queen of creation; the stars unite to crown her head, the crescent moon is a glorious orb rounded beneath her feet, the sun yields its purest gold from which her jewels are made, painters who want to flatter the angels give them the shapes of women, and certainly I am not one who will blame them for doing so. Before the arrival of that

gentle and gallant teller of parables, it was quite the opposite; gods or heroes were not feminised when they were required to appear seductive. They took their own form, vigorous and delicate at the same time, but always male, however amorous the contours, however polished, and devoid of muscles and veins the worker wished their divine legs and arms to be. The particular beauty of women was assimilated, all the more readily, to the type. Shoulders were broadened, hips attenuated, the throat protruded a little, the joints of the arms and thighs were more robustly accentuated. There is almost no difference between a sculpted Paris and a Helen. Thus, Hermaphroditus is one of the most ardently cherished ideals of idolatrous antiquity.

That son of Hermes and Aphrodite is indeed one of the most subtle creations of pagan genius. Nothing more ravishing can be imagined in this world than those two perfect bodies, harmoniously blended together; those two beauties so well-matched and yet so different, forming a single person superior to both, because they modify yet enhance each other, reciprocally. For an exclusive worshipper of form, is there a more delightful feeling of uncertainty than that which stirs within one at the sight of that back, those ambiguous loins, and those legs so slender and yet so strong that one knows not whether to attribute them to a Mercury about to take flight, or a Diana emerging from her bath? The torso is a composite of the most charming contrasts: on the plump and full breast of the epebe is set the oddly graceful neck and throat of a young virgin. Beneath the ample flanks, of a most feminine softness, one can discern muscles and ribs like those beneath the flanks of a young boy; the belly is a little too flat for a woman, a little too rounded for a man, and the whole form of the body has something vague and indecisive about it, that is impossible to render, and the attractiveness of which is unique. Théodore would certainly be an excellent model for this kind of beauty; however, I find that the feminine portion prevails in him, and that more of Salmacis remains than of the Hermaphroditus of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

What is singular is that I hardly think of his gender anymore, and love him with perfect assurance. Sometimes I try to persuade myself that such love is abominable, and tell myself so with the greatest possible severity; yet my censure is only on my lips, it is a statement I myself offer up, but do not feel: it really seems to me that to love him is the simplest thing in the world, and that anyone else in my place would do the same.

I see him, I listen to him speak or sing, for he sings admirably, and I take indescribable pleasure in doing so. He seems so much like a woman to me that, one day, in the heat of conversation, I let slip the word 'Madame' in addressing him, which made him laugh, though it seemed to me rather a forced laugh.

If Théodore is a woman, however, what would be her motive for disguising herself in this manner? I cannot explain that in any way. For a young, handsome, perfectly beardless young gentleman to disguise himself as a woman is understandable; he thus opens a thousand doors that would else have remained stubbornly closed to him, and the deceit may involve him in a tangle of adventures quite Labyrinthian, and delightful. One can attain the presence of a closely-guarded woman in this way, or suddenly initiate an affair by taking advantage of the surprise it can cause. But I know of little advantage a beautiful young woman could gain, by running about the country in men's clothes: she can only lose by that same. A woman should not thus renounce the pleasure of being courted, 'madrigalised', and adored; she might as well renounce life, and rightly so, for what is a woman's life without all such? Nothing, or something worse than death. And I am always

surprised that women who attain the age of thirty, or are pitted by smallpox, do not throw themselves from the top of the nearest bell-tower.

Despite all this, something stronger than reason cries out to me that 'he' is a woman, and that 'she' is the one of whom I have dreamed, she whom alone I must love, and who will love only myself: yes, it is she, the goddess of the aquiline gaze, and the lovely, regal hands; she who smiled at me condescendingly from the height of her cloudy throne. She has presented herself to me in this guise to try me, to see whether I would recognise her, whether my loving gaze would penetrate her covering veil, as in those marvellous tales where feys appear at first in the guise of beggars, then suddenly rise up resplendently dressed, adorned with gold and precious stones.

I have recognised you, my love! Oh, at the sight of you, my heart leapt in my breast as Saint John leapt in the womb of Saint Anne, when she was visited by the Virgin. A blaze of light spread through the air and I discerned something like the odour of divine ambrosia. I saw the trail of fire beneath your feet, and understood at once that you were no simple mortal.

The melodious sounds of Saint Cecilia's viol, to which the angels listen with rapture, are hoarse and discordant in comparison with the pearly cadences which fly from your ruby-red mouth: the young and smiling Graces dance about you, in a perpetual round; the birds, when you pass by in the woods, incline their little decorative heads, and twitter, seeking a better view of your form, and whistle their prettiest refrains for you; the amorous moon rises earlier to kiss you with her pale silver lips, for she has abandoned her shepherd-lad for you; the wind takes care not to erase the delicate imprint of your adorable foot in the sand; the fountain, when you lean above it, becomes smoother than crystal, for fear of wrinkling and distorting the reflection of your heavenly face; the modest violets open their little hearts to you, and perform a thousand coquetries; strawberries jealously stir themselves to emulation, and strive to match the divine crimson of your mouth; the slightest midge buzzes joyfully, and applauds you by beating its wings: all Nature loves and admires you, oh you, her most beautiful work!

Ah! I live again; till now I have been no better than a dead man: here I am free of the shroud, and stretch my thin arms from the grave towards the sun; my blue spectral colour has left me. The blood circulates more rapidly in my veins. The frightful silence that reigned around me is finally broken. The opaque and black vault that weighed on my brow is filled with light. A thousand mysterious voices whisper in my ear; delightful stars twinkle above me, and scatter their golden gleams along my path; the daisies smile at me sweetly, and the harebells murmur my name on their little twisting tongues: I understand a multitude of things that I failed to, before; I discover marvellous affinities and sympathies; I comprehend the language of the roses, and that of the nightingale, and I read fluently in that book where before I failed to spell a single word. I recognized that I have a friend in that respectable old oak tree, covered with mistletoe and parasitic plants, and that the periwinkle, so languid and frail, whose large blue eye always overflows with tears, has long nourished a discreet and restrained passion for me: it is love, love that has opened my eyes and granted me the answer to the riddle. Love has descended to the deep vault where my crouched and somnolent spirit lay captive; love took me by hand and made my soul climb the steep and narrow staircase that led to the outside air. All the doors of the prison were locked, yet this poor Psyche emerged for the first time from the self in which she was imprisoned.

Another life is mine. I breathe with another's breast, and a blow that wounded him would kill me. Before this happy day, I was like those gloomy Japanese idols who perpetually gaze at their bellies. I was a spectator of myself, a member of the audience gazing at the comedy in which I acted; I merely watched myself live, listening to the oscillations of my heart as if to the ticking of a clock. That was my lot. Images filled my distracted eyes; sounds struck my inattentive ears, but nothing of the outside world reached my soul. The existence of others went unheeded; I even doubted all existences other than my own, of which I was still unsure. It seemed to me that I was alone amidst the universe, and that all was but vapour, phantoms, vain illusions, fleeting apparitions destined to people the void. How different it all is, now!

Yet, what if my presentiment has deceived me, what if Théodore is really a man, as everyone else believes! One has sometimes seen wondrous male beauty; indeed, youthfulness lends itself to such illusions. It is something I wish not to think on; something which might, truly, drive me mad. The seed which fell yesterday onto the sterile rock of my heart has already penetrated the stone in every direction with a thousand filaments; the plant born of it clings there robustly, and now would be impossible to tear out. It is, already, a tree, leafing and flowering, and twining its muscular roots deeper. If I found that Théodore was male beyond doubt, alas, I know not if I would love him still.

The End of Part III of Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin'

Part IV: Chapters 10 and 11

Chapter 10: Théodore to Graciosa

My fair friend, you were quite right to try and deter me from pursuing my plan of observing men, and studying them thoroughly, before granting my heart to any one of them. It has led to my renouncing love, inwardly, and even the possibility of love.

Poor young girls that we are; raised with such care, our virginity defended by a triple wall of precaution and reticence, we, who are permitted to understand nothing, surmise nothing, and whose sum of learning is to know nothing, by what strange errors we live, and what perfidious chimeras rock us in their arms!

Ah! Graciosa, thrice cursed be the moment when the idea of this disguise came to me; what horrors, infamy and vulgarity, I have been forced to see and hear! How my chaste and precious ignorance has been dissipated, and in no great length of time!

Do you recall that beautiful moonlit night? We walked together in the garden's depths, down that sad and little-frequented path, ending, on the one side, at the statue of a flute-playing Faun, lacking a nose, and whose whole body is covered with a thick coating of blackish moss, and, on the other, in a false perspective, drawn on the wall and half-erased by the rain. Through the still sparse foliage of the hornbeam, we could see the stars sparkling here and there, and the moon's silver crescent. The scents of fresh shoots and new leaves reached us from the flowerbeds, on the soft breath of a little breeze; an unseen bird whistled a strange, languid tune; we, as young girls do, talked of love, of gallants, of marriage, of the handsome gentleman we had seen at Mass; we exchanged what scant notions we possessed as regards the world and its affairs; we examined in a hundred ways some sentence we had heard by chance and whose meaning seemed obscure and intriguing; we asked each other a thousand ludicrous questions such as only complete innocence can conceive. What primitive poetry, what adorable nonsense, in those furtive conversations between two little fools, who had finished with school but a day or so before!



Lovers on a moonlit lane (1873)
John Atkinson Grimshaw (English, 1836 – 1893)

[Artree](#)

You desired as your lover some bold, proud young fellow, a kind of amorous braggart, with dark hair and a moustache, large spurs, a tall plume, and a great sword; you aimed straight for the heroic and triumphant: you dreamt only of duels and sieges, and of wondrous devotion, and would have gladly thrown your glove into the lions' den for your *Esplandián* (see *Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's 'The Adventures of Esplandián', 1510*) to retrieve: it was more than comical to watch a little girl like you, blonde, flushed, yielding to the slightest breeze, deliver those fine tirades, in a single breath, and with the most martial air in the world.

I, though only six months older, was six years less of a romantic: one thing intrigued me above all, and that was what men said to each other, and what they did, after they left the salons and

theatres: I sensed many a doubtful and obscure affair in their lives, affairs carefully veiled from our gaze, yet which it was most important for us to penetrate. Sometimes, hidden behind a curtain, I spied, from afar, on the cavaliers who came to the house, and it seemed to me that I could discern something ignoble and cynical in their appearance, a gross insouciance or a fierce self-preoccupation, that vanished as soon as they entered, seemingly shed as if by magic on the threshold of the room. All of them, young and old, seemed to me to have uniformly adopted a conventional mask, display of feeling, and mode of speech, when they were with the women. From the corner of the living room, where I sat as straight as a doll, not leaning back in my chair, while rolling the stem of my bouquet between my fingers, I listened, I watched; though my eyes were lowered, I saw everything to right and left, in front and behind: like the fabled eyes of the lynx, my eyes pierced the walls, and I could have told you what was happening in the next room.

I also found a notable difference in the way married women were addressed; no longer in the polite, discreet, childishly-framed phrases delivered to me or my companions; a freer playfulness was on display, a less sober and more relaxed manner, an obvious degree of reticence and subtlety, revealing a level of decadence matched by a correspondingly decadent air: I felt that there was a mutual understanding between them that was lacking between us, and I would have given anything to comprehend its origins.

With what anxiety, and what eager curiosity, I followed, by sound and sight, those groups of young people and the buzz of laughter they emitted, who, having chosen various directions for their promenades, resumed their course, chattering away, and casting ambiguous glances as they passed. On their lips, puckered in disdain, hovered incredulous sneers; they seemed to mock at the words they themselves had said, to retract the compliments and showers of praise they had heaped upon us. I could not hear their words; but I understood, from the movement of those lips, that they were pronouncing words in a language unknown to me, and which no one had ever used before me. Even those who possessed the humblest and most submissive air gave a shrug, and a perceptible expression of rebellious ennui, a breathless sigh, like that of an actor who has reached the end of a long speech, escaped their lips despite themselves; while, once they had passed us they turned on their heels in a brisk, lively manner, displaying a kind of inner satisfaction at being freed from the harsh chore of seeming honest and gallant.

I would have given a year of my life to listen to an hour of their conversation without being seen. Often, I gathered, from a certain posture, a few sidelong gestures, and glances cast obliquely, that it was myself who was in question. and that they were talking either about my age or my appearance. Then I was as if standing on burning coals; the few stifled words, the fragments of sentences that reached me at intervals, roused my curiosity to the highest degree without being able to satisfy it, and I was full of strange doubts and perplexities.

Most often what was said was favourable in tone; it was not that which troubled me: I cared little whether people found me beautiful; but the brief comments whispered in an ear, and almost always followed by mocking smiles, and the odd blink of an eye, they were what I wished to comprehend; and, to overhear one of those phrases spoken quietly, from behind a curtain, or in the angle of a door, I would have abandoned without regret the most flowery, perfumed conversation in the world.

I longed to know in what terms, if I were actually to take a lover, he might speak of me to other men, in what terms he might boast of his good fortune to his drunken companions, elbows on the tablecloth, after a few bottles of wine. I know now, and am truly sorry that I do, that they speak ever in the same manner.

The idea I conceived was foolish, but what's done is done, and one cannot unlearn what one has learned. I refused to listen to you, my dear Graciosa, and I regret it; but one does not always listen to reason, especially when it comes from lips as pretty as yours, since, I know not why, one imagines good advice as only ever deriving from some old, grey-haired person, as if sixty years of stupidity renders one wise.

Well, it all proved a torment to me, and I could not endure it; I was roasting in my skin like a chestnut in the coals. The fatal apple hung, a globe in the foliage, above my head, and I was tempted to take a bite, even if the taste proved bitter to me and I was forced to cast it aside afterwards. I did as Eve, my ancestress, did — I bit deep.

The death of my uncle, my only remaining relative, left me free to act, and I carried out what I had dreamed of for so long. I took the greatest care, my precautions such that none would question my gender: I had learned how to wield a sword, and shoot a pistol; I rode perfectly, with a boldness of which few squires were capable; I studied the manner of wearing a man's cloak, and making the whip crack, and, in a few months, succeeded in turning the girl who was considered quite pretty into an even prettier horseman, who lacked little more than a moustache. I realised what funds I had, and left town, determined not to return until I had experienced all.

It was the only way to quench my doubts: taking a lover or two would have taught me nothing, or at least it would have given me only incomplete glimpses, and I wanted to study men thoroughly, to anatomize them inexorably, fibre by fibre, with a scalpel, and view them alive and palpitating on my dissection table; and for that I had to see them alone at home, in a state of undress, and to follow them on visits to taverns and elsewhere. So disguised, I might enter everywhere without being noticed. Men, indeed, could not hide from me; with me, they cast aside all reserve and constraint; I received confidences, and uttered false ones to provoke the truth. Alas, women have only read novels written by men, never their histories!

It is a fearful thing to consider, and women seldom do, how profoundly ignorant we are of the life and conduct of men who appear to love us, and whom we may wed. Their real existence is as completely unknown to us as if they were inhabitants of Saturn, or some other planet hundred of millions of miles from our sublunary orb: I declare they are of another species, and there is not the slightest intellectual bond between the two sexes; the virtues of one seem faults in the other; what renders a man admired renders a woman hated.

Our female lives are clear, and penetrated at a glance. It is a simple task to follow our trajectory from home to boarding-school, from boarding-school to domesticity; what we do is a mystery to none; everyone can view our inept pencil sketches, and our coloured bouquets, composed of a pansy and a rose as big as a cabbage, and gallantly tied at their stems with a ribbon of tender hue. The slippers we embroider for our father's or grandfather's birthday are nothing very strange or disturbing. Our sonatas, and our singing, are performed with the expected lack of emotion. We are well and duly tied to our mothers' skirts, and, at nine or ten o'clock at the latest, we retreat to our little white beds, in the depths of our neat, discreet cell-like rooms, in which we are virtuously

imprisoned till next morning. The most alert and jealous guardian would find nothing untoward in this. The clearest crystal is less transparent than such a life.

Whatever man marries us knows how we have been occupied from the moment we were weaned, and even before, if he chooses to take his research so far. Our life is not a life, it is a kind of vegetative existence like that of moss or flowers; the icy shadow of the maternal presence hovers about us, poor stifled rosebuds that are scared to open. Our whole business is to hold ourselves upright, very straight and trim, with our eyes properly lowered, and to outdo dolls or mannequins in our immobility and rigidity

We are forbidden to speak, forbidden to join in conversation except, if questioned, to answer yes or no. As soon as we seek to say something interesting, we are sent off to learn to play the harp or spinet, and our music teachers are all sixty years old at least, and take far too much snuff. The plaster models in our rooms possess a most vague and evasive anatomy. The gods of Greece, in order to reveal themselves to a boarding school for young ladies, take care beforehand to buy very ample capes at a second-hand clothes shop, and to have themselves engraved with stippling, which grants them the appearance of doormen or cab-drivers, and so hardly likely to fire our imaginations.

Barred from being romantic, we are rendered stupid. The days of our education are spent not in teaching us something, but in preventing us learning anything.

We are truly prisoners in body and mind; but a young man, free in his actions, who goes out in the morning and returns the following morning, who has funds, and can earn them and dispose of them as he pleases, how would he justify the use of his time? What man would want to tell his beloved what he did during the day, or at night? None, not even among those who are reputed to be purest by nature.

I sent my horse, and my clothing, to a small farm I had bought some distance from town. I dressed, mounted and departed, though not without a strange pain at heart. I regretted nothing, I left nothing behind neither relatives, nor friends, not even a dog, or cat, and yet I was sad, I well-nigh had tears in my eyes. This farm which I had only visited five or six times held nothing special or dear to me, and I felt none of the affection that one feels for certain places, and which moves one when one must leave them, yet I still turned around two or three times, to view from afar the tendrils of blue smoke from its chimney, rising between the trees.

It was there I had left my title of 'woman', along with my dresses and skirts; in the room where I donned my new garb, I relinquished twenty years of a life that no longer counted or concerned me. On the door one might have written: 'Here lies Madeleine de Maupin'; for indeed I was no longer Madeleine de Maupin, but rather Théodore de Sérannes, and none would now call me by that sweet name of Madeleine. The drawer in which my dresses were kept, now abandoned, seemed to me like the coffin of my innocent illusions; I was a man, or at least I had the appearance of one: and the young girl was dead.

Once the crowns of the chestnut trees surrounding the farm were lost to sight, it seemed to me I was no longer myself, but another, and I recalled my former actions as if they had been those of a stranger, actions which I had merely witnessed, or those at the start of a novel I had not yet finished reading.

I remembered, complacently, a thousand little details whose childish naivety brought to my lips an indulgent smile, a little mocking smile, like that of a young libertine listening to the arcadian, pastoral confidences of a third-grade schoolboy; and, at the moment when I departed forever, all my childish and adolescent female selves hovered at the edge of the road, offering me a thousand signs of friendship, and sending me kisses from the tips of their white, slender fingers. I spurred my horse to escape those unnerving emotions; the trees sped by swiftly to left and right; yet that playful crowd, buzzing louder than a hive of bees, ran up and down the side paths, calling: ‘Madeleine! Madeleine!’

I gave my mount a harsh blow on the neck with my whip, which made it redouble its speed. My hair stretched almost straight behind my head, my body was horizontal, the folds of my coat as if carved in stone, so great was my speed; I looked back once, and saw a small white cloud far away on the horizon, the dust that my horse’s hooves had raised.

I halted for a while. I saw something white stirring, amidst a wild rose bush, at the edge of the road, and a small voice, clear and sweet as silver, struck my ear: ‘Madeleine, Madeleine, where are you going so fast, Madeleine? I am your virgin innocence, my dear child; that is why I have a white dress, a white coronet, and pale features. But you, why are you booted like a man, Madeleine? You have very pretty feet. Boots, and breeches, and a large hat with a plume, like a horseman going to war! Why is that sheath striking, and bruising your thigh? Your outfit, is strange, Madeleine, and I know not whether I should keep you company.’

— ‘If you’re afraid, my dear, return home; water my flowers, and tend my doves. But in truth you are wrong, you are safer in these fine clothes than your gauze and linen. My boots prevent anyone knowing whether I’ve a pretty foot or no; the sword is for my defence; the feather fluttering from my hat is to scare away all those nightingales who would come and sing false love-songs in my ear.’

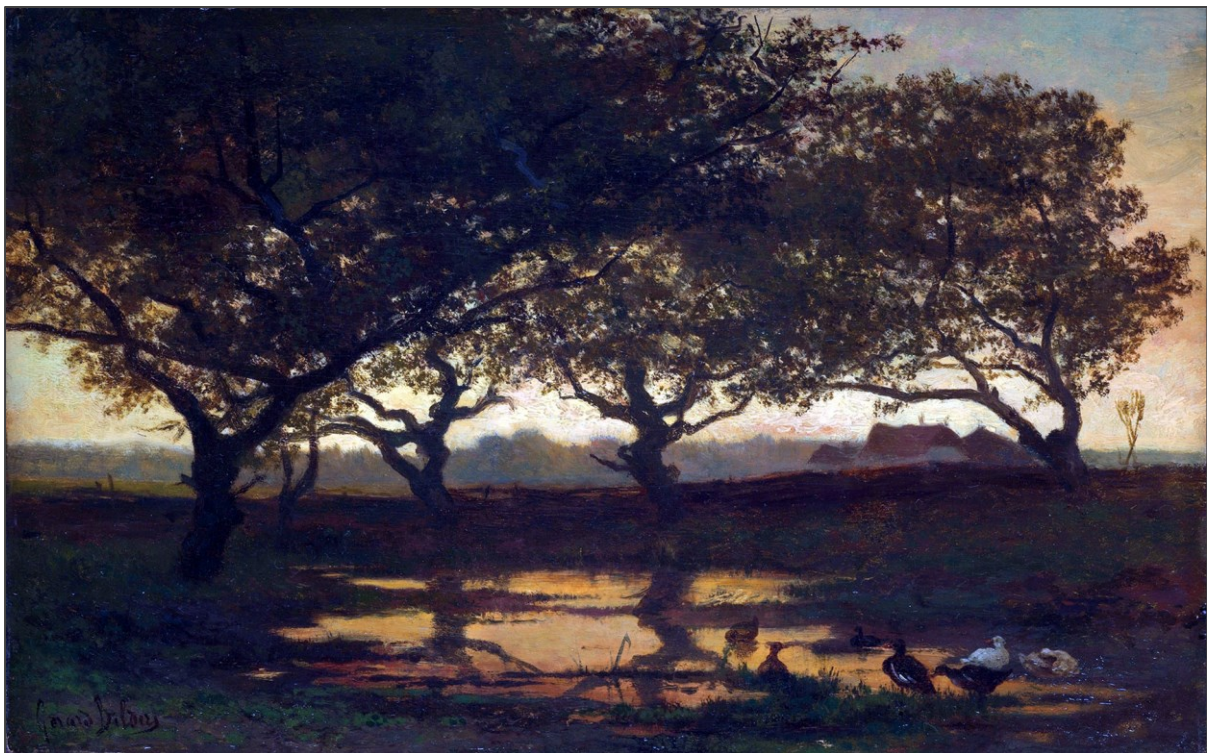
I continued on my way. In the sigh of the wind, I thought I recognised the last phrase of the sonata I’d learned for my uncle’s birthday; in a large rose that raised its head above a low wall, the large rose I had used for a model in painting so many watercolours; and passing a house, I saw the ghosts of my curtains floating at a window. All my past seemed to cling to me, and prevent me from advancing towards my fresh future.

I hesitated two or three times, and turned my horse’s head as if to return. But the little blue snake of curiosity hissed softly and insidiously: — ‘On, on, Théodore; this is a fine opportunity to learn; if you fail to instruct yourself now, you never will. Would you give your noble heart, randomly, to the first man who merely appears honest and passionate? Men hide most extraordinary secrets from us, Théodore!’

I resumed my gallop. I felt my breeches on my body, but not in my mind. I felt a certain unease, a sort of shiver of fear, to grant the thing its name, while navigating a dark corner of the forest; a gunshot, probably fired by a poacher, well-nigh made me faint. Had he been a robber, the pistols in my saddlebags and my formidable sword would certainly have proved of little help. But moment by moment, I hardened myself, and paid my feeling no further attention.

The sun was slowly sinking below the horizon, like the chandelier at the theatre lowered once the performance is done. A pheasant, or a rabbit, crossed the road from time to time; the shadows

were lengthening, and all the horizon was tinged with red. Some parts of the sky were a soft and faded lilac, others were a lemon or orange hue; the nocturnal birds were beginning to call, and a multitude of strange noises emerged from the woods: the little light still present was gradually extinguished, and the darkness was complete, deepened as it was by the shadows cast by the trees. I, who had never ventured out alone at night, found myself at eight in the evening in a dense forest! Can you imagine that, my Graciosa, I who used to tremble with fear at the end of the garden? Terror seized me, and my heart beat terribly. It was with great relief, I confess, that I saw the lights of my destination appear and sparkle on the slopes of a hill. As soon as I saw those bright points, like small terrestrial stars, my fear completely vanished. It seemed to me that those indifferent gleams were the eyes of as many friends watching over me.



Woodland Pond at Sunset (c. 1862)

Gerard Bilders (Dutch, 1838-1865)

[Artvee](#)

My horse was no less pleased than I was and smelling the sweet scent of a stable, an odour more agreeable to him than those of daisies or wild strawberries, he sped straight towards the Red Lion Hotel.

A pale light shone through the leaded window of the inn, whose tin sign swung from side to side and moaned like an old woman as the north wind began to freshen. I handed my horse to a groom and went to the kitchen. An enormous fireplace, whose black maw yawned, redly, in its depths, consumed a bundle of wood at each mouthful, and on either side, a pair of hounds, sitting

on their haunches, and almost as tall as human beings, were toasting themselves, with the greatest composure in the world, content with raising their paws a little, and emitting a sigh of sorts as the heat became more intense; but, preferring, it seemed, to be reduced to ashes than retreat an inch.

My arrival seemed to give them little pleasure and, though I patted their heads several times, so as to introduce myself, it was all in vain; the glances they cast augured nothing good. I was surprised, because animals usually warm to me, quite readily.

The innkeeper approached and asked me what I desired for dinner. He was a pot-bellied fellow, with a red nose, squinting eyes, and a grin that stretched from ear to ear. At every word he spoke, he revealed a double row of sharp teeth like an ogre's. The large kitchen knife that hung at his side seemed capable of several dubious uses. When I had told him what I wished to eat, he went and kicked one of the dogs, which rose and slouched to a sort of mill-wheel, which it entered with a pitiful, sullen air, and a reproachful glance towards myself. Finally, seeing that scant mercy was forthcoming, it began to turn the wheel, and in turn, therefore the spit which held the chicken for my supper. I promised myself to throw it the leftovers as a reward for its efforts, and looked about the kitchen while waiting for my meal.

Wide oak beams lined the darkened ceiling, blackened by the smoke from the hearth, and from the candles. On the dressers, pewter dishes gleamed brighter than silver in the shadows, beside white earthenware pots with bouquets of blue flowers. Along the walls, numerous rows of well-scoured saucepans looked like those depictions of antique shields that were once suspended the length of Greek or Roman triremes (forgive me, *Graciosa*, the epic splendour of my comparison). One or two plump maids were busy around a large table, amidst a clatter of dishes and forks, music more agreeable than any other, when one is hungry, to the stomach rather than the ear. All in all, in spite of the innkeeper's coffer of a mouth and jagged teeth, the inn had a fairly honest and cheerful appearance; and though the innkeeper's smile had been a yard longer and his teeth three times longer and sharper, the rain pattered against the window-panes, and the wind howled, in such a manner as to rob one of all desire to leave, for I know of nothing more lugubrious than such moaning on a dark and rainy night.

An idea struck me that made me smile: that no one in the world would have thought to find me where I then was. Indeed, who would have thought that little Madeleine, instead of lying in her warm bed, with her alabaster candlestick beside her, a novel beneath her pillow, and her maid in the next room, ready to come running at the least nightmare, was rocking on a chair with a straw seat, in a country inn, fifty miles from her house, her booted feet resting on the andirons, her little hands tucked proudly in her pockets?

Yes, Madelinette no longer remained, like her companions, with an elbow lazily propped on the edge of the balcony, amidst the morning glories and jasmines at the window, gazing over the plain, at the violet edge of the horizon, or some little rose-coloured cloud drifting on the May breeze. She no longer filled the mother-of-pearl palaces in which she lodged her chimeras with lily-leaves; she did not, like you, beautiful dreamers, adorn some empty phantom with all imaginable perfections: she wanted to understand men before giving herself to any man; she abandoned everything, her beautiful, brilliantly-coloured dresses in velvet and silk, her necklaces, her bracelets, her birds, and her flowers; she had willingly renounced all adoration, prostrate gallantry, all bouquets and madrigals, the pleasure of being claimed as more beautiful or better

adorned than you, her sweet feminine name, everything that was hers, and had run off, that courageous girl, all alone, to gain, amidst the vast world, knowledge of life.

Hearing of it, people might have said Madeleine was mad. You said it yourself, my dear Graciosa. But the truly mad ones are those who fling their souls to the wind, and sow their love at random amidst rocks and stones without knowing if a single ear of it will sprout.

O Graciosa! It is a thought ever accompanied with terror, where I am concerned: the thought of loving someone unworthy of me! To bare my soul to impure eyes, and allow some profane intruder to penetrate the sanctuary of my heart! To stain for a time its limpid waters with a muddy wave! However completely they may part from it, something of its silt always remains, and the flow cannot regain its original transparency.

To think that a man has kissed you and touched you; that he has seen your body; that he can say: 'She is like this, or like that; she has such and such a blemish in such a place; she has such and such a cast of thought; she laughs at this, and cries at that, and her dream is of this other; and here in my wallet is a feather from the wings of her chimera; this ring is braided with a lock of her hair; a fragment of her heart is enfolded in this letter; she caressed me in this manner,' or 'this is her customary tender phrase!'

Ah, Cleopatra, I understand now why you had that lover you had spent the night with slain in the morning. A sublime act of cruelty, for which, I lacked enough imprecations, once! Grand voluptuary that you were, how well you knew human nature, and how much depth there was in that barbarous notion! You wished no living person to be capable of divulging the mysteries of your bed; the words of love, that had flown from your lips, were never to be repeated. In that way, you preserved others' illusions concerning you. Habit did not consume, piece by piece, the charming phantom you had cradled in your arms. You preferred to be separated from it by a sudden blow of the axe than gradual disgust. What torment, indeed, to see the man you have chosen betray, minute by minute, the idea you have formed of him; to discover in his character a thousand petty traits that you never suspected; to realise that all that had seemed so beautiful to you when viewed through love's prism was in effect quite ugly, and that he whom you had taken to be a true hero from a novel was revealed, in the end, to be only a prosaic bourgeois who wears slippers and a dressing gown!

I lack Cleopatra's power, and if I possessed it, I would certainly lack the strength to deploy it. Also, since I shall not, and cannot, have my lovers decapitated when I leave my bed, and am not in the mood to endure what other women bear, I must think twice before taking such a lover; or three times rather, if the desire takes me, which I very much doubt, given all I have seen and heard; unless, that is, I meet in some unknown, yet blessed, land a heart like mine, a pure and virginal heart, as the novels have it, that has never loved though capable of love, in the true sense of the word, which is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a likely thing.

Several horsemen entered the inn; the storm and the darkness had prevented them from continuing their journey. They were all young, the oldest certainly not more than thirty: their clothes announced that they belonged to the upper class, and, if not their clothes, the insolent ease of their manners would have made it sufficiently clear. There were one or two who had interesting faces; the others all had, to a greater or lesser degree, that kind of brutal joviality, and careless show

of good nature, which men display among themselves, and which they completely divest themselves of in our presence.

If they could have suspected that the frail young man, half asleep on his chair, in the corner of the fireplace, was not what he appeared to be, but rather a young girl, 'a pretty little thing', as they say, they would assuredly have changed their tone promptly; they would have puffed themselves up immediately, and tried to display themselves to advantage. They would have approached me with deep bows, legs planted, elbows out, and a smile in their eyes, on their lips, their noses, their hair, in every attitude of their bodies; they would have omitted the phrases they used among themselves, and uttered satiny and velvety compliments; at the slightest movement on my part, they would have offered to stretch themselves out on the floor as a carpet, for fear that my delicate feet might be offended by its unevenness; all hands would have been raised to support me; the softest seat would have been placed for me in the most comfortable place; but I looked like a pretty boy, not a pretty girl.

I confess I was almost on the point of regretting leaving my skirts behind, finding how little attention they paid me. I was quite mortified for a while; for, I forgot, now and then, that I was wearing male apparel, and was obliged to recall it to maintain a proper manner.

I stood there, saying nothing, arms crossed, and gazing with a seemingly very attentive air at the chicken which was browning nicely, and at the unfortunate dog that I had so sadly disturbed, struggling away inside its wheel like a demon trapped in a font of holy water.

The youngest of the troop approached and dealt me a friendly blow on the shoulder which hurt a great deal, and drew from me a little involuntary cry, then asked if I would not prefer to sup with them than alone, since folk drank better when there were several together. I answered that it was a pleasure I'd scarcely dared hope for, and would do so very willingly. The table was set, and we took our places side by side. The dog was released, panting, and after swallowing a huge bowlful of water, with three laps of its tongue, resumed its position opposite the other hound, who had not moved any more than if he had been made of porcelain, the newcomers not having requested chicken, by heaven's particular grace.

I learned, from a few sentences that escaped them, that they were off to the Court, which was then at ***, where they were to join other friends of theirs. I told them I was a younger son of rank who had just left university, and was going to visit relatives in the provinces, by the schoolboy's route, that is to say, by the longest one I could find. This made them laugh, and, after a few remarks about my innocent, candid air, they asked if I had a mistress. I replied I knew nothing about such things, and they laughed even more. Bottle followed bottle swiftly; and though I was careful never to empty my glass, my head became a little heated, and, without losing sight of my object, I ensured that the conversation turned to the subject of womankind. It was scarcely difficult; because after theology and aesthetics, that is the topic men debate most readily when drunk.

These comrades were not inebriated, they carried their wine too well for that; but they did begin to enter into endless moral discussion, propping their elbows on the table without ceremony. One of them even placed his arm about the plump waist of one of the maids, and was inclining his head very amorously: another swore he would die instantly, like a toad made to take snuff, if Jeannette refused to let him plant a kiss on each of the large red apples that served as her cheeks.

And Jeannette, not wishing him to die like a toad, granted his wish with a deal of grace, and even failed to deny the hand that insinuated itself audaciously between the folds of her kerchief, in the moist vale of her breasts, quite ill-protected by a small gold cross, and it was only after a brief conversation, in low tones, that he set her free to remove the dishes.

Yet these were courtiers of refined morals, and assuredly, unless I had witnessed the scene, I would never have thought of accusing them of gross familiarity with inn maids. It is probable that they had just quitted their charming mistresses, to whom they had sworn the finest oaths in the world: in truth, I would never have previously thought of warning a lover not to soil his lips on some Maritorne's cheeks; lips to which I might have offered mine.

The rascal seemed to take great pleasure in that kiss, no more and no less than if he had kissed *Phyllis* (see *Ovid's Heroides' II*) or *Oriana* (see *Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's 'Amadis of Gaul'*): it was a smacking kiss, firmly and frankly applied, which left two small white marks on the damsel's blushing cheek, and which she wiped away with the back of her hand fresh from washing the dishes. I doubted he had ever given so naturally tender a one to that pure deity who was supposed to command his heart. This was apparently his thought too, for he said in a low voice, and with a completely disdainful movement of the elbow:

— 'To hell with thin women, and grand sentiments!'

This moral seemed to the liking of the assembly, and all nodded their heads in assent.

— 'My goodness,' said another, continuing this theme, 'I meet with misfortune in everything I touch. Gentlemen, I must confide to you, under the seal of greatest secrecy, that I, who am speaking to you, have a passion for someone at this moment.'

— 'Oh ho!' cried the rest. 'A passion! That's exceeding droll. And how do you treat your passion'

— 'She's an honest woman, gentlemen; gentlemen, you mustn't laugh; for after all, why shouldn't I seduce an honest wife? Did I say something ridiculous?... Look, you there, I'll break your head if you don't stop.'

— 'Well! And then?'

— 'She's crazy about me: she's truly the most beautiful soul in the world; in matters of soul, I'm knowledgeable, I know women as well as I do horses at least, and I guarantee you that hers is a soul of the finest quality. She displays elevated thought, ecstasy, devotion, sacrifice, and every refinement of tenderness, everything that one can imagine that's most transcendent; though she's almost no breasts, none at all, like a little girl of at most fifteen. She is quite pretty, however; her hands are finely formed, and her feet small. But she has overmuch spirit, and not enough flesh, and for that I wish to quit her. The Devil! One cannot sleep with a spirit. I am most unhappy; pity me, my friends.' And, mellowed by the wine he had drunk, he began to weep, bitterly.

'Jeannette will console you for your misfortune in sleeping with a sylph,' his neighbour told him, pouring him a drink; 'her soul is so solid one could easily carve others' bodies from it, and she's enough flesh to clothe the frames of three elephants.'

O pure and noble lover! If you knew how the man you love most in all the world, he for whom you have sacrificed everything, speaks of you at the inn, casually, in front of people he barely

knows! How he shamelessly undresses you and, brazenly, delivers you, utterly naked, to the drunken gaze of his comrades, while you wait, sadly, chin in hand, eyes gazing at the path on which he will return to you!

If someone came and told you that your lover, perhaps no more than twenty-four hours after leaving you, was courting a vile serving-maid, and had arranged to spend the night with her, you'd deem it impossible, and refuse to believe it. Though you'd hardly credit your eyes and ears, yet it is so.

Their conversation, the wildest and most shameful in the world, lasted some time; and their buffoonish exaggerations, their often-filthy jokes, displayed a real and profound contempt for women. I learned more that evening than by reading twenty cartloads of moral treatises.

The enormous, unheard-of things that met my ears tinged my face with a sadness and severity which the other guests noticed, and which they kindly tried to dispel; but my feeling of gaiety was lost. I had indeed suspected that men were not as they appeared to us, but I did not yet believe them to be so different from their masks, and my surprise was equalled by my disgust.

It would take but half an hour of listening to such conversation to correct a young girl's romantic ideas forever; it would be better for her than all maternal remonstrance.

Some boasted of possessing as many women as they pleased, and of needing only to say the word; others communicated their recipes for procuring mistresses, or discussed the tactics to follow in laying siege to the virtuous; some ridiculed the women whose lovers they were, and proclaimed themselves the most complete imbeciles on earth for having consorted with such creatures. All made little of the idea of love.

So, these are the thoughts they hide from us behind their fine shows of pretence! Who would have conceived it, seeing them grovelling so, and seemingly so humble, so amenable? Ah! How, after their conquests, they raise their heads boldly, and set the heels of their boots insolently on the foreheads they previously adored from afar and on their knees! How they avenge themselves for their temporary humiliation! How dearly they make us pay for their politeness! And how insultingly they brush aside the madrigals they composed! What frenzied coarseness of language and thought they display! What inelegance of manners and bearing! The alteration is complete, and one which is certainly not to their advantage. However extreme my predictions might have been, they fell far short of the reality.

My Ideal, blue flower with a golden heart, pearled with dew, that blooms beneath the Spring sky, amidst the perfumed breath of gentle reverie, and whose fibrous roots, a thousand times more delicate than the silk braids of feys, plunge to the depths of our soul, where their thousand hairy tendrils drink its purest substance; bittersweet flower, one cannot pluck you without the heart bleeding in its deepest recesses, while from your broken stem ooze crimson drops, which, falling one by one into the lake of our tears, serve to measure the tremulous hours of our vigil by the bed of dying Amor.

Ah! Cursed flower, how you had blossomed in my soul! Your shoots had multiplied there like nettles amidst ruins. Nightingales came to drink from your chalices, and sing in your shade; diamantine butterflies, with emerald wings, and ruby-red eyes, fluttered and danced about your frail pistils covered with golden dust; many a bee sucked your poisoned honey unaware; chimeras

folded their swan-like wings and crossed their leonine claws beneath their beautiful breasts, as they rested beside you. The tree of the Hesperides was no better guarded. Sylphs gathered starry dew in the hearts of lilies, and watered you magically every night. Plant of the Ideal, more venomous than the manchineel or the upas tree, what it has cost me, amidst your deceptive flowers, and the poison breathed in with your perfume, to uproot you from my soul! The cedar of Lebanon, the gigantic baobab, the palm-tree a hundred cubits high, could not fill the place together that you occupied all alone, little blue flower with the golden heart.

Supper was finally over, and the question of retiring to bed arose; but, as the number of sleepers was twice that of beds, it naturally followed that they either had to take it in turns, or sleep two in a bed. That was a simple matter for the rest of the company, but not nearly so for me, in view of the protuberances which my shirt and doublet together conceal quite admirably, but which a shirt alone would have revealed in all their roundness; and I was scarcely disposed to betray my incognito, before any of those gentlemen, who at that moment seemed to me truly primitive monsters, but whom I have since recognised as fine, devilish, fellows, worth as much as any of their kind.

The one whose bed I was to share was fairly drunk. He threw himself on the mattress, leaving one leg and arm dangling towards the ground, and fell asleep at once; not sleeping the sleep of the just, but in a sleep so deep that the angel of the Last Judgment might have blown his trumpet in the man's ear and he would not have woken. His falling asleep greatly simplified my difficulty; I removed only my doublet and boots, stepped over the body of the sleeper, and stretched out on the sheet, on the window side.

So, I was lying with a man! A promising way to begin! I confess that, despite all my self-confidence, I was singularly moved and troubled. The situation was so strange, so new, I could hardly admit to myself it was not a dream. The fellow slept as deeply as one can, but I failed to close my eyes all night.

He was a young man, about twenty-four years of age, with a rather handsome face, dark eyelashes and an almost blond moustache; his long hair flowed like the waves rippling from an urnful of water poured into a pool, a slight blush tinted cheeks as pale as clouds reflected in the depths, his lips were half-open and bore a vague and languid smile.

I raised myself on my elbow, and gazed at him for a long while, by the flickering light of a candle whose wax had dripped in large sheets, and whose wick was covered with black flecks. Quite a large gap separated us. He occupied one extreme edge of the bed; I, as an extra precaution, had taken myself to the other edge.

All I had heard was assuredly not of a nature to predispose me to tenderness or voluptuousness: I felt a horror of the male sex. However, I felt more troubled and agitated than I ought: the body failed to share the mind's repugnance as profoundly as it should have done. My heart was beating fast, I was burning hot, and, whichever way I turned, could find no rest.

The deepest silence reigned; only the occasional dull thud of a horse's hoof striking the floor of the stable could be heard, or the sound of a water-drop falling from the chimney onto the ashes. The candle, having reached the end of its wick, died in a cloud of smoke.

The densest darkness fell like a curtain between us. You can hardly imagine the effect produced by that sudden loss of light. It seemed to me that all was over, and that I would never be free of the dark again as long as I lived. I felt like rising from bed; but how would I have occupied myself? It was still only two in the morning, all the lamps were unlit, and I could scarcely wander about like a ghost, in a dwelling strange to me. I was obliged to stay where I was, and wait till dawn.

I lay on my back, hands clasped, trying to think of something, and with always the one thought, namely: that I was lying with a man. I went so far as to wish that he would wake, and realise that I was a woman. No doubt the wine I had drunk, though small in quantity, had something to do with that extravagant idea, but I could not help returning to it. I was on the point of touching his side, waking him, and telling him who and what I was. A fold of the blanket that obstructed my arm was the reason I failed to carry the thing through to the end: it granted me time to reflect; and, while I was freeing my arm, I recovered the commonsense that had deserted me, if not fully at least enough to restrain me.

Would it not have been strange indeed, if a lovely disdainful person like myself, if I who would have wished to observe a man for ten years before even yielding him my hand to kiss, had given myself, in an inn, on a pallet-bed, to the first man who came along! And, by my faith, it would scarcely have taken much.

Can a sudden hot effervescence in the blood, overcome, thus, the proudest resolve? Does the voice of the body speak louder than that of the mind? Whenever my pride soars too high in the sky, I summon up the memory of that night, and bring myself back down to Earth. I am increasingly in agreement with male opinion: what a poor thing is a woman's virtue, and, Lord, on what slight things it depends!

Ah! It is in vain that one tries to spread one's wings; too much dirt and dust weighs them down; the body is like an anchor that moors the soul to the earth: though the vessel spreads its sails before the breath of elevated ideas, it yet hangs motionless, as though all the remora fish in the Ocean clung to its keel. Nature delights in such mockery. When she sees the mind mounted, proudly, on a tall pillar, elevated towards the sky above, she compels the blood to flow faster, and strain the arteries; she commands the brow to swell, the ears to ring, and behold, vertigo seizes the haughty: images merge and blur, the earth seems to sway like the deck of a boat in a storm, the sky rotates, the stars dance a jig; and those lips, which once uttered only austere maxims, purse, and draw closer, as if ready to be kissed; those arms, ready to repel every advance, weaken, become more supple, and clasp another tighter than a scarf. Add to that the touch of the other's body, the breath of a sigh through one's hair, and all is lost. Often even less is needed: the scent of cut grass that flows through your half-open window, from the fields; the sight of two pigeons billing and cooing; a patch of daisies; an old love song you recall in spite of yourself, and repeat without registering its meaning; a warm breeze that disturbs and intoxicates you; or perhaps the softness of your bed or sofa, a single one of these things is enough. The solitary nature of your room makes you think there ought to be two of you there, and that there was never a more charming nest for a brood of fledgling pleasures. Drawn curtains, half-light, silence, all arouses the fatal idea that brushes you with perfidious wings, and murmurs softly around you. The fabric that touches your arm, seems to caress you, and drape its folds across your body. It is then that the young girl opens her arms to the first footman with whom she finds herself alone; and the philosopher leaves his work unfinished, and, head in his cloak, runs in haste to the nearest courtesan.

I felt no love, in truth, for the man who roused me to such curious agitation. He had no other charm than that of not being a woman, yet, in the state I was in, that sufficed! A man! That mysterious thing so carefully hidden from us; that strange animal of whose history we knew so little; that god or demon who alone could realise all the vague dreams of voluptuousness that Spring brought us in sleep; the sole object of our thoughts since the age of fifteen!

A man! Some confused idea of pleasure floated in my drowsy head. The little I knew of such feelings nonetheless kindled my desire. Ardent curiosity urged me to quell, once and for all, the doubts that embarrassed me and constantly recurred in my mind. The solution to the problem lay overleaf and I had only to turn the page, for the book was beside me. A handsome enough knight, a narrow enough bed, a dark enough night! A girl whose brain was dazed by a few glasses of champagne! What a propitious chain of circumstances! Well! All that resulted was plain nothing.

On the wall, on which my eyes were fixed, I began to distinguish, thanks to the waxing light, the advent of day. The window-panes became less opaque, and the grey light of morning which penetrated them restored their transparency; the sky was illuminated little by little: it was dawn. You cannot imagine what pleasure those pale rays, lighting the green of my Serge d'Aumale riding-habit gave me, which bordered the glorious battlefield where virtue had triumphed over desire! It seemed to me like a field of victory. As for my sleeping companion, he had slumped to the floor.

I rose, tidied myself as quickly as possible and ran to the window. I opened it, the morning breeze did me good. I stood before the mirror, to comb my hair, and was astonished at the pallor of my face, which I had thought must be blushing crimson.

The others entered to see if we were still sleeping, and nudged their friend with their foot, who showed little surprise on finding himself in the position he occupied.

The horses were saddled, and we set off. But let that suffice for today; my pen is blunt, and I too tired to sharpen it. I'll tell you the rest of my adventures later. In the meantime, love me as I love you, Graciosa the aptly-named, and, despite what I've just written, don't think too badly of me, or my virtue.

Chapter 11: D'Albert to Silvio

Many things are a bore: it's a bore to return money one has borrowed, funds one was accustomed to regard as one's own; it's a bore to caress the woman today one loved yesterday; it's a bore to visit a house for dinner, and find the owners are in the country for a month; it's a bore to write a novel, and more boring to read it; it's a bore to find a pimple on one's nose, and to possess chapped lips on the day one goes to visit the idol of one's heart; it's a bore to be shod in ridiculous boots that yawn at the pavement through every seam, and above all to have emptiness lodge in one's cobwebbed purse; it's a bore to be a doorkeeper or an emperor; it's a bore to be oneself, or to be another; it's a bore to walk when your corns hurt, ride a horse when your backside aches, in a carriage where some fat fellow is bound to make a pillow of your shoulder, or aboard a steamer if you feel seasick, and so vomit up all the contents of your stomach; it's a bore to endure the winter

in which you shiver, and the summer in which you sweat; but the most tedious thing in earth, hell, or heaven, is certainly to attend the performance of a tragedy, unless it be a romance, or a comedy.

A tragedy truly makes my head ache. What could be more foolish or more stupid? Those great tyrants with bull-like voices, pacing the stage from side to side, swinging their hairy arms like windmill sails, and imprisoned in flesh-coloured stockings, are they not wretched imitations of Bluebeard, or the Ogre? Their inflated pride would make any audience still awake burst into laughter.

Those lovers of the romances are no less ridiculous. It is something indeed to see them advance, dressed all in black or all in white, with hair down to their shoulders, sleeves that cover their hands, bodies ready to pop from their corsets like kernels pressed between one's fingers; and seeming to drag the soles of their satin shoes along the floor, or, in great movements of passion, pushing their coat-tails back with a little kick of the heel. The dialogue, composed exclusively of 'Oh!'s and 'Ah!'s that emerge amid their giggles, as they preen themselves, is truly a pleasant meal and easy to digest. Their princes are always most charming; only a little dark and melancholic, which does not prevent them from being the finest companions in the world, and elsewhere.

As for those comedies that are supposed to correct our morals, but which fortunately fulfil that role rather badly, I find their paternal sermons and carping uncles, as tiresome on stage as in reality. It is not my opinion that we should double the count of fools by presenting them theatrically; there are already enough as it is, thank the Lord, nor is the species about to become extinct. Why portray someone who has a snout like a pig, or a muzzle like an ox, or repeat the nonsense of some fool whom one would hurl from the window if he visited your house? An actor playing a pedant is as uninteresting as the pedant himself; seen in a mirror, he's no less of a pedant. A mime who imitates the poses and mannerisms of a cobbler, perfectly, amuses me no more than the real cobbler.

But there is one form of theatre that I love: an impossibly fantastic, and extravagant form, which the honest public would hiss, mercilessly, from the very first scene, for want of being unable to understand a word of it.

It is a most singular form too. Glow-worms serve as lamps; a beetle beating time with its antennae directs the music. The cricket performs its part; the nightingale is first flute; little sylphs, emerging from pea-flowers, clasp lemon-peel double-basses between their pretty legs which are whiter than ivory, and with bows made from Titania's eyelashes scrape away at the strings made of spider's thread; the little wig with triple curls, worn by the beetle who acts as conductor, quivers with pleasure, and scatters luminous powder around, so sweet is the harmony and so well executed the overture!

A curtain woven of butterfly wings, thinner than the inner membrane of an egg, rises slowly after the three initial and obligatory chords. The room is full of the souls of poets seated in mother-of-pearl stalls, watching the spectacle through drops of dew mounted on the golden pistils of lily flowers which form their opera-glasses.

The sets are unlike any known before; the countries they represent are more unknown to us than America prior to its discovery. The palette of the richest painter bears not half the hues with

which they are decorated: everything is painted in strange and singular colours. Ash-green, ash-blue, ultramarine, yellow, and crimson lacquers are lavished on them.

The sky, a greenish-blue, is striped with broad pale and tawny bands; the foliage of small, slender, spindly trees, the colour of a dried rose, sways in the background; the landscape, instead of drowning in azure vapour, is the most beautiful apple-green, and spirals of golden smoke escape from it here and there. A stray shaft of light catches the pediment of a ruined temple, or the spire of a tower. Cities full of bell-towers, pyramids, domes, arches, and ramparts, sited on the hills, are reflected in crystal lakes; the intertwined trunks and branches of tall trees with broad leaves, cut by the feys with magic scissors, form the wings. Snowy clouds gather above them, and deep in the trees' cracks and hollows one can see the glittering eyes of dwarves and gnomes, while the twisted roots plunge into the ground like the fingers of giant hands. Woodpeckers strike the trunks in time with their hard beaks, as emerald lizards bask in the sun, on the moss at their feet.



Sunset by the Ruins
Hermann David Salomon Corrodi (Italian, 1844-1905)

Artree

Mushrooms watch the comedy, hats on heads, like the insolent folk they are, while charming violets stand on tiptoe between the blades of grass, opening wide blue eyes, to see the hero pass by. Bullfinches and linnets lean from the tips of the branches to prompt the actors.

Through the tall grasses, and purple thistles, and burdocks with velvet leaves, streams of tears from baying stags wind, like silver snakes. From time to time, anemones gleam on the lawn like drops of blood, and daisies raise their heads laden with crowns of pearls like duchesses.

The characters are of no known time or country; they come and go without anyone knowing how or why; they neither eat nor drink, they live nowhere, and do no work; they have neither land, income, nor houses; though sometimes they carry under one arm a small box full of diamonds as big as pigeon's eggs; as they pass by, not a single drop of rain falls from the tips of the flowers, nor does a single grain of dust rise from the roads.

Their clothes are the most extravagant and fanciful in the world. Hats pointed like steeples, their brims as wide as Chinese parasols, adorned with enormous feathers plucked from the tails of phoenixes and birds of paradise; capes striped in brilliant colours, doublets of velvet and brocade that reveal their satin or silver cloth lining through gold-laced slits; breeches puffed out, inflated like balloons; scarlet stockings with embroidered heels; high-heeled shoes with large rosettes; small, slender swords, blades in the air and hilts pointing downward, decorated with braid and ribbons; that's how the men are clothed. The women are no less curiously dressed.

The drawings of Stefano della Bella and Romeyn de Hooghe would serve to represent the character of their attire: full-bodied, undulating dresses, with wide pleats that shimmer like turtledoves' throats and reflect the changing hues of the iris-flowers; large sleeves; corsets loaded with bows and embroidery; braided cords, curious jewels, aigrettes of heron-feathers, necklaces of huge pearls, peacock-tail fans with mirrors at their centres; little mules and pattens; garlands of artificial flowers, sequins, and gauze in gold and silver lamé; rouge, beauty-spots; everything that can add interest and piquancy to a theatrical toilette.

The style is neither precisely English, nor German, nor French, Turkish, Spanish, or Tartar, though it includes a little of all these, adopting from each country all that is most graceful and characteristic. Actors so dressed can speak as they wish, without concerning themselves with verisimilitude. Fantasy has run riot everywhere, fashion unfurls its variegated coils at ease, like a snake warming itself in the sun; the most exotic conceits open their singular blooms fearlessly, and spread about them perfumes of amber and musk. Nothing constrains them; neither place, name, nor costume.

How amusing and charming their speeches! These fine actors are not those screechers of the playhouses, mouths distorted, eyes bulging to add effect to their tirades; they never present themselves like workers pursuing a task, oxen yoked to the action, and hastening to finish; they are free of chalk and rouge plastered half an inch thick; they wield no daggers made of tin, nor

hide pig's bladders filled with chicken's blood under their coats; nor drag the same oil-stained rag around for entire acts.

They speak without haste, without shouting, like people in company who attach scant importance to their actions: the lover makes his declaration to his beloved with the most detached air in the world; while talking, he taps his thigh with the tip of his white glove, or adjusts his adornments. The lady, in turn, nonchalantly shakes the dew from her bouquet, and strikes poses along with her maid; the lover cares little about wooing his lady: his principal business is to let fall, from his lips, streams of pearls, and cascades of roses, and scatter poetic gems like a true worker of miracles; often he even retires completely, and lets the author woo his mistress for him. Jealousy is not a fault of his; his nature is most accommodating. With his eyes raised to the airy cornices and friezes of the theatre, he waits, complacently, for the poet to finish saying whatever caught the latter's fancy before resuming his role and kneeling before her again.

Everything is tied and untied with admirable carelessness: effects lack cause, and causes have no effect; the wittiest character is the one who talks the most nonsense; the most foolish person utters the wittiest things; young girls say things that would make courtesans blush; courtesans reel off moral maxims. The most unheard-of adventures follow one another in quick succession without being explained; the noble father arrives expressly from China, in a bamboo junk, to reclaim his kidnapped daughter; the gods and feys do little but descend and ascend in their machines. The action plunges beneath the topaz domes of the ocean waves, and wanders the seabed, through forests of coral and madrepores, or rises to the sky on lark's wings, or those of a griffin. The dialogue is universal; the lion contributes with a vigorous roared 'Oh' (*see Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' Act V, Scene I, Snug as the lion*) the wall speaks through its crannied hole or chink (*ditto: Snout, as the wall*), and, provided they have a remark, disguise or pun to add, all are free to interrupt the most interesting of scenes: Bottom's ass's head is as welcome as Puck's blonde one; the author's spirit is seen there in all forms; and all these contrasts are like so many facets which reflect different aspects, adding their prismatic colours.

This apparent chaos and disorder, this fantastic guise, ultimately renders real life more accurately than the most minutely studied drama of morals. Each character contains the whole of humanity within, and by uttering what comes into their head succeeds far better than a copyist with a magnifying glass in portraying objects without.

O fair throng! Romantic young lovers, vagabond damsels, obliging attendants, caustic jesters, naive servants and peasants, good-natured kings, often with names unknown to the historian and kingdoms unknown to the geographer; colourful 'fools', clowns of sharp repartee and miraculous capers; O you, above all, who let free caprice speak through your smiling mouths, I love and adore you: Perdita, Rosalind, Celia, Pandarus, Parolles, Silvia, Leander, and the rest; you, charming types, products of artifice and yet so true, who, on the colourful wings of fancy, rise above gross reality; you, in whom the poet personifies his joy, his sadness, his love and his most intimate dreams under the most frivolous and impersonal of masks.

In this form of theatre, written for feys, and to be performed by moonlight, there is one piece which delights me most; it is a play so errant, so vagabond, whose plot is so wayward, and the characters so singular, that Shakespeare himself, not knowing what title to give it, called it 'As You Like It', an adaptable name, that suits the whole.

In reading that strange play, one feels transported into an unknown world, of which one nevertheless has some vague reminiscence: one no longer knows whether one is dead or alive, whether one is dreaming or awake; graceful figures smile at you gently, and throw you, as they pass, a friendly hello; you feel moved and troubled at the sight of them, as if, at the bend of a road, you suddenly encountered your ideal, or the forgotten ghost of your first mistress suddenly stood before you. Springs flow, murmuring half-stifled complaints; the wind stirs the old trees of the ancient forest over the head of the old exiled duke, with compassionate sighs; and, when the melancholic Jaques lets his philosophical complaints flow with the willow leaves, it seems to you that it is you yourself that speaks, and that the most secret and obscure thought of your heart is revealed and illuminated.



As you like it, act 1, scene 2 (1901)
John E. Sutcliffe (English, 1876-1923)

Artree

O youngest son (*Orlando*), so mistreated by fate, of the brave knight Rowland de Boys! I cannot help being jealous of you; you still have a faithful servant, Adam, whose old age is green beneath his snowy hair. You are banished, but at least you are banished after having fought and triumphed; your wicked brother robs you of all your wealth, but Rosalind gives you the chain from her neck; you are poor, but you are loved; you leave your country, but the daughter of your persecutor follows you beyond the sea.

The trees of the forest of Arden open great arms of foliage to receive and hide you; that good forest, so as to lodge you, gathers silkiest moss from deep in its caves; it inclines its arched branches over your head to protect you from rain and sun; the tears of its founts show their pity for you, as do the sighs of its fawns, and the baying of its stags; it makes of its rocks pleasant writing-desks for your amorous epistles; it lends you its thorn-bushes to hang them from, and commands the satin bark of its aspens to yield to the point of your stylus whenever you wish to engrave Rosalind's name there.

If only, Orlando, one had, like you, a large, shady forest to retreat to, there to isolate oneself in one's sorrow, and if, at the turn of an alley, one could meet the one who is sought, recognisable, through their disguise! But, alas, the world of the spirit owns to no verdant Arden, and it is only in the flowery beds of poetry that the capricious little wild-flower blooms, whose perfume makes one forget all. We shed tears, but they do not flow as beautiful silvery cascades; we sigh, but no complacent echo troubles to return our complaints, adorned with assonance and conceits. In vain we hang our sonnets on the prickly brambles, Rosalind never reads them; and we carve amorous ciphers on the tree-bark to no purpose.

Birds of the sky, each of you lend me a feather, the swallow and the eagle, the hummingbird and the rock dove, so that I may make a pair of wings for myself, so as to fly high and swiftly through unknown regions, where I shall find nothing that recalls the cities of the living, where I can forget that I am myself, and live a strange, new life, beyond America, Africa, Asia, beyond the last isle of the world, across the northern ice, beyond the pole where the aurora borealis trembles, in that impalpable kingdom to which the divine creations of poets, and examples of supreme beauty, take flight.

How can one endure the ordinary conversations of our circles and salons, once one has heard you speak, glittering Mercutio, whose every sentence bursts in showers of silver and gold, like firework rockets beneath a sky strewn with stars? Pale Desdemona, what pleasure do you expect us to take in earthly music, after the romance of your 'Willow Song'? What woman can seem beautiful, faced with your Venuses, you ancient sculptors, you poets of the marble stanza?

Ah! Despite the furious embrace in which I have sought to clasp the material world, lacking the other, I feel that I am ill-born, that life was not fashioned for me, and repels me. I cannot mingle with the crowd: yet whatever path I follow, I go astray; the trim alley, the rock-strewn track, lead me equally to the abyss. If I wish to take flight, the air congeals around me, and I remain captive, my wings spread, and I unable to close them. I can neither walk nor fly; on earth, the sky

attracts me, the earth when I mount the sky; on high, the north wind tears my feathers from me; below, the pebbles offend my feet. These feet are far too tender to tread the glass shards of reality; my wingspan is too narrow to hover high above things, or rise, from circle to circle, in the mystical azure, and attain the inaccessible summit of eternal love; I am the most unfortunate hippogriff (*see Ariosto's 'Orlando Furioso'*), the most miserable collection of heterogeneous fragments that has ever existed since the Ocean fell in love with the Moon, and women chose to deceive men. The monstrous Chimera, put to death by Bellerophon, with her virgin's head, lion's paws, goat's body and dragon's tail, was an animal simply composed compared to me.

In my frail breast dwell the violet-strewn reveries of a modest girl, and the mad ardour of an orgiastic courtesan: my desires stray, like lions sharpening their claws in the shadows, seeking something to devour; my thoughts, more feverish and more restless than those of goats, cling to the most threatening cliffs; my hatred, bloated with venom, twists scaly folds in inextricable knots, and drags itself endlessly through ruts and ravines.

My soul is a strange country, flourishing and splendid in appearance, but moist with more putrid and deleterious marshes than the shores of Batavia: the slightest ray of sunlight on the mud there causes reptiles to hatch and mosquitoes to swarm; the large yellow tulips, the nagassari and ashoka flowers, veil, in their pomp, filthy carrion. The amorous rose opens its scarlet lips, and shows its little dew-wet teeth, smilingly, to the gallant nightingale, who recites to it madrigals and sonnets: nothing is more charming; but I wager that, in the grass, in the shade of the rose-bush, a dropsical toad crawls on lame legs, silvering the path with its slime.

Here are springs clearer and more limpid than purest diamond; but it would be better to draw stagnant marsh water from beneath a mantle of rotting rushes, and drowned dogs, than to dip your cup in this wave. A serpent haunts the depths, and twines about itself with frightening rapidity, while disgorging its venom.

Plant wheat, and asphodel, henbane, darnel, and pale hemlock with its greyish-green branches will grow. Instead of the roots you buried, you'll be surprised to find hairy, twisted tentacles of black mandrake emerging from the ground.

If you leave a souvenir here, and return later to collect it, you'll find it greener with moss, teeming more busily with woodlice, and fouler insects still, than a stone left on a damp cellar floor.

Don't try crossing the dark forests; they are more impassable than the virgin forests of America, or the jungles of Java: lianas as strong as cables run from tree to tree; plants, leaves bristling and pointed like spearheads, obstruct your passage; the grass-blades themselves are like downy stinging nettles. From arches of foliage, gigantic vampire bats hang by their claws; scarabs of vast size shake threatening antennae, and whip the air with their quadruple wings; monstrous creatures of fantasy, like those seen in nightmares, advance, painfully, shattering the reeds before them. There are herds of elephants, whose dry and wrinkled skin crushes flies, or that rub their flanks across stones and trees; rhinoceroses, with rough hides; and hippopotami, whose bloated muzzles bristle with hair, ploughing and kneading the forest's mud and detritus with their broad feet.

In the clearings, where the sun's luminous rays cut golden wedges through the moist air, where you might hope to rest yourself, you'll forever find some streak of tigers casually lying, sniffing the

air, blinking their sea-green eyes, and licking their velvet fur with crimson, papillae-covered tongues; or some knot of boa constrictors half-asleep, digesting the bull they last swallowed.

Fear everything: grass, fruits, water, air, shade, sun; all are deadly. Close your ears to the chatter of the parakeets with golden beaks and emerald necks that hop down from the trees, and perch on your fist, fluttering their wings; for, with their pretty golden beaks, those little parakeets with emerald necks will gently gouge out your eyes the moment you stoop to kiss them. That's how things are!

The world does not want me; it rejects me, as if I were a ghost escaped from the tomb; I'm almost as pallid as one: my blood refuses to accept that I'm alive, and fails to colour my skin; it drags, itself slowly, through my veins, like stagnant water in a clogged canal. My heart beats at nothing that makes a man's beat. My sorrows and joys are not those of humankind. I violently desire what none desire; yet I disdain what others desperately seek. I have loved women who bore no love for me, and have been loved when I had rather been hated: always too soon or too late, less or more, below, beyond; never what was needed; either I failed to arrive, or travelled too far. I have scattered my life from the window, or focussed it to excess on a single point, and from the restless activity of the *ardelio* (*busybody*) have attained the gloomy drowsiness of the *tiryaki* (*addict*), or the stasis of a Stylite (*ascetic*) on his column.

Whatever I do always seems like a dream; my actions seem more the outcome of somnambulism than free will; there is something in me, felt obscurely, deeply within, that makes me act without my own involvement and always outside of the common law; the simple, natural aspect of things reveals itself to me only after every other has done so, and I grasp, first of all, the bizarre: if a line is a little skewed, I will soon turn it into a spiral, more twisted than a snake; contours, if they are not carved in the most precise of manners, quickly seem blurred and deformed. Figures take on a supernatural air, and gaze at me with a dreadful gaze.

Also, through a kind of instinctive reaction, I have always desperately clung to the material, the external features of things, and have given a deal of space in my life to the plastic arts. I comprehend statues perfectly, yet I fail to understand human beings; when life arises, I halt and recoil in terror, as if I had seen Medusa's face. The mere phenomenon of life itself causes me a degree of astonishment from which I fail to recover. I will doubtless make an excellent corpse, given I make a poor show as a living being, while the point of my existence escapes me completely. The sound of my own voice startles me, unimaginably, and I often mistake it for the voice of another. When I want to stretch out my arm, and it obeys me, it seems to me quite a prodigious thing, and I fall into the most profound stupefaction.

And yet, Silvio, I understand what is unintelligible to others perfectly; the most extravagant things seem natural to me, and I enter into them with singular ease. I follow the most capricious and disorganised of nightmares easily. That is the reason why the kind of theatre I was speaking of just now pleases me above all others.

I have lengthy discussions with Théodore and Rosette on this subject: Rosette has little taste for my system, she is for actual reality; Théodore allows the poets more latitude, and admits a truth derived through artificial conventions, and visual effects. I maintain the field must be left completely free to the author, and that fantasy should reign supreme.

Many of my companions, based their argument mainly on the fact that such plays were generally beyond the scope of theatrical effects, and were thus unperformable. I replied that this was true in one sense and false in another, like almost everything else that is said, and that their ideas regarding the possibility and impossibility of staging such pieces seemed to me lacking in accuracy and derived from prejudice rather than reason, and I claimed, among other things, that 'As You Like It' was certainly very performable, especially for amateurs unaccustomed to playing other roles.

This gave rise to the idea of actually enacting it. After all, the season is drawing on, and every kind of amusement has been exhausted; people are weary of hunting, riding, and water-play; and card-games like Boston, however varied they may be, lack enough interest to occupy an evening, so the proposal was received with universal enthusiasm.

A young fellow who knew how to paint a scene offered to do the sets; he is working on them, at present, with great ardour, and, in a few days, they'll be finished. A stage has been erected in the orangery, which is the largest room in the château, and I think all will go well. I am to play Orlando; Rosette was to play Rosalind, as was only fair. Being my mistress, and mistress of the house, the role belonged to her by right; but she disdains to disguise herself as a man, due to some singular whim of her own, of which prudishness is certainly not the cause. If I had not been certain of the contrary, one would have thought she wished to hide ill-shaped legs. Currently, none of the society ladies wish to show themselves as any less scrupulous than Rosette, and this almost caused the idea to be abandoned; but Théodore, who had accepted the role of the melancholic Jaques, offered to replace her, since Rosalind is almost always in male disguise, except in the first act, where she is in female dress; and with makeup, a corset, and a gown he will be able to maintain sufficient illusion, not yet possessing a beard, and being very slim.

We are learning our parts, and it is a curious thing to see. In every solitary corner of the park, you are sure to find someone, script in hand, muttering their lines under their breath, raising their eyes to heaven and suddenly lowering them, and repeating the identical gesture seven times or more. If one did not know we are about to play a comedy, we might certainly be taken for a house of madmen or poets (which is well-nigh a tautology).

I think we'll soon be ready to hold a rehearsal. I expect something very singular. Perhaps I am wrong. I was afraid, at first, that instead of acting in an inspired manner our actors would try to reproduce the poses, and inflections of voice, of some fashionable player of comedy; but fortunately they have not followed the theatre with sufficient zeal to fall into this error, and I believe they will display, due to their awkwardness, being folk who have never acted on stage, precious flashes of naturalness, and the charming naiveté the most consummate talent cannot reproduce.

Our young painter has truly worked wonders: it would be impossible to give a more whimsical turn to the old tree trunks, and the ivy that entwines them; he has modelled them on those in the park, accentuating and exaggerating them, as should be the case as regards a stage-set. Everything is done with admirable liveliness and caprice; the stones, the rocks, the clouds are of a mysteriously steely form; reflections play on the trembling waters, shimmering more than quicksilver, and the usually chilly foliage is marvellously enhanced with saffron tints applied with an autumnal brush;

the forest varies from emerald-green to a carnelian purple; the warmest and freshest tones merge harmoniously, and the sky itself passes from tenderest blue to the most ardent of colours.

He has also designed all the costumes according to my instructions; they are of the loveliest character. At first, there arose a cry that they could never be translated into silk and velvet, nor any known fabric, and I almost dreaded the moment when troubadour costume might be generally adopted. The ladies said that such bright colours would eclipse the light of their eyes. To which I replied that their eyes were perfectly inextinguishable stars, and that it was, on the contrary, their eyes that would eclipse the colours, and even the oil lamps, the chandelier, and the sun, if needs be. They made no reply to this; yet a bristling host of other objections appeared, like the tentacles of the Lernaean Hydra; no sooner had the tip of one been severed, than another reared its head, more stubborn and stupid than ever.

— ‘How do you expect that to hold up?’ — ‘It’s all fine on paper, but something else on one’s back.’ — ‘I’ll never get into that!’ — ‘My petticoat’s at least four inches too short.’ — ‘I’d never dare show myself in this!’ — ‘This ruff’s too tall; I look like a hunchback with no neck.’ — ‘This hairstyle ages me intolerably’.

— ‘With starch, and pins, and goodwill, everything will be fine.’ — ‘Are you joking! With a waist like yours, slenderer than a wasp’s, one that would fit through the ring on my little finger! I wager twenty-five louis against a kiss that the bodice will have to be made shorter.’ — ‘Your skirt is far from being too short, and if you could see what adorable legs you have, you’d certainly be of my opinion.’ — ‘On the contrary, your neck stands out admirably well in your lace halo.’ — ‘That hairstyle doesn’t age you at all, and, even if it made you look a few years older, you’re so exceedingly young that it couldn’t matter less; in truth, one would suspect you were barely an adult, if one did not know where the pieces of your last doll lie scattered’... *et cetera*.

You cannot imagine the prodigious quantity of compliments I was obliged to offer, to force our ladies to wear those charming costumes which suit them perfectly.

I also had a deal of trouble getting their fascinators adjusted properly. What devilish taste women have! And what titanic stubbornness is possessed by some vaporous little mistress who believes that a cold straw-yellow suits her better than daffodil, or bright pink. I am sure if one were to apply to public affairs half the tricks, and half the intrigue I did to have a red plume worn on the left, and not on the right, one could easily become Emperor, or a Minister of State at the very least.

What pandemonium! What a huge and inextricable tumult mounting a real play must involve! Since the talk of acting began, everything here has remained in complete disorder. All the drawers are open, all the cupboards emptied; it is a matter of true sack and pillage. The tables, armchairs, consoles, everything is cluttered, one does not know where to place one’s feet: prodigious quantities of dresses, mantles, veils, skirts, capes, toques, and hats are scattered about the house; and, when one thinks that all this must be borne by the bodies of only seven or eight people, one involuntarily recalls those entertainers at the fairground, with eight to ten suits of clothes worn on top of each other: and one cannot imagine that, from all this heap, but a single costume will emerge to adorn each.

The servants are always hastening to and fro; there are always two or three on the road between the castle and the town, and if this continues, the horses will all be winded.

A theatre director lacks the time to be melancholic, and I have not been so for some time. I am so deafened and stunned that I begin to lose track of the play. Since I am fulfilling the role of impresario in addition to that of Orlando, my job is twofold. Whenever any difficulty arises, I am the one they turn to, and since my decisions are not always considered oracular, the matter devolves into interminable discussion.

If one calls it living to be always on one's feet, to answer questions from twenty people, to run up and down stairs, and not have a minute to think, I have never lived so much as I have this week; yet I am not as moved by all this activity as one might believe. My agitation is shallow in depth, and a few fathoms down one would find that the water is undisturbed and dead; external life does not readily penetrate; and it is then that I perhaps am least alive. Though I seem to act, and to involve myself with what is done; action stupefies me, and wearies me to a degree of which you can have no idea; when I cease to act, I reflect, or at least I dream, and that is a form of existence; I no longer experience it whenever I quit the state of repose of a porcelain idol.

Up to now, I have achieved nothing, and know not if I ever will. I know not how to control my thoughts, which is the whole difference between the man of talent and the man of genius; they bubble endlessly in my brain, wave after wave of them; I cannot channel the internal fount of ideas, that rises from my heart to my head, and which lacking an outlet produces no result. I fail to create anything, not from sterility, but from overabundance; my ideas are dense, so tightly packed, that they suffocate and fail to flourish. My powers of execution, however swiftly and ardently I work, are insufficient: when I write a sentence, the idea it sought to express seems already as remote from me as if a century has passed, and not an instant, and is often entangled, in spite of my efforts, with some element of the idea which has already replaced it in my mind.

That is why I can neither maintain the life of a poet nor of a lover. I can only render ideas I no longer own; I seek to possess women only once I have forgotten them, and found love elsewhere; how can I bring what I wish to light, for, however quickly I work, I no longer sense what I am doing, and act based on memory alone?

To quarry a thought from deep in one's brain; to extract it like a raw block of marble from its seam, to set it before oneself and, chisel in one hand, hammer in the other, strike, carve, scrape, from morn to eve, yet bear away at night a mere pinch of its dust to scatter over one's writing; that I shall never be capable of.

I can envisage the slender form in the rough block, quite clearly, I have a precise vision of it; but there are so many angles to smooth, so many fragments to split away, so many blows of hammer and chisel to land, in order to achieve its shape, to grasp the proper sinuosity of outline, that my hands blister, and I drop the chisel to the ground.

If I persist, my fatigue is so intense that my inner vision is utterly eclipsed, and I can no longer see in the marble block the pale divinity hidden within. Then I work at random, gropingly; I carve out too much here, I fail to cut deep enough there; I remove material designed to form a leg or arm, yet leave a compact mass where there should have been a void. Instead of a goddess, I leave a lump, sometimes less than a lump, and that magnificent block excavated, at great expense and

with such labour, from the bowels of the earth, and then hammered, carved, hollowed out, in all directions, looks more like a colony of polyps, a skeletal coral-reef, than shaped by a sculptor according to a prior plan.

How did you, Michelangelo, slice through marble, like a child carving at a chestnut? Of what steel were your unconquerable chisels made? What robust limbs were yours, all you fertile, hardworking artists, whom no material could resist, who poured your dreams entire onto canvas, or into statues made of bronze?

It is an innocent vanity of mine, permissible in a way, after speaking so harshly of myself just now, and one for which you will not blame me, Silvio, that I am indeed a poet and a painter, even though the universe will never know of it, even though my name is doomed to oblivion! I have experienced ideas as beautiful as those of any poet in the world; I have created types as pure, as divine, as those which are most admired in the paintings of the great masters. I see my creations here before me, as clearly, as distinctly as if they were real, and, if I could but pierce a hole in my skull, and set a piece of glass there so that someone could gaze therein, they would see the most marvellous gallery of pictures ever known. No king on earth can boast of possessing such. There are works by Rubens there, as flamboyant, as glowing, as the purest seen in Antwerp; my Raphaels are of the finest, his own Madonnas do not possess more graceful smiles; Buonarotti never portrayed muscular form in a prouder or more striking way; Venetian sunlight shines on that canvas as if it were signed: Paulo Caliari (*Veronese*); Rembrandt's own dark hues haunt the depths of this frame, where a pale starry light trembles in the distance; these paintings, in a manner peculiar to myself, would surely not be disdained by any.

I know well that what I say sounds strange; that I shall appear stubborn and intoxicated with foolish pride, in maintaining such a thing; but that is how I am, and nothing can shake my conviction on this point. No one, doubtless, will share that same; but what can be done? Everyone born is sealed with a black or white seal. It would seem that mine is black. I even have difficulty in hiding my thoughts sufficiently on occasions, regarding this matter; I have often spoken too familiarly of those elevated geniuses whose works one must adore, and whose statues one must contemplate from afar, and on one's knees. Once, I even forgot myself to the point of saying: 'We'. Fortunately, it was to a person who failed to notice, otherwise I would, infallibly, have been taken for the most enormous fool there ever was. Am I not both poet and painter, Silvio?

It is fallacious to believe that all those who have been thought geniuses were truly greater than others. We are unaware to what extent the pupils, and unknown artists whom Raphael employed enhanced his reputation; that he leant his signature to a host of other minds and talents is all we know.

Great painters, great writers, often occupy, and fill, whole centuries by themselves: they have no more urgent and immediate task than to attempt every genre, so that rivals, if they appear, can be accused from the outset of plagiarism, and halted at the first step in their careers; it is an established tactic which, while not new, is nonetheless seen to succeed every day.

It may be that someone famous has no more talent than you possess but, for fear of being considered a mere imitator, you are obliged to divert your innate inspiration, and let it flow elsewhere. You were born, perhaps, to blow the epic trumpet, or evoke the pale phantoms of past days, but must play the seven-holed flute instead, or tie knots on a sofa in the back of some

boudoir, all because your father did not take the trouble to produce you nine or ten years earlier, and because the world does not permit two artists to pursue the same field.

Thus, many noble minds are obliged to choose, knowingly, a path that is not their own, and continually skirt their true domain from which they are banished, continually stealing a glance over the hedge, seeing the beautiful varied flowers the seed of which they possess but, lacking access, cannot sow, blooming in the sun on the other side.

As for me, ignoring the opportune effects, or not, of circumstance, the amount of air or sun, some door that remained closed that might have opened, some missed encounter, some person I should have met but failed to do so, I know not if I would ever have achieved anything, even then.

I lack the necessary degree of stupidity to become what is known as an 'absolute genius', and also the enormous stubbornness which is deified under the beautiful name of willpower once the great artist has arrived at the shining summit of the mountain, and which is indispensable if one is to reach it. I know far too well that all things are hollow and rotten within to attach myself for long to any single one, and pursue it, despite all, ardently, and uniquely.

Artists of genius are narrow-minded, which is why they become what they are. A certain lack of intelligence prevents their perceiving the obstacles that separate them from all they wish to achieve; they advance, and in two or three strides, devour the intervening space. As their minds remain obstinately closed to fashion, and they perceive only what is most immediate to their projects, they expend far less thought and action: nothing distracts them, nothing diverts them, they act more by instinct than otherwise, and many, when viewed outside of their special sphere, are mere nullities, a thing which is difficult to comprehend.

Certainly, it is a rare and charming gift to write verse well; few delight more than I in matters of poetry; nevertheless I have no desire to limit my life to the twelve metrical feet of an alexandrine; there are a thousand things that trouble me quite as much as a hemistich, though not the state of society and the reform it requires; I care little whether the masses know how to read or not, and whether folk eat bread or must graze on grass; it is the hundred thousand visions and more that pass through my head in a single hour, and have not the slightest connection with caesura or rhyme, that cause me to execute so little, though I possess far more ideas than certain poets who might well be burned at the stake along with their works.

I adore beauty and I feel it deeply. I can speak of it as genuinely as the most passionate sculptor can grasp it, and yet I carve no statues. The ugliness and imperfection of sketches revolts me; yet I am too impatient to bring the work to fruition through endless polishing and repolishing. If only I could resolve to ignore certain blemishes in what I do, whether in verse or in painting, I would perhaps create a poem or a picture that would guarantee my fame, and those who love me (if there are any in this world who take the trouble to do so) would not be obliged to take my word for it, and would possess a perfect answer to the sardonic sneers of the many detractors of the great, ignored genius that is myself.

I see many who take up a palette, brushes, and cover the canvas, without otherwise caring what whim is brought to life at the tip of their brush, and others who pen a hundred verses in a row without a single deletion, and without once raising their eyes to the ceiling. I always admire them for themselves, even if I sometimes fail to admire their work. I envy, with all my heart, their

charming intrepidity, that happy blindness which prevents their seeing their faults, even the most palpable. As soon as I have captured something badly, I see it at once, and worry over it incessantly; and, as I am far more learned in theory than in practice, it often happens that I cannot correct the fault of which I am conscious; so, I turn the canvas with its face to the wall, and never return to it. I possess so persistent an idea of perfection that disgust with the work grips me, and prevents my continuing.

Ah! When I compare the sweet aspects of my thought, with the ugly pout it displays on canvas or paper, when I see a repulsive bat pass by, in place of the beautiful dream that spread its great wings of light amidst my night, or a thistle spring from the concept of a rose; when I hear a donkey braying when I expected the nightingale's sweetest melody, I am so dreadfully disappointed, so furious with myself, so angered by my own impotence, that I resolve never to write or speak a single word more in my life, rather than thus commit a crime of high treason against my mind.

I can't even manage to write a letter as I would like. I often say something completely different to my intent; certain parts take on an excessive development, others shrink to the point of becoming imperceptible, and very often the idea that I had to express is lost, or only admitted as a postscript.

When I began to write this letter to you, I certainly had no intention of telling you half of what I've said. I simply wished to let you know that we were going to perform a comedy; but a word leads to a sentence; parentheses are pregnant with other inner parentheses which, themselves, bear others in their wombs ready to be born. There is no reason why this letter should end rather than continuing on to fill two hundred volumes in folio, which would certainly be too much of a fine thing.

As soon as I take up my pen, there is a murmur and rustling of wings in my head, as if multitudes of cockchafers were being released therein. They strike the wall of my skull, turn, descend, and ascend again while causing a dreadful din; they are my thoughts, which seek an exit so they may fly away; all strive to emerge at once; more than one shatters its legs or tears the crepe of its wings: sometimes the threshold is so obstructed that none can cross it, and reach the paper I write on.

It is how I am made: not well, no doubt, but what do you expect? The fault lies with the gods, not with myself, a poor devil who cannot help it being thus. I have no need to ask for your indulgence, my dear Silvio; it is already mine, and you will show your kindness once more, in reading my indecipherable scribble to the end, my thoughts lacking head or tail: for however disjointed and absurd they may seem, they always offer you interest, because they originate in myself, and what I am, even if it is ill, is not without some worth to you.

I allow you to see what revolts commonplace men the most: a sincere pride. But let us sign a truce regarding all these fine things, and, since I write to tell you of the play we are to perform, let me return to it, and speak of it a little.

A rehearsal took place today; never in my life have I been so troubled, not because of the embarrassment that always arises in reciting something before an audience, but for another reason. We were in costume, and about to begin. Théodore alone had not yet arrived, and they sent to his

room to see what delayed him. He sent word that he had just finished dressing, and was heading downstairs.

Indeed, he had arrived; I heard his step in the corridor long before he appeared, and yet no one in the world has a lighter step than Théodore; the sympathy I feel for him is so strong that I can somehow discern his movements through the walls, and when I felt that he was about to put his hand on the doorknob, it caused something akin to tremor in me, and my heart beat with dreadful force. It seemed to me that some important issue in my life was about to be decided, and that I had reached a solemn and long-awaited moment.

The door slowly opened and fell back. There was a general cry of admiration. The men applauded; the women crimsoned. Rosette alone turned extremely pale and leant against the wall, as if a sudden revelation had invaded her mind; she made the same sudden movement, though in the opposite direction, as myself. I had always suspected her of being in love with Théodore.

Doubtless, at that moment, she saw, as I did, that Rosalind, no longer disguised as a man, was in truth a young and beautiful woman, and that the frail house of cards her hopes had built had suddenly collapsed, while mine arose from its ruins; at least that is what I thought: I may be mistaken, for I was hardly in a condition for exact observation.

The three or four pretty women present in addition to Rosette, appeared revoltingly ugly. Beside this risen sun, the star of their beauty had been eclipsed in an instant, and the gathering wondered how anyone could have found them even passable. Men who, before this, would have thought themselves quite happy to possess them as mistresses would scarcely now have wanted them as servants.

My image of the ideal, which until then had been only faintly outlined and with vague contours, the adored and vainly-pursued phantom, was there, before my eyes, living, palpable, no longer in mist and half-light, but brightly and radiantly lit; and not in a useless disguise, but in its true dress; no longer in the mocking form of a young man, but with the features of the most charming of women.

I felt a sensation of enormous well-being, as if a mountain or more had been lifted from my chest. I felt the horror I had of myself dissipate, now having been delivered from the tedium of thinking myself a monster. I reverted to a completely pastoral view of myself, and all the violets of spring bloomed once more in my heart.

He, or rather she (for I no longer wish to recall that I was stupid enough as to take her for a man), remained motionless for a minute on the threshold, as if to grant the gathering time to utter their initial exclamations. A bright ray lit her from head to foot, and, against the dark background of the corridor which brightened in the distance, the carved doorway serving as a frame, she glittered, as though the light emanated from her instead of being simply reflected, and one might have taken her rather for a marvellous production of the artist's brush than a human creature made of flesh and blood.

Her long brown hair, interwoven with strings of large pearls, fell in natural curls across her beautiful cheeks! Her shoulders and breast were uncovered, and I have never seen anything so lovely in all the world; the finest marble fails to attain such exquisite perfection. What powers of life coursed beneath that earthly transparency! How strangely her flesh appeared simultaneously

white and tinted! How harmoniously the blondish hues merged in the transition from skin to hair! What ravishing poetry lay in those soft undulations of contour, more supple and velvety than a swan's neck! If there were words to express what I feel, I would offer you a description fifty pages long; but language was invented by I know not what ignoramus who never looked attentively at a woman's back or breasts, and we lack a good half of the most indispensable terms.

I believe I must definitely become a sculptor; for to have seen such beauty and not be able to render it in some form or another is enough to drive one to wild fury. I have written twenty sonnets on the subject of those shoulders, but they are insufficient. I desire something I might touch with my fingers, the exact image of her; verses only render beauty's phantom not beauty itself. The painter achieves a more precise likeness, but still only appearance. Sculpture possesses all the dimensions and reality a completely false object can have; it has multiple aspects, casts a shadow, and allows itself to be touched. A sculpted mistress differs from a real one only in that she is a little more solid, and does not speak, two very minor defects!

Her dress was made of a varicoloured fabric, azure in the light, golden in the shadows; very trim, tight, ankle-boots adorned feet that had no need of their being too close a fit, while scarlet silk-stockings clung lovingly about her well-turned and most seductive legs; her arms were bare to the elbows, and emerged from their web of lace, rounded, firm, and white, as splendid as polished silver, and unimaginably delicate in their lineaments; her right hand, laden with rings, waved a large fan of variegated feathers singular in its hues, which looked like a pocket rainbow.

She advanced into the room, her cheeks slightly reddened, with a glow that was not that of rouge, and all cried out in ecstasy, questioning if this could truly, possibly, be Théodore de Sérannes, the bold squire, the accursed duellist, the determined huntsman, and whether they were absolutely sure it was not his twin sister.



Celia and Rosalind departing from Orlando (1840s)

Anonymous

[Artvee](#)

For one would have thought 'he' had never worn any other costume in his life! He was not hindered in the least in his movements, he walked well, never tangled up in his train; he fluttered his eyelids and his fan ravishingly; and how slender his waist seemed! One could take him between one's fingers! He was prodigious! It was inconceivable! The illusion was as complete as possible: one might almost think he had breasts, so firm and well-rounded was his chest, and then not a single sign of a beard, not one; and his voice so sweet! Oh! The fair Rosalind! Who would not want to play the part of Orlando?

Yes, who would not want to play the Orlando to this Rosalind, even at the price of the torments I had suffered? To love 'her', as I loved, with a monstrous, unspeakable love, and yet one that could not be uprooted from one's heart; to be condemned to maintain the most profound silence, and not even dare to allow oneself to say what the most discreet and respectful lover might

utter without fear to the most prudish and severe of women; to feel oneself devoured by an unapologetic ardour, wildly mad, even to the eyes of the most damned of libertines! What is commonplace passion compared to that, a passion embarrassed by itself and lacking in hope, whose improbable success would be a crime that would make one die of shame? To be reduced to hoping not to succeed, to fear every opportunity, every favourable occasion, and to avoid my object as another would seek it, such was my fate.

The deepest discouragement had gripped me; I observed myself with a horror mingled with surprise and curiosity. What revolted me most was to think that, as I had never loved before, this was the first effervescence of youth, the first flower of my Spring of Love.

This monstrous thought replaced the fresh and modest illusions of my Golden Age; my dreams of tenderness so gently embraced, at eve, at the edge of the woods, on the little reddening paths, or on white marble terraces by the pool in the park, metamorphosed thus, into a perfidious Sphinx, with questionable smile and ambiguous voice, before which I stood without daring to seek an answer to the riddle! To interpret it wrongly would bring about my death; for, alas, it is the only link that binds me to the world; when it is broken, all will be over. Take this spark of light from me, and I shall be gloomier and more inanimate than the oldest pharaoh's mummy wound in its bandages.

At the very moment when I had felt myself being drawn most violently towards Théodore, I had thrown myself with terror into Rosette's arms, though she displeased me infinitely. I had sought to interpose her between myself and Théodore, as a barrier and a shield, having felt a secret satisfaction, when embracing her, in thinking that at least she was a woman of good repute, and that, if I no longer loved her, I was still loved enough by her for our liaison not to descend to intrigue and debauchery.

Nonetheless, deep down, I had felt throughout all, a kind of regret at being so unfaithful to the idea of my impossible passion. I felt as guilty as if it were a betrayal, and, though I knew well enough that I would never possess the object of my love, I was dissatisfied, and had resumed my coolness towards Rosette.

The rehearsal went far better than I had hoped; Théodore especially was admirable; it was also found that I acted superbly. It is not that I possess the qualities required to be a fine actor, however, and one would be greatly mistaken in believing me capable of fulfilling any other role in the same way; but by a most singular chance, the words that I had to pronounce corresponded so well to my situation that they seemed to me rather invented by myself than learned by heart from a book. Had my memory failed me in certain places, I would certainly not have hesitated for a moment in filling the gap with an improvised phrase or two. Orlando was myself at least as much as I was Orlando, and it would be impossible to meet with a more marvellous coincidence.

In the wrestling scene (*Act I, Scene 2*) when Théodore, in his role as Rosalind, unfastened the chain from about his neck, and presented it to me, he cast me such a sweetly languid look, a look so full of promise, and pronounced the sentence: 'Wear this for me, one out of suits with Fortune, that could give more but that her hand lacks means,' with such grace and nobility, that I was truly troubled, and could hardly continue with my reply: 'What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue? I cannot speak to her, yet she urged conference. O poor Orlando!'

In the third act, Rosalind, dressed as a man and sporting the name Ganymede, traverses the woods with her cousin Celia, who has changed her name to Aliena. This made an unpleasant impression on me: I had already become so accustomed to his woman's costume which allowed my passion some hope, and had maintained my doubtful but seductive apprehension! One quickly becomes accustomed to regarding one's wishes as realities based on the most fleeting of appearances, and I became quite gloomy when Théodore reappeared in male costume, gloomier even than before; for joy only serves to make one feel one's pain more deeply, the sun shines only to make one better understand the horror of darkness, and bright white has no other purpose than to deepen all the sadness of black.

His costume was the most gallant and coquettish in the world, elegantly and capriciously cut, adorned with pearls, jewels, embroidery and ribbons, almost in the style of the polished courtiers of the days of Louis XIII; a pointed felt hat, with a long curling plume, shaded the curls of his beautiful hair, and a damascened sword raised the hem of his traveling cloak. However, all was tailored in such a way as to suggest that these manly garments had a feminine interior; something wider at the hips and fuller at the chest, something undulating that fabrics do not display on a man's body, left faint doubts concerning the character's sex.

He had a half-deliberate, half-timid demeanour that could not have been more entertaining, and with infinite art he made himself look as embarrassed in a costume that was his habitual wear, as he had looked at ease in the clothes that were not his own. My composure returned a little, and I persuaded myself once more that 'he' indeed must be a woman. I regained enough composure to fulfil my role properly.

Do you know the play? Perhaps not. For the past two weeks, since I have been doing nothing but reading and reciting it, I know it all by heart, and cannot imagine that everyone is not as well informed as I about the crux of the plot; it is a mistake into which I fall quite commonly, that of believing that, when I am drunk, all creation is inebriated, and beats on the walls, and, if I knew Hebrew, I would be sure to ask my servant in Hebrew for my dressing gown and slippers, and be very surprised if he failed to understand me. Read it if you choose; I will act as if you have read it, and will only touch on the passages which relate to my situation.

Rosalind, while traversing the forest with her cousin, is very surprised that the bushes instead of bearing blackberries and sloes display madrigals in her praise: singular fruits which happily do not usually grow on brambles; since it is better, when one is hungry and thirsty, to find blackberries on their branches than bad sonnets. She is concerned to know who has spoiled the bark of the saplings thus, by carving a cipher into them. Celia, who has already encountered Orlando, tells her, after much persuasion, that this rhymer is none other than the young man who defeated Duke Charles' champion, in the wrestling.

Soon Orlando himself appears, and Rosalind (*disguised as Ganymede*) begins the conversation by asking him the time. Certainly, this is a beginning of the most extreme simplicity; there can be nothing more bourgeois in the world. But be not deceived: from that banal and vulgar phrase springs, instantly, a harvest of unexpected conceits, full of flowery phrases and odd comparisons as if from the most fertile and best manured soil.

After a few lines of sparkling dialogue, where each word of each sentence scatters thousands of crazy sparks to left and right, like a hammer striking a red-hot iron bar, Rosalind (*as Ganymede*)

asks Orlando if by chance he knows who hangs odes on the hawthorn-trees, and elegies on the brambles, and seems to have been attacked by the common illness called lovesickness, a sickness which 'he' knows perfectly well how to cure. Orlando confesses that he is the man so tormented by love, and that, since he (*Ganymede*) has boasted of having several infallible recipes for curing that illness, he would beg him to do him the favour of showing him one. 'There is none of my uncle's marks upon you: he taught me how to know a man in love; in which cage of rushes, I am sure you are not prisoner,' replies Rosalind, naming 'a lean cheek, which you have not, a blue eye and sunken, which you have not, an unquestionable spirit, which you have not, a beard neglected, which you have not; but I pardon you for that, for simply your having in beard is a younger brother's revenue: then your hose should be un-gartered, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbuttoned, your shoe untied and everything about you demonstrating a careless desolation; but you are no such man; you are rather point-device in your accoutrements as loving yourself than seeming the lover of any other.' It was not without real emotion that I gave my speech in reply, the words of which, verbatim, are as follows: 'Fair youth, I would I could make thee believe I love.'

This answer, so apposite, yet so strange, which was brought about by nothing particular, and which seemed written expressly for me, as by a kind of foresight on the part of the dramatist, had a great effect on me when I pronounced it before Théodore, whose divine lips were still slightly swollen by the ironic expression adopted for his previous speech, and whose eyes smiled with inexpressible sweetness, while a clear expression of benevolence gilded the entire upper part of his young and beautiful face: 'Me believe it!' he answers, 'you may as soon make her that you love believe it; which, I warrant, she is apter to do than to confess she does: that is one of the points in the which women still give the lie to their consciences. But, in good sooth, are you he that hangs the verses on the trees, wherein Rosalind is so admired?'

Once she is quite sure that it is he, Orlando, and not another, who has rhymed these admirable verses which tread to so full a measure, the beautiful Rosalind (*in the person of Ganymede*) consents to tell him how she once cured someone of love. Thus: she had pretended to be the beloved of the lovesick man, who was obliged to pay court to her as to his true mistress, and, so as to wean him of his passion, she gave in to the most extravagant whims; sometimes she wept, sometimes she laughed; one day she welcomed him nicely, the next ill; she scratched him, and spat in his face; she was not in the same mood for a single minute; effeminate, changeable, proud, shallow, she was all these things in turn, and all the disordered fancies that boredom, vapours, and blue devils can give birth to in the empty head of a little mistress, the poor wretch had to endure or perform. A goblin, a monkey, and a lawyer combined could not have invented more tricks. This miraculous treatment had not failed of its effect; the sick man, from a humour of love, had fallen into a humour of madness, which had made him forswear the world, and he had gone to end his days in a merely monastic retreat; a result which could not be more satisfactory, and which, moreover, was not difficult to anticipate.

Orlando, as one might well imagine, is not too enamoured of being healed by such means; but Rosalind insists, and desires to undertake his restoration. This Rosalind of ours uttered the sentence: 'I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind and come every day to my cote and woo me,' with such marked and obvious intent, and gazing at me so strangely, that it was impossible for me not to attach a broader meaning to the words, and see it as an indirect offer to declare my true feelings. And when my Orlando answered her: 'With all my heart, good youth.'

Théodore uttered in an even more significant manner, as if with a measure of annoyance at not being understood, the reply: 'Nay you must call me Rosalind.'

Perhaps I was mistaken, and thought I saw what was not in fact there, but it seemed to me that Théodore had perceived my love, though I had certainly never indicated such, and that through the veil of these borrowed expressions, behind his theatrical mask, in hermaphroditic words, he was alluding to his true sex and to our reciprocal situation. It is quite impossible that a woman as intelligent as her, and as knowing, should not, from the beginning, have unravelled what was passing in my soul. In default of my tongue, my glances, and my confusion, spoke sufficiently well, and the veil of ardent friendship that I had thrown over my love was not so impenetrable that an attentive and interested observer could not easily penetrate it. The most innocent and least-experienced girl would not have been deceived for a minute.

Some important reason, which I know nothing of, has doubtless forced her to adopt this accursed disguise, which has been the cause of all my torment, and which has made me a most strange lover: without which everything would have progressed simply, easily, like a carriage whose wheels are well-greased, on a well levelled road, covered with compacted sand. I could have indulged, with sweet assurance, in the most amorously wayward reveries, and taken the little white and silky hand of my divinity in mine, without shivers of dread, and without recoiling twenty paces, as if I had touched a red-hot iron or felt the claws of Beelzebub himself.

Instead of despairing and fretting, every morning, like the truly mad, beating myself to the bone for remorse, and lamenting that I felt none, I would have said to myself, stretching forth my arms, with a feeling of duty fulfilled and conscience satisfied: 'I am in love,' a sentence as pleasant to say to oneself in the morning, one's head on a soft pillow, under a warm blanket, as any other four-word sentence one could imagine, except this one: 'I am in funds.'

After rising, I would have gazed into the mirror, and there, appraising myself with a measure of respect, I would have felt moved, while combing my hair, by my poetic pallor, promising myself to employ it well, and display it properly, because nothing is as ignoble as making love with a crimson complexion; and, when one has the misfortune to be red of face, and in love, which can happen, I am of the opinion that one must powder it daily, or renounce being handsome and frequent but Margots and Toinons (*Marguerites and Antoinettes, country-girls*).

Then I would have breakfasted with compunction, and gravity, so as to nourish this dear body, this precious treasure-house of passion, and fill it with the juice of rich meats, fatty chyle, warm blood, and maintain it in a state to please generous spirits.

The meal over, while picking my teeth, I would have woven a few heterogeneous rhymes in sonnet form, all in honour of my princess; I would have devised a thousand little comparisons, each more thoughtful than the last, and infinitely gallant: in the first quatrain, there would have been a starry dance, and, in the second, a minuet of theological virtues, the two tercets would have been in no less superior style; Helen would have been rendered a mere maid at an inn, and Paris an idiot; the Orient could not have matched the magnificence of my metaphors; the last verse especially would have been particularly admirable, and would have contained at least two conceits per line; for the venom of the scorpion is in its tail, and the merit of a sonnet in its last verse. The sonnet completed, and well and duly transcribed on glossy, perfumed paper, I would have left my house a hundred feet tall, bowing my head for fear of striking the heavens and catching clouds (a

wise precaution), and I would have visited all my friends to declaim my new work, then all my enemies, then suckling babes and their nurses, then horses and donkeys, and walls and trees, to discover all Creation's opinion of my latest achievement.

In the salons, I would have conversed with the women, with a doctoral air, and defended theses of sentiment in a serious and measured tone of voice, like a man who knows much more than he is prepared to say on the subject under discussion, and who has not learned all he knows from mere books; which never fails to produce a most prodigious effect, and make all the women in the gathering who no longer admit to their age, and the few little girls who have not been invited to dance, swoon away like carp on the sand.

I would have led the happiest life in the world, treading on the pug's tail, without making his mistress weep too excessively, knocking over the china-laden side-tables, eating the best morsels at table without leaving any for the rest of the party: all this would have been excused as revealing the well-known state of distraction that lovers betray; and, watching me swallow everything with a wild expression, everyone would have said, clasping their hands: 'Poor boy!'

And then the dreamy and doleful air, the tear-drenched hair, the rumpled stockings, the loosened cravat, the long dangling arms, that I would have presented for your delectation! How I would have trodden the paths of the park, sometimes striding out, sometimes mincing along, like a man whose reason is utterly lost! How I would have gazed at the moon cross-eyed, and made circles in the water, with profound tranquility!

But the gods have decreed otherwise. I have fallen in love with a beauty in doublet and boots; with a proud Bradamante who disdains the clothes of her sex, and leaves one hanging at times, plagued by the most troubling perplexities; her features and body are indeed the features and body of a woman, but her mind is incontestably that of a man.

My mistress is in the first rank as regards swordplay, and would outshine the most experienced fencing-master's assistant; she has engaged in I know not how many duels, and killed or wounded three or four people; when on horseback, she leaps ditches ten feet wide, and hunts like an experienced provincial gentleman: singular qualities for a mistress!

It could only happen to me. I laugh, though I've no reason to do so, certainly, since I've never suffered so much, and these last two months have seemed like two years, or rather two centuries, to me. There has been an ebb and flow of uncertainty in my mind that would have stupefied the strongest brain; I was so violently agitated and dragged in all directions, I felt such furious impulses then such dull listlessness, such extravagant hope and such profound despair, that I really know not how I failed to die from the pain. This obsession occupied my mind, filling my thoughts to such a degree, that I was astonished it could not be seen, clearly, through my body, like a light in a lantern, and I was in mortal fear lest someone discovered the object of this insane love. Yet, Rosette, the person in the world who had the greatest interest in observing the state of my heart, seemed not to notice a thing; I think she herself was too preoccupied by her love for Théodore to notice my increasing coldness towards her; or else it seems I have become a master of dissimulation, and I am not so conceited. Théodore himself has not revealed to this day the slightest suspicion of my state of mind, and has always spoken to me in a familiar and friendly manner, as a well-bred young man speaks to a youth of his own age, but nothing more. His

conversation with me turns indifferently to all sorts of subjects; the arts, poetry and other similar matters; but nothing intimate and personal to do with himself or myself.

Perhaps the reasons that compelled 'him' to adopt 'his' disguise no longer exist, and he will soon resume the clothing that suits him: this I am unsure of; the fact remains that Rosalind, as Ganymede, pronounced certain words with a particular inflection, and emphasised in a very marked manner all the passages of that role which possess an ambiguous meaning, and which could be turned in that direction.

In the rendezvous scene (*Act IV, Scene I*), from the moment when Rosalind, as Ganymede, warns Orlando to return after two hours, as promised and as befits a true lover, and not be late, until the painful sigh that, frightened by the extent of her passion, she emits as she throws herself into Aliena's arms: 'O coz, coz, coz, my pretty little coz, that thou didst know how many fathom deep I am in love!', Théodore displayed a miraculous talent. He portrayed a mixture of tenderness, melancholy, and irresistible love; Rosalind's voice had something tremulous and moving about it, and behind the laughter one felt the most violent of loves ready to explode; add to that all the piquancy and singularity of the transposition, all that is intriguing in seeing Orlando courting this mistress whom he takes for a man, and who has the appearance of one.

Expressions which would have seemed ordinary and commonplace in other situations took on a particular meaning in this one, and all the small change of comparison and amorous protestation, which is current on the stage, seemed re-minted in brand new coin; moreover even if the speeches, instead of being rare and charming as they are, had been more worn-out than the a judge's cassock, or the crupper of a hired donkey, the way in which they were delivered would have made them appear to be of the most marvellous finesse and best taste in the world.

I forgot to tell you that Rosette, after refusing the role of Rosalind, had willingly taken on the secondary role of Phebe; Phebe is a shepherdess in the forest of Arden, desperately loved by the shepherd Silvius, whom she cannot stand, and whom she treats with constant harshness. Phebe is cold as the moon whose name she bears; she has a heart of snow that melts not in the fire of the most ardent sighs, but whose icy surface becomes denser and denser, until it is as hard as diamond. But scarcely has she seen Rosalind dressed as the handsome page Ganymede than all this ice dissolves in tears, and the diamond becomes softer than wax. The proud Phebe, who laughed at love, is in love herself; she now suffers the torments that she has made Silvius endure. Her pride is brought low, to the point of her making every advance, and she even forces poor Silvius to deliver to Rosalind an amorous letter containing the confession of her passion in the most humble and supplicating terms. Rosalind, pitying Silvius, and having moreover the most excellent reason in the world for not responding to Phebe's love, had made her endure the harshest treatment and mocked her with unparalleled cruelty and relentlessness. Phebe, however, prefers such insults to the more delicate and passionate madrigals of her unfortunate shepherd; following the handsome stranger everywhere, and by dint of importunity, the fairest thing she can obtain from him is the promise that, if ever he marries a woman, it will certainly be her; in the meantime, he urges her to treat Silvius well and not to lull herself into too flattering an expectation.

Rosette performed her role with a sad, charming grace; a sorrowful, resigned tone; that pierced to the heart; and when Rosalind (*as Ganymede*) says to her: 'I would love you, if I could,' the tears were ready to flow from her eyes, and she had difficulty in containing them, for Phebe's story is

as much hers, as Orlando's is mine, with this difference that everything ends as he hoped for Orlando, while Phebe, deceived in her love, instead of the charming ideal she wished to embrace, is reduced to marrying Silvius. Life is thus arranged: what makes one wholly content necessarily disappoints another. It is most fortunate for me that Théodore is a woman; it is most unfortunate for Rosette that he is not a man, and she now finds herself entangled in those amorous impossibilities in which I was formerly lost.

In the last scene of the fifth and final act, Rosalind doffs the page Ganymede's doublet for clothes of her own sex, and is recognised by Duke Senior to be his daughter, and by Orlando to be his mistress; the god Hymen arrives in saffron livery with his torches of lawful wedlock. Four marriages take place. Orlando marries Rosalind, Celia marries Oliver, Phebe weds Silvius, and the jester Touchstone the naive Audrey. Then Rosalind speaks the epilogue, and takes her bow, and the curtain falls...

All this greatly interested and occupied us: there was a play within the play, as it were, a drama invisible and unknown to the other spectators, enacted for ourselves alone, and which, veiled in symbolic words, summed up our lives complete, and expressed our most hidden desires. Without Rosalind's singular recipe, I would have been more lovesick than ever, without even a distant hope of recovery, and I would have continued to wander sadly along the errant paths of that dark forest.

However, I know only one thing for certain; proof is lacking, yet I cannot remain any longer in this state of uncertainty. I absolutely must speak to Théodore in a more forthright manner. I have approached him twenty times with a prepared speech, but found myself unable to say it. I do not dare. I have many opportunities to speak to him alone or in the park, or in my room, or in his, for he comes to see me and I go to visit him, but I have let them pass without employing them, though I feel mortal regret the next moment, and rage dreadfully against myself. I open my mouth, and despite myself other words replace those I would like to say; and instead of declaring my love, I discourse on the rain or fine weather, or some other similar stupidity. However, the season is ending, and soon we return to the city; the circumstances which here are favourable to my passion will be found nowhere else: we will lose sight of each other perhaps, and some opposing current will doubtless part us.

The freedom the countryside provides is so charming and convenient a thing! The trees, even though sparsely-leaved in autumn, offer such delightful shade to reveries of nascent love! It is difficult to resist the lovely depths of Nature! The birds emit such languorous songs, the flowers such intoxicating perfumes, the hill-slopes are covered with such golden silky lawns! Solitude inspires a thousand voluptuous thoughts, which the whirlwind of the world would have dispersed, or scattered here and there, while the instinctive movement of two beings who hear their hearts beating as one, amidst the silence of a deserted countryside, is to embrace more closely, and fold themselves in each other's arms, as if there were none alive in the world but themselves.

I went for a walk this morning; the weather was mild and damp, the sky revealed not the slightest patch of azure; yet it was neither dark nor threatening. Two or three shades of pearly grey, harmoniously blended, clothed it from end to end, while puffs of cloud like masses of cotton-wool slowly passed against this vaporous background; driven by the dying breath of a light breeze barely strong enough to shake the tops of the most restless aspens, wisps of mist rose amidst the large chestnut trees, indicating, from afar, the river's course. When the breeze rose, momentarily, a few

scorched, reddened leaves scattered excitedly, and sped before me above the path like swarms of timid sparrows; then, the breath of air ceasing, they would settle a few paces further on, faithful representatives of those whirling shapes we take for birds in free flight, which prove, in the end, to be similar leaves curled by the morning frost, leaves that the slightest passing wind mocks, and makes its playthings.

The distant landscape was so blurred with vapour, and the edge of the horizon so sharp that it was hardly possible to see the exact line where the sky began and the earth ended: a slightly opaquer grey, a slightly denser mist indicated, vaguely, the distance to, and the difference between, their levels. Veiled by this curtain, the willows, with their ashen heads, had the air of ghostly trees rather than real ones; the sinuous contours of the hills resembled the undulations of a mass of cloud rather than the firmness of solid ground. The outlines of objects wavered before the eye, and a kind of grey weft of inexpressible fineness, like a spider's web, stretched between the foreground and the mistier depths; in shadowy places, the hatching was more evident, and the meshes of the net were visible; in the better lit places, the wisps of mist were imperceptible, and merged with a diffuse glow. There was something somnolent, humid, warmly and gently stultifying, in the air which predisposed one, singularly, to melancholy.

As I walked, I felt that autumn was within me also, that the radiant summer had passed without return; that the branches of my soul were perhaps even more bare than those of the forest; that a single green leaf barely clung to its highest twig, swaying and trembling, sad to see its sisters abandoning it one by one.

Cling to its crown, little leaf, the colour of hope; cling to its crown with all the strength of your veins and fibres; be unafraid of the whistling wind, dear little leaf! For, when you have left me, who will know whether I am a living tree or no; what will prevent the woodcutter hacking at my base with his axe, and bundling together my severed branches? That hour has not yet arrived in which the trees will no longer bear leaves at all, and the sun will rid itself, with ease, of the mist in which it is swaddled.

The spectacle of the fading season made a deep impression on me. I thought how swiftly time was passing, and that I might die without having clasped my ideal to my heart.

When I returned, I formed a resolution. Since I could not bring myself to speak, I committed my whole fate to a sheet of paper. It may seem ridiculous to have written to someone in the same house as myself, who can be met with every day, at any moment; but I no longer concern myself with what is ridiculous or no.

I sealed my letter, though not without trembling and changing colour; then, choosing a moment when Théodore was absent, I placed it on the middle of his table and fled, as troubled in mind as if I had committed the most abominable action in the world.

The End of Part IV of Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin'

Part V: Chapters 12 to 14

Chapter 12: Théodore to Graciosa

I promised you the continuation of my adventures; but in truth I am so lazy where writing is concerned that only the fact that I indeed love you like the apple of my eye, and know your curiosity to be greater than that of Eve or Psyche, prompts me to sit at a table in front of a large sheet of completely white paper that must be darkened, and a well of ink deeper than the sea each drop of which must turn into a thought, or into something resembling one at least, rather than mounting my horse and travelling, at full gallop, the two hundred long miles that separate us, so I might relate to you in person all that I am going to string together imperceptibly, so as not frighten myself by contemplating the prodigious extent of my picaresque odyssey.

Two hundred miles! To think there is all that space between myself and the person I love best in all the world! I feel like tearing up my letter, and having my horse saddled yet. But I forget: in the clothes I am wearing, I could not approach you, and resume the familiar life we led together when we were naive and innocent little girls: if ever I wear skirts again, that will assuredly be why.

I left you, I believe, at my point of departure from the inn where I spent such a strange night, and where my virtue almost suffered shipwreck before leaving port. We all left together, riding in the same direction. My companions were very ecstatic about the beauty of my mare, who is indeed a thoroughbred and one of the best racers there is; this elevated me at least half a yard in their esteem, for to my own merit was added all the merit of my mount.

However, they seemed to fear that she was too frisky and too spirited for me. I told them that they should calm their fears, and, to show them that there was no danger, I made her curvet several times, then leap a fairly high barrier, after which I broke into a gallop.

The troop tried in vain to follow me; I gripped the bridle when I was far enough away, and returned at full speed to join them. As I drew near, I curbed my mare, and stopped her short: which, as you may know, demands real strength.

From esteem they passed, without transition, to the deepest respect. They could scarcely believe that a lad just out of college, could prove such a good horseman. This discovery served me more than if they had recognised in me all the theological and cardinal virtues; instead of treating me like a mere youth, they spoke to me in a tone of obsequious familiarity that pleased me.

In doffing female dress, I had not renounced my pride: no longer being a woman, I wished to be a man complete, and not rest content with mere external display. I was determined to achieve as a cavalier the success to which I could no longer aspire as a woman. What worried me most was lacking the courage, perhaps, to do so; for courage and skill in bodily exercise are the means by

which a man most easily establishes his reputation. It is not that I am a timid woman, full of the imbecilic pusillanimity that one sees in many; but from there to the careless and ferocious brutality which men glory in there is still a long way, and my intention was now to become a little swashbuckler, a throat-cutter like these gentlemen with their fine airs, in order to put myself on a good footing with the world, and enjoy all the advantages of my metamorphosis. I found later that nothing could be easier and that the recipe is a very simple one.

I will not tell you, as is customary among travellers, that I journeyed so many miles on such and such a day, that I passed from this place to that other, that the roast I ate at the White Horse, or the Cross Inn, was raw or burnt; that the wine was sour, and the bed I slept in had curtains adorned with figures or flowers: these are very important details and it is good to preserve them for posterity; but posterity will have to do without them on this occasion and you will have to resign yourself to not knowing how many dishes my dinner consisted of, and whether I slept well or badly during the course of my travels. Nor will I give you an exact description of the various landscapes, the wheat-fields and forests, the varied crops, or the hill-slopes burdened with hamlets, that successively passed before my eyes: they are easy to imagine; take a little earth, plant a few trees, and a few blades of grass, daub a little patch of sky as a backcloth, either greyish or pale blue, and you will have a more than adequate idea of the shifting background against which our little caravan was highlighted. If, in my first letter, I indulged in some details of this kind, pray excuse me, I will not do so again. As I had never before journeyed beyond my garden, the slightest thing seemed to me of enormous importance.

One of the riders, the companion who had occupied that bed, the one I had almost tugged by the sleeve on that memorable night whose anguish I described to you at length, acquired a great liking for me, and rode his horse beside me the whole time.

With the one exception, that I would not have wished to take him as a lover though he brought me the most beautiful crown in the world, he did not otherwise displease me; he was educated, and lacked neither intelligence nor good humour: yet, when he spoke of women, it was with a tone of contempt and irony for which I would have very willingly torn the eyes from his head, especially since, ignoring his exaggerations, there was much harsh truth in what he said, the justice of which my manly dress forced me to recognise.

He invited me so insistently, on so many occasions, to visit one of his sisters, a widow who was nearing the end of her period of mourning, and who at that moment dwelt in an old château with one of her aunts, that I could not refuse. I raised a few objections, though merely formal ones, since in truth it was much the same to me whether I went there or anywhere else, and since I could just as readily achieve my goal in that way as any other; and, as he told me that I would certainly disoblige him greatly if I did not grant him my presence for at least a fortnight, I replied that I was willing, and the thing was settled.

At a fork in the road, my companion, pointing to the right leg of this natural Y, said: — ‘Here is our road.’ The others shook hands with us, and turned to the left.

After a few hours at walking pace, we arrived at our destination. A wide ditch which, instead of water, was filled with abundant and bushy vegetation, separated the park from the highway; the sides were of cut stone; and, in the interstices, gigantic artichokes and iron thistles bristled, seeming

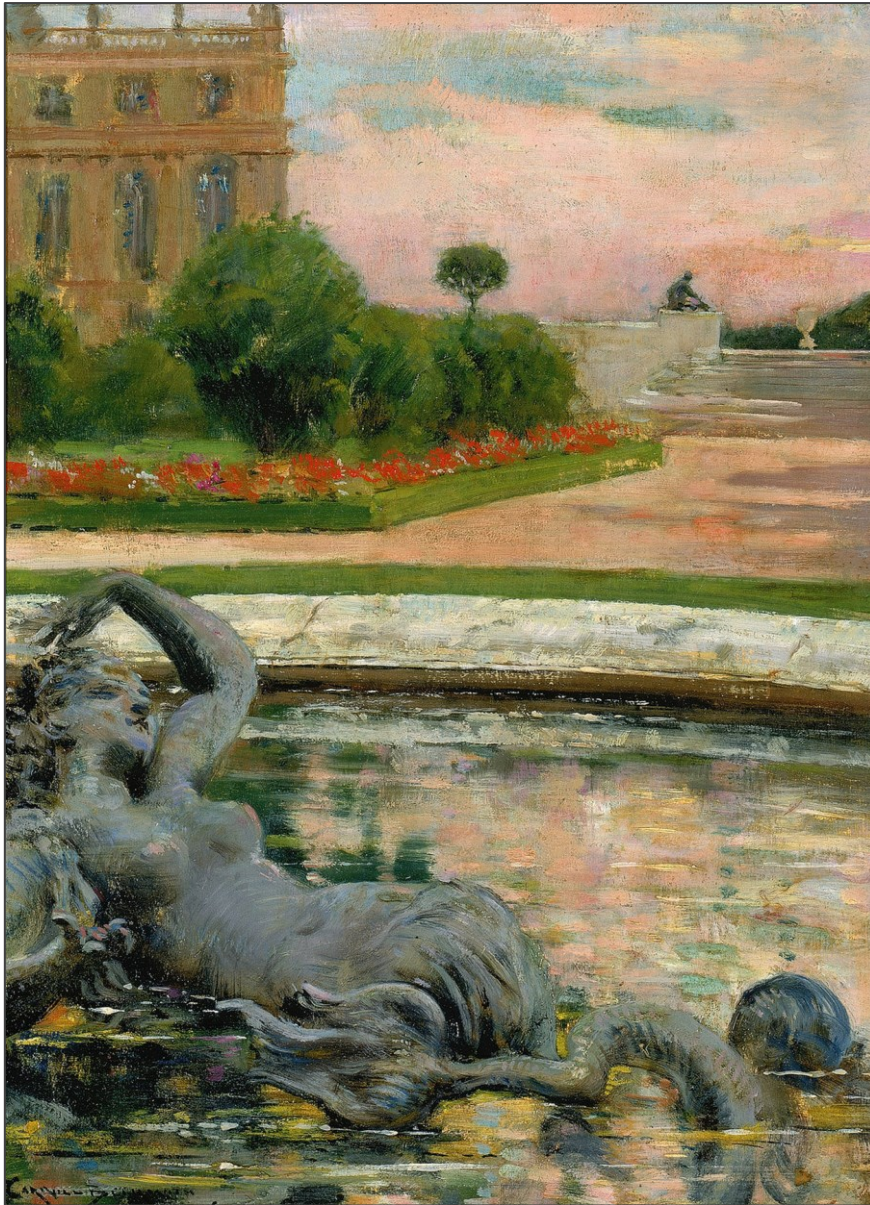
to have grown naturally between the disjointed blocks of the walls: a small bridge, with a single arch, crossed this dry canal, and allowed access to the gate.

A tall avenue of elms, rounded to a barrel shape, and trimmed in the old fashion, first presented itself; and, after following it for some time, we emerged at a sort of circle.

The elm-trees looked old-fashioned rather than merely old; they appeared to have wigs and be powdered white; and had only a small tuft of foliage at their crowns; all the rest was carefully pruned, so that one would have taken them for enormous plumes planted in the ground at intervals.

After crossing the circle, covered with fine grass carefully flattened with a roller, it was necessary to pass through a curious avenue of foliage adorned with vases, pyramids, and columns of rustic order, all clipped with great care using billhooks and shears, from an enormous series of box trees. One sometimes caught various glimpses, to right and left, of a half-ruined castle of rocks, or the moss-eaten staircase of a dried-up waterfall, or else a vase, or statues of nymphs and shepherds, with broken noses and fingers, and a few pigeons perched on their shoulders and heads.

A large parterre, designed in the French style, stretched out in front of the château; all its compartments were laid out with most rigorous symmetry, employing boxwood and holly; it looked as much ornate carpet as garden: large flowers, in their ballroom finery, of majestic bearing and serene mien, like duchesses preparing to dance a minuet, bowed their heads to you as you passed. Others, apparently less polite, stood stiff and motionless, like dowagers weaving their tapestry. Shrubs, in every possible shape except their natural form, round or square, pointed or pyramidal, in green or grey tubs, seemed to usher you courteously along the great avenue, and lead you by the hand to the lower steps of the porch.



Parterre du Nord, Fontaine des Sirenes (1913)
James Carroll Beckwith (American, 1852-1917)

[Artree](#)

A few turrets, half-buried amidst more recent constructions, protruded above the line of the building to the full height of their slate chimney-tops, while their dove-tailed sheet-metal weathervanes bore witness to a fairly respectable antiquity. The windows of the middle pavilion opened onto a single balcony adorned with an extremely rich and elaborate iron balustrade, while the others were surrounded by stone frames with carved figures and knots.

Four or five large dogs came racing towards us, barking at the top of their lungs, and performing prodigious bounds. They gambolled around the horses, and leapt in their faces: they

made a point of welcoming my friend's horse especially, whom they probably visited in the stable often, or accompanied on walks.

Amidst all this uproar, a sort of servant finally arrived, looking half-ploughman, half-groom, who took our mounts by their bridles and led them away. I had not yet seen a living soul, except for a little peasant girl, timorous and wild as a deer, who had fled on sight of us, to crouch in a furrow behind some hemp, though we called her several times, and did our best to reassure her.

No one appeared at the windows; one would have said the castle was uninhabited, or at least was haunted only by ghosts; for not the slightest noise transpired outside. We were about to climb the first steps of the porch, our spurs jingling since our legs were a little heavy, when we heard inside a sound of doors opening and closing, as if someone were hurrying to meet us.

Indeed, a young woman appeared at the top of the balustrade, raced across the space that separated her from my companion, and threw herself on his neck. He embraced her very affectionately and, putting his arm around her waist, he almost lifted her up, and bore her thus to the landing.

— 'You know, you are hardly a kind or gallant sort of brother, my dear Alcibiades. What point, sir,' said the young beauty, turning towards me, 'is there in informing you that he is my brother, for, in truth, he scarcely displays the manners of one?'

To which I replied that if I were not mistaken, it must prove a misfortune, in some degree, to be her brother, and thus find oneself excluded from the category of her admirers; as for me, if I were her brother, I would be at once the most unhappy, and yet the happiest of horsemen on earth. All of which made her smile gently.

While talking thus, we entered a low-ceilinged room whose walls were decorated with a tapestry woven on a high-warp loom in Flanders, in which large trees with sharply-pointed leaves supported swarms of fantastic birds; the colours, altered by time, producing bizarre transpositions of hue; the sky was green, the trees royal-blue with yellow streaks, and in the draperies of the figures the shadows were often of a colour conflicting with that of the background fabric; the flesh resembled wood, and the nymphs who walked beneath the faded shades of this forest had the air of unwrapped mummies; their mouths alone, whose purple had retained its original tint, smiled with an appearance of life. In the foreground, bristled tall plants of a singular green, with large variegated flowers whose pistils resembled peacock-aigrettes. Herons, of serious and pensive mien, their heads sunk into their shoulders, their long beaks resting on their rounded crops, stood philosophically, each on one thin leg, in still, black water striped with tarnished silver threads; through gaps in the foliage, one could see, far off, small castles with turrets like pepper-pots, their balconies laden with beautiful ladies in full court dress who were watching processions or hunts go by. Capriciously jagged rocks, from which white thready torrents fell, merged at the horizon's edge with dappled clouds.

One of the things that struck me most forcibly was the figure of a huntress shooting at a bird. Her open fingers had just released the string, and the arrow was in flight, but, as this part of the tapestry turned a corner, the arrow was present on the other wall, having seemingly described a wide curve; as for the bird, it was flying on motionless wings, still seeking a neighbouring branch.

This feathered arrow armed with a golden point, forever in the air and destined never to reach its target, produced the most singular effect on me. It seemed like a sad, painful symbol of human destiny, and the more I gazed at it, the more mysterious and sinister the meaning I discovered there. The huntress stood, her foot stretched out before her, the leg bent, her wide-open eyes, with their silken lids, no longer able to observe her arrow deflected from its path: and seemed to be anxiously searching for the flamingo with variegated feathers that she had wished to bring down, and had expected to see, pierced through and through, fall before her. I know not if my imagination erred, but I found in her face an expression as gloomy and as desperate as that of a poet who dies without having written the work which he had counted on to found his reputation, and whom the pitiless death-rattle seizes while he is attempting to dictate it.

I tell you at length of this tapestry; at greater length, certainly, than it justifies; but it is a thing which has always strangely preoccupied me, that fantastic world created by the Flanders weavers.

I love that fanciful vegetation, with passion; flowers and plants that do not exist in reality; forests of nameless trees where unicorns, horned goats, and snow-white deer with golden crucifixes between their antlers, wander, endlessly, pursued by hunters with crimson beards, in Saracenic dress.

When I was a little girl, I scarcely ever entered a tapestried room without experiencing a kind of shiver, and hardly dared wander about there. All those figures on the walls, to whom the undulations of the fabric, and the play of light, lent a kind of fantastic life, seemed to me so many spies, engaged in observing my actions, so as to give account of them at the due time and place, and I would never have dared eat an apple, or a stolen cake, in their presence. What tales those grave personages could tell, if they could open their lips of red thread, and if sound could penetrate the embroidered conches of their ears. To how many murders, treacheries, infamous adulteries, and monstrosities of all kinds have they not been, silently and impassively, witness! But let me forgo the tapestry and return to our story.

— ‘Alcibiades, I will have my aunt informed of your arrival,’ cried the lady.

— ‘Oh! There’s no urgency, sister; let us sit and talk a little first. Let me present this gentleman, Théodore de Sérannes, to you. He will be spending some time with us. I need not ask you to grant him fair welcome; he is his own recommendation.’ (I repeat what he said; please don’t accuse me of inappropriate conceit). The lovely girl nodded slightly, as if in assent, and we three talked of something else.

As we conversed, I examined her in detail, observing her more closely than I had been able to do before. She was twenty-three or twenty-four years old, perhaps, and her mourning dress suited her to perfection; to tell the truth, she seemed neither gloomy nor desolate, and I doubt whether she consumed the ashes of her Mausolus in her soup every day, as Artemisia is said to have done. I know not if she wept profusely for her deceased husband; if she did, it was hardly apparent, and the pretty cambric handkerchief she held in her hand was as dry as could be. Her eyes were scarcely reddened, but, on the contrary, the clearest and brightest in the world, and one would have searched in vain for furrows on her cheeks where tears had flowed; there were in truth only two small dimples produced by her habitual smile, and it is fair to say that her teeth were thereby seen quite frequently, for a widow: which was certainly no unpleasant sight, for she had neat, well-set ones. I esteemed her most of all for not having felt obliged, merely because her husband had died,

to veil her eyes, or empurple her nose: I was also grateful that she lacked a mournful expression, and spoke naturally, in a sonorous and silvery voice, without drawing out her speech and interrupting her sentences with virtuous sighs. It seemed to me to be in very good taste; I judged her, from the first, to be an intelligent woman, which indeed she was.

She was well-formed, her feet and hands very neat; her black costume arranged with every coquetry and so happily that its gloomy hue was offset, and she might have attended a ball dressed thus, without anyone finding it strange. If ever I marry, and am widowed, I will ask her for a pattern of her dress, for it fitted her like an angel.

After conversing a while, we visited the old aunt's apartments. We found her seated in a large, sloping armchair, with a small stool under her foot, while beside her lay a very sullen, bleary-eyed old dog, who raised his black muzzle at our arrival, and greeted us with a most unfriendly growl.

I never think of old women except with horror. My mother died very young; doubtless, if I had seen her features imperceptibly aging, I would have accustomed myself to the process in a tranquil manner. In childhood, I was surrounded only by young and smiling faces, thus I've retained an unconquerable antipathy towards old people. So, I shuddered when the beautiful widow's pure, rosy lips touched the dowager's yellowing brow. Aging is something I cannot accept. I know that if I reach sixty, I will look the same as she; I can do nothing about it, and I pray I will die young like my mother.

However, this old woman had retained, of her former beauty, a natural majesty which had prevented her from displaying that baked-apple ugliness which is the fate of women who have been merely pretty or simply fresh-looking; her eyes, though terminated at their corners by wrinkled folds, and possessing wide, drooping eyelids, still emitted some sparks of their original fire, and one saw that, during the reign of the previous king, they must have cast glances fit to dazzle. Her thin, sharp, nose, slightly curved like that of a bird of prey, granted her profile a sort of sombre grandeur, which was tempered, however, by the indulgent smile on her 'Austrian' lips, which were painted with carmine, according to the fashion of the last century.

Her costume was antiquated without being ridiculous, and harmonised perfectly with her figure; her headdress was a basic white wimple adorned with a little lace; her long, thin hands, which one might guess to have been very beautiful, were clad in half-mittens without fingers or thumbs. A dress patterned with autumn leaves, and embroidered with foliage of a darker shade, a black mantle, and an apron of smooth silk the colour of a pigeon's breast, completed her outfit.

Old women should always dress so, and sufficiently respect the approach of death not to adorn themselves with feathers, garlands of flowers, ribbons in lighter hues, and the thousand trappings that only suit the very young. Those who effect the latter may set out to woo life, but life will have none of them; their efforts are wasted, like those of ancient courtesans who plaster themselves with powder and rouge, women whom drunken muleteers thrust against the barriers, accompanied by insults and kicks.

This old lady received us with that ease and exquisite politeness which is a feature of those who, of old, frequented the Court, the secret of which seems to have been gradually lost, like so many other fine secrets, and her speech, though broken and quavering, still possessed great sweetness of tone.

I seemed to please her very much, and she gazed at me for a long while, very attentively, in a most touching manner. A tear formed at the corner of her eye, and slowly coursed down a large wrinkle, where it was lost and dried. She begged me to excuse her emotion, saying that I looked very much like a son of hers who had fallen in battle.

Because of this resemblance, real or imaginary, the whole time I remained at the château I was treated by this good lady with an extraordinary and entirely maternal kindness. I knew more pleasure there than I would have, at first, believed, for the greatest delight that people of my own age can grant me, is never to address me, and to depart as soon I arrive.

I will not describe day by day, in detail, all I did at R***. If I have dwelt a little on my arrival, and have sketched for you, with some care, these few physiognomies of people and place, it is because most singular and yet predictable events happened there, which I should have foreseen when dressing as a man.

My natural frivolity made me commit an imprudence which I cruelly regret, because it has brought, to a good and beautiful soul, trouble that I cannot ease without revealing who I am, and seriously compromising myself. To perfect my role as a man, and divert myself a little, I thought it best to pay court to my friend's sister. I found it amusing to scrabble on all fours if she dropped her glove, and return it to her with prostrate bows; to lean over the back of her armchair with an adorably languid air; and to pour into her ear a thousand and one compliments that could not have been more charming. As soon as she wished to move from one room to another, I graciously offered her my hand; if she rode, I held the stirrup for her, and, when she went for a walk, I always walked beside her. In the evening, I would read to her and accompany her singing; in short, I acquitted myself with scrupulous exactitude as regards all the duties of a *cavalier servente*. I adopted the expressions, I had seen lovers do, which set me laughing, like the true madwoman I am, whenever I found myself alone in my room, reflecting on all the impertinent speeches I had offered in the most serious tone in the world.

Alcibiades, and the old marquise, seemed to view our intimacy with pleasure, and often left us to our own devices. I sometimes regretted my not being truly a man, as I might have taken better advantage of their indulgence. If I had, it would have needed only my own decision, since the charming widow seemed to have forgotten the deceased completely, or, if she did remember him, would willingly have proved unfaithful to his memory.

Having begun in this manner, I could scarcely, in all honesty, retreat, and it was very difficult to do so bag and baggage; however, I could not exceed certain limits, and hardly knew how to seem more amiable except in words. I hoped to reach the end of the month, that I was to spend at R***, and leave, with the promise of my returning, without doing more. I believed that after my departure the fair lady would console herself, and in my absence, would soon forget me.

Yet, in toying with her, I aroused a serious passion, and things turned out otherwise: which reminds one of a truth that has been long known, namely that one should never play with fire, or toy with love.

Before seeing me, Rosette had not yet known love. Married very young to a man much older than herself, she must only have felt a kind of filial friendship for him; no doubt, she had been courted, but had never had a lover, extraordinary as that may seem: either the gallants who had

paid her attention were inept seducers, or, what is more probable, the opportunity had not yet arisen. The provincial squires and gentlemen, always talking of leashes and spoor, sightings and antlers, halloos and ten-point stags, interspersed only with almanac references, and ancient moss-covered compliments, hardly suited, and her virtue had no need to struggle hard to avoid yielding to them. Moreover, her gaiety and natural playfulness sufficiently protected her from love, that melting passion which has such a hold over dreamers and melancholics. Her aged Tithonus' idea of voluptuousness, had doubtless proved mediocre enough not to tempt her to sample it again, and she had savoured the pleasure of being widowed so early, and having so many years of youthful attractiveness left, in a state of calm.

On my arrival, all this changed. I believe that, if I had, at first, kept within the narrow bounds of cold and exact politeness, she would have paid no further attention to me; but, in truth, I was obliged to recognise afterwards that events would have turned out the same, and that this supposition, though showing modesty on my part, was purely gratuitous. Alas, naught can delay the fatal ascendant; none can avoid the beneficent or malignant influence of their stars! Rosette's fate is to love only once in her life, and experience an impossible love; she is obliged to fulfil her destiny, and therefore she will.

I am beloved, O Graciosa, and it is a sweet thing, though I am loved only by a woman, and in a love thus embodied, there is something painful not to be met with on love's other path. Oh, a sweet thing indeed! When one wakes in the night, and raises oneself on one's elbow, saying to oneself: 'Someone is thinking or dreaming of me; someone is interested in my existence; every movement of my eyes or lips causes joy or sadness in another creature; some word I let fall at random was gathered with care, and is commented on, reflected on, for hours on end. I am the pole to which the free magnet turns; my eyes are stars, my lips a paradise more longed for than the real one. If I were to die, a shower of hot tears would warm my ashes, my tomb would be more bedecked with flowers than a wedding-basket. If I were in danger, someone would throw themselves between the sword-point and my breast; and sacrifice themselves for me! It is a beautiful thought; and I know not what in the world one could wish for more.

The thought gave me pleasure, for which I reproached myself, since I had nothing to give, and was in the position of a debtor who accepts a gift from a rich and generous friend, without hope of ever being able to return the favour. It delighted me to be adored so, and at times I let myself experience that delight with singular complacency. By dint of hearing everyone call me 'Sir', and finding myself treated as if I were a man, I forgot, unconsciously, that I was a woman; my disguise seemed to me my natural mode of dress, and I felt I had never worn another; I no longer reflected that I was, after all, nothing but a muddle-headed child, who had fashioned a sword from her needle, and a pair of breeches by adapting one of her skirts.

Many men appear more of a woman than I, for I possess little of one but my breasts, a few other rounded contours, and more delicate hands; the skirt around my hips is not I myself. It often happens that the mind's gender is not the same as that of the body, a contradiction which cannot fail to produce a degree of disorder. I, for example, if I had not taken this resolution, apparently foolish, but at its heart a wise one, to renounce the attire of that sex which is mine only materially and by chance, I would have been most unhappy. I love horsemanship, fencing, every sort of violent exercise. I enjoy climbing, and racing here and there, like a young lad. It bores me to sit with my feet together, my elbows pressed to my sides, to lower my eyes modestly, to speak in a

small, sweet, flute-like, voice, and to thread wool through the holes in a piece of canvas a million times. I do not like obeying instructions in the least, and the words I say most often are: 'I wish.' Beneath my smooth brow and silken hair, strong and virile thoughts stir; all the most precious nonsense that women find seductive has touched me but moderately and, like Achilles disguised as a girl, I would willingly quit the mirror for the sword. The only thing that pleases me about women is their beauty; despite the inconvenience that results, I would not willingly renounce my looks, however ill-matched they may be to the mind they clothe.

It was something new and piquant, such an intriguing affair, and I would have been greatly amused by it, if it had not been taken seriously by poor Rosette. She loved me with admirable naivety and conscientiousness, with all the strength of her beautiful and virtuous soul, with that love which men do not comprehend and of which they cannot form even a distant idea; she loved delicately and ardently, as I would wish to be loved, and as I would love, if I met the reality of my dreams. What beautiful lost treasure, what pale, translucent pearls such as divers will never find in the jewel case of the sea! What sweet breath, what gentle sighs scattered in the air, might have been gathered from those pure and loving lips!

Her passion might have made some young man happy indeed! So many unfortunate individuals, handsome, charming, well-endowed, full of heart and spirit, have vainly begged, on their knees, before insensitive and gloomy idols! So many fine and tender souls have thrown themselves, despairingly, into the arms of courtesans, or have died silently like a candle in a tomb, individuals who would have been saved from debauchery, or death, by a love that proved sincere! What a strange thing is human destiny! And how fate mocks us!

What so many others ardently desired, fell to me, who did not, and could not, receive it. A capricious young girl takes a fancy to wander about the country in male attire, to learn the nature of her future lovers; she sleeps in an inn with a worthy fellow, who leads her, by the tip of her finger, to his sister, who without more ado falls in love with her as a cat might, or a dove, as might any of the amorous and languid people in this world. It is perfectly evident that, if I were indeed a young man, and had stood to benefit from the situation, all would have transpired differently, and the lady would have abhorred me, since Fortune is rather fond of handing slippers to those who have high arches, and gloves to those who lack hands; the inheritance that might have allowed you to live comfortably inevitably descends to you on the day of your death.

Sometimes, yet not as often as she would have liked, I visited Rosette in her bedroom. Though she usually only received visitors when she was dressed, nevertheless, she received me as I was her favourite. She would have received many another thing, if I had wanted; but, as they say, 'the most beautiful girl can only give what she has', and what I have would have proved of little use to Rosette.

She would hold out her hand to me to kiss; I confess I did not kiss it without some pleasure, for her hands are very white and tender, exquisitely perfumed, and softened by natural moisture; I would feel it shiver and contract under my lips, the pressure of which I would unnecessarily prolong. Then Rosette, quite moved, and with a supplicating air, would turn on me her broad eyes, full of voluptuousness, and flooded with moist, transparent light, then she would let her pretty head fall back on the pillow, which she had raised a little the better to receive me. I would observe her breast swell anxiously, and her body quiver suddenly beneath the sheet. Certainly, someone in

a position to act might have dared much, and been grateful for her temerity, and for her having skipped a few chapters of the romance.

I would stay for an hour or two, never letting go of her hands, which I placed on the coverlet; we had endless and charming conversations; for, though Rosette was preoccupied with her amorous feelings, she believed herself too certain of succeeding to forego her free, playfulness of mind. Only occasionally did her passion cast a transparent veil of sweet melancholy over her gaiety, which rendered it even more piquant.

Indeed, it would have seemed ridiculous for a novice, such as I appeared to be, to balk at such good fortune and not make the most of the situation. Rosette, indeed, was not made for enduring cruel delay, and, knowing no more of me than this, counted on her charms and my youth, given the apparent lack of love on my part.

However, as this situation began to extend a little beyond its natural bounds, she became uneasy, and a redoubled flow of flattering phrases, and fine protestations, scarcely allayed her insecurity. Two things astonished her as regards myself, contrary aspects of my conduct which she noted and could not reconcile: my warmth of speech and my coldness of action.

You know better than anyone, my dear Graciosa, that with me friendship bears all the characteristics of passion; it is sudden, ardent, lively, exclusive, and loving to the point of jealousy, and my feelings of friendship towards Rosette were almost as strong as those I have for you. One might be confused by less. Rosette was all the more completely deceived, as my attire scarcely permitted any other idea.

Since I have never yet loved a man, my excess tenderness has somehow spilled over into my friendships with young girls and women; into such friendships I have injected the same passion, the same exaltation, that I inject into everything I do, since I find it impossible to act with moderation, and especially in regard to what concerns the heart. In my eyes, there are only two groups of people, those I adore and those I loathe; the others are as if they did not exist, and I would set my horse at them on the highway: they in no way differ, to my mind, from paving stones or milestones.

I am naturally expansive, and affectionate. Sometimes, forgetting the significance of my actions, I would, while walking with Rosette, put my arm around her body, as I did when you and I walked together on the solitary path at the end of my uncle's garden; or else, leaning over the back of her armchair while she embroidered, I would run through my fingers the little stray hairs turning blond on the back of her smooth round neck, or polish, with the back of my hand, her beautiful tresses stretched taut by the comb, to restore their lustre, or else I indulged in some other of those little things that I am accustomed to with my dearest friends, as you know.

She attributed these caresses to more than simple friendship. Friendship, as it is ordinarily conceived, does not extend so far; but seeing that I went no further, she was inwardly astonished, and knew not what to think; she settled on this interpretation: that it arose from too great a timidity on my part, due to my extreme youth and lack of experience in amorous relations, and that I sought to encourage myself through all kinds of advances and kindnesses.

Consequently, she took care to arrange a host of opportunities for tête-à-têtes in places likely to embolden me by their solitude, and distance from all noise and unwelcome arrivals; she took

me on several walks in the high woods, to see if the voluptuous reverie, and amorous desire that the dense and propitious shade of the forests inspire in tender souls could not be turned to her advantage.

One day, after having us wander, for a long time, through the most picturesque park which extended far behind the château, and of which I knew only the area bordering the buildings, she brought me, by a little path, whimsically laid out in serpentine fashion, and bordered by elder and hazel bushes, to a rustic cabin, a sort of charcoal-burner's, hut built of logs laid transversely, with a roof of reeds, and a rough door made of five or six pieces of barely-planed wood, the interstices of which were filled with tow, now covered with wild plants and moss; next to it, amidst the green roots of a clump of large ash trees, their silvery bark spotted here and there with black patches, a strong spring gushed forth, which, a few steps further on, spilled down a pair of marble steps into a basin filled with watercress greener than emerald. In places where there was no cress, one could see fine sand as white as snow; the water was crystal clear, and icy cold; emerging from the earth suddenly, and never being touched by the faintest ray of sunlight, in the nigh-on impenetrable shade it had no time to warm, or become clouded. Despite their chill, I love such springs, and, seeing that this one ran so clear, I could not resist the desire to drink; I bent down and cupped a few drops in the palm of my hand, having no other vessel at my disposal.

Rosette expressed the desire, to quench her thirst, by drinking some of this water as well, and asked me to collect her a few drops also, not daring, she said, to bend down to reach it. I plunged my two hands, joined as closely as possible, into the clear fountain, then raised them like a cup to Rosette's lips, and held them thus till she had drunk the water they contained, which took no time at all, for there was little there, and that little leaked through my fingers, however tightly I held them; it made for a charming scene, and an artist might have made a fine sketch of the subject.

When she had almost finished, as what was left in one palm was close to her lips, she could not help kissing my hand in such a way as to have me believe it was merely to exhaust the last pearls of water there; but I was not mistaken, and the charming blush which suddenly covered her face gave her away.

She took my arm again, and we walked towards the cabin. The lovely lady walked as close to me as she could, and leaned forward while speaking to me, so that her breast rested entirely on my sleeve; an extremely knowing position capable of disturbing any but myself; I felt its firm, pure contour and gentle warmth perfectly; moreover, I noticed a precipitate undulation of breath which, whether affected or real, was no less flattering and engaging.

We arrived, thus, at the door of the hut, which I opened with a kick; I certainly did not expect the spectacle that met my eyes. I thought the hut would be lined with rushes, with a mat on the ground, and some roughly-carved stools as seats: but not at all.

It was a boudoir, furnished with all imaginable elegance. The friezes and mirror-surrounds represented the most gallant scenes from Ovid's 'Metamorphoses': Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, Venus and Adonis, Apollo and Daphne, and other mythological amours, rendered in pale-lilac monochrome; the panel over the mantelpiece displayed pompom roses, charmingly carved, and small daisies which, with luxurious refinement, had been granted gilt centres and silvered leaves. Silver braid edged all the furniture, and highlighted coverings of the softest blue to be found marvellously suited to enhancing the whiteness and radiance of flesh. A thousand charming

curiosities filled the hearth, consoles, and shelves, and there was a luxury of duchess and other sofas, and chaise longues, which showed this retreat as being intended for no austere occupation, for one certainly would not lack comfort there.

A beautiful rocaille clock, placed on a richly inlaid pedestal, faced a large Venetian mirror, and was reflected therein with singular clarity and brilliance. Moreover, its hands had stopped, as if it were a superfluous thing to mark the hours in a place designed for neglecting them.

I informed Rosette that this refinement of luxury pleased me, that I found it to be in excellent taste to hide the greatest refinement beneath a simple appearance, and that I very much approved of a woman wearing petticoats and chemises, trimmed with embroidery, beneath a simple dress; it was a delicate attention for the lover she had, or might acquire, for which one could not be sufficiently grateful, and that it was certainly better to enclose a diamond in a nutshell, than a nutshell in a golden box.

Rosette, to prove to me that she was of my opinion, raised her dress a little, and showed me the edge of a petticoat very richly and flowerily embroidered; it was my choice whether to be admitted to the secrets of some greater hidden magnificence; but I sought not to discover whether the splendour of the chemise corresponded to that of the petticoat: it is probable its luxuriousness was no less. Rosette let the fold of her dress fall, angry at not having been requested to reveal more. However, the exhibition had served for her to show the lower part of a perfectly turned calf, and grant a fine idea of its continuation. In truth, her leg, which she had stretched forward to better spread her skirt, looked wondrously fine and graceful, in its pearl-grey silk stocking, stretched smooth and tight, while the mule with a heel and adorned with a tuft of ribbons, that clad her foot, resembled the glass slipper worn by Cinderella. I paid her the sincerest of compliments, and told her that I scarcely knew a prettier leg or a smaller foot, and thought it impossible to meet with a finer. To which she replied with a frankness and ingenuousness quite spirited and charming: 'It's true.'

Then she went to a convenient cupboard in the wall, took out a few liqueur bottles, and various plates of cakes and preserves, deposited everything on a small pedestal table, and sat down beside me on a somewhat narrow couch, so that I was obliged, in order for us not to be too cramped, to place my arm about her waist. As she had both hands free, and I only my left hand, she poured me a drink, and filled my plate with the fare. Observing that I was going about things rather clumsily, she said to me: 'Come now; I'll feed you like a little child, since you don't know how to eat on your own.' And she herself raised the pieces to my mouth, and forced me to swallow them faster than I liked, pushing them in with her pretty fingers, just as one fattens birds, which set her laughing. I could scarcely avoid granting her fingers a counterpart to the kiss she had granted the palm of my hand a moment ago, while as if to stop me, but in truth to provide the opportunity for me to press home my kiss more firmly, she brushed my lips two or three times with the backs of her fingers.

She had drunk two or three fingers of *Crème de Barbades* (*lemon ratafia*) with a glass of Canary Islands wine, and I about the same. Certainly not a great deal; but enough to vivify two women accustomed to drinking only watered-down spirits. Rosette let herself fall back, and leaned on my arm most amorously. She had thrown off her mantlet, her manner of arching her back revealing the curve of her breasts; their skin tone of a ravishing delicacy and transparency; their form, of a

marvellous finesse and, at the same time, firmness. I contemplated her for some time with an indefinable and pleasurable emotion, and the thought came to me that men were more favoured than us in their love affairs, that we granted them the most charming treasures to possess, and that they had nothing equivalent to offer us. What a pleasure it must be to run one's lips over that smooth, polished flesh, those rounded contours which seem to rise to meet a kiss and provoke it! Satiny skin, undulating curves which merge into one another, silky hair so soft to the touch; what inexhaustible incentives for delicate voluptuousness that men fail to provide us with! Caresses, for us, can scarcely be more than passive; yet there is more pleasure in giving than receiving.

These are remarks that I certainly would not have uttered last year; then, I could have viewed all the throats, breasts, and shoulders, in the world, without being concerned as to the grace or otherwise of their form; but, since I doffed the garb of my own sex, and took to living among a wider group of young people, a feeling has developed in me that was unknown to me before: a feeling for female beauty. We women usually seem to lack it, I know not why since, superficially, we would seem better placed to judge it than men; but, as women are the ones who possess it, and since self-knowledge is the most difficult of all, it is scarcely surprising that we understand little about it. Ordinarily, if a woman compliments another woman on being 'pretty', one can be sure the latter is in truth quite ugly, and that no man will pay her attention. Equally, all the women whose beauty and grace are praised by men are unanimously considered abominable, and sycophantic, as far as the whole flock of skirted females are concerned; they raise endless cries and clamour. If I were the man I appear to be, I would accept no other guide, and female disapproval would grant me sufficient proof of a woman's beauty.

Now I both love and appreciate beauty; the clothes I wear separate me from the rest of my sex, and remove from me all rivalry; I am able to judge of their beauty better than they. I no longer see as a woman, though not yet as a man does, thus desire cannot blind me to the point of mistaking mannequins for idols; I gaze coolly, and without prejudice, thus my position is as wholly disinterested as possible.

The length and fineness of her eyelashes, the glow of her temples, the clarity of her pupils, the shape of her ears, the tone and quality of her hair, the nobility of her feet and hands, the greater or lesser slenderness of her ankles and wrists, a thousand things to which I paid no attention before, but which constitute true beauty, and demonstrate a purity of lineage, guide me in my appreciation, and hardly allow me to err. I believe that one could accept unseen any woman of whom I might say, as men do: 'Truly, she's not bad.'

As a quite natural consequence, I am much more confident about judging the beauty of paintings than before, and, though I have only a very superficial acquaintance with the masters of portraiture, it would be hard to convince me that a poor effort was good; I find in such studies a singular and profound charm; for, like everything in the world, moral or physical beauty desires to be studied, and refuses to allow one to penetrate it all at once. But let us return to Rosette; to make the transition from the one subject to the other is not difficult, each evoking its counterpart.

As I have said, the lovely woman leant back against my arm, her head resting on my shoulder; emotion tinged her beautiful cheeks with a tender pink hue, which was admirably enhanced by the pure black of a small beauty mark very coquettishly placed; her teeth shone behind her smile like raindrops in the depths of a poppy-flower, and her eyelashes, half-lowered, further increased the

moist brilliance of her large eyes; a ray of sunlight made a thousand metallic sparkles play over her silken, wavy hair, some of which had escaped, and fell, in the form of shadowy *pentimentos*, down her round, smooth neck, whose warm whiteness they emphasised; a few small, stray hairs, more mischievous than the others, stood out from the mass, twined in capricious spirals, gilded with singular reflections, and which, traversed by the light, acquired every nuance of prismatic colour: one might have thought them those golden threads which surround the heads of virgins in old paintings. We both remained silent, and I amused myself by tracing the small azure-blue veins beneath the pearly transparency of the surface of her temples, and the soft and imperceptible down at the end of her eyebrows.

The lovely woman seemed to withdraw into herself, lost in a dream of infinite voluptuousness; her arms hung at her sides, undulating and soft as loose scarves; her head leant further and further back, as if the muscles that supported it had been severed or were or too weak to do so. She had tucked her two feet under her petticoat, and had managed to nestle completely in the corner of the loveseat I occupied, so that, although this piece of furniture was too narrow, there was now an empty space on the other side.

Her body, relaxed and supple, modelled itself against mine like wax, and took on that external contour as exactly as could be: water could not have insinuated itself more precisely into all its sinuosity of line. Attached thus to my flank, it created something akin to the dual line with which painters embellish a drawing on the shaded side, in order to amplify and deepen the effect. Only a woman in love achieves such undulation and intertwining. Ivy and willows are very far from displaying the same.

The gentle warmth of her body penetrated through her clothes and mine; a thousand magnetic lines radiated around her; her vitality seemed to have passed into me, wholly, and abandoned her, completely. From minute to minute she languished, and died, and arched more and more: a light perspiration beaded her glossy brow: her eyes moistened, and two or three times she made the movement of raising her hands as if to hide them; but, halfway there, she failed to reach them, and her arms fell back weakly against her knees; a large tear overflowed an eyelid and rolled down her burning cheek, where it soon dried.



Dante's Dream (Io sono in pace) (1875)
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (English, 1828 - 1882)

[Artvee](#)

My situation was becoming most embarrassing and even somewhat ridiculous; I felt I must look enormously foolish, and this annoyed me to the last degree, although it was not in my power to assume any other posture than that. An enterprising manner was denied me, yet it was the only one that would have been appropriate. I was certain of not meeting with any resistance to risk it, yet, in truth, could make nothing of it. Uttering gallantries and rattling off compliments might have been fine at the start, but nothing could have proved more insipid at the point we had reached; to rise and depart would have been the height of rudeness; and besides, who knows if Rosette would not have played the part of Potiphar's wife, and held me back by the corner of my cloak. I could have offered no virtuous motive to excuse my resistance; and then, I will confess to my shame,

this scene, however ambiguous its character was not without a certain charm for me, which detained me more than it ought; a flame of ardent desire licked me, and I was truly sorry not to be able to satisfy its urging: I even wished I were a man, in accord with my attire, in order to crown this love, and regretted, greatly, that Rosette was mistaken in me. My breathing quickened, I felt a hot blush rise to my cheeks, and was hardly less troubled than my poor lover. The thought of our like gender was gradually fading, leaving only a vague feeling of pleasure; my eyes were veiled, my lips trembled, and, if Rosette had been a man instead of a woman, 'he' would certainly have found me easy prey.

At last, unable to contain herself, she rose suddenly, with a sort of spasmodic movement, and began to walk about the room with great activity; then she halted in front of the mirror and adjusted a few locks of her hair, which had lost their shape. During all this, I cut a poor figure, hardly knowing how to behave.

She stopped in front of me and seemed to think. She no doubt thought extreme shyness alone was restraining me, that I was more of a mere schoolboy than she had first believed. Beside herself, having mounted to the highest degree of amorous exasperation, she chose to make a supreme effort, and dare everything, at the risk of losing all.

She approached me, with a lightning motion seated herself on my knees, threw her arms about my neck, crossed her hands behind my head, and seized my mouth in a furious embrace. I felt her breasts, rebellious and half-naked, press against my chest, as her intertwined fingers tightened in my hair. A shudder ran through my whole body, and the tips of my breasts rose on end.

Rosette's mouth never left mine; her lips enveloped my lips, her teeth struck against my teeth, our breaths mingled. I drew back for a moment, and averted my head two or three times to avoid her kiss; but an unconquerable attraction drew me back, and I returned the kiss almost as ardently as she delivered it. I know not what would have occurred, if loud barking had not been heard outside the door, and the sound of scrabbling paws. The door gave way, and a fine white greyhound entered the cabin, barking and frolicking.

Rosette rose, suddenly, and ran to the far end of the room: the greyhound leapt around her vigorously and joyfully, trying to reach her hands to lick them, such that she had great difficulty arranging her mantle on her shoulders. This greyhound was her brother Alcibiades' favourite dog: he never left her brother's side, and his arrival meant his master was not far behind; that is what had so frightened poor Rosette.

Indeed, Alcibiades himself entered a minute later, all booted and spurred, with his riding-whip in his hand: 'Ah! There you are,' he cried, 'I've been seeking you for an hour, and certainly would never have found you if Snug, my brave greyhound, had not roused you from your hiding place.' And he cast a half-serious, half-playful look at his sister, which made her blush to the whites of her eyes. 'You must have had some thorny subject or other to discuss for you to retreat to such deep solitude? Doubtless you were talking theology, concerning the dual nature of the soul?'

— 'Oh! Good Lord, no. Our occupation was by no means so sublime; we were nibbling cake, and talking of fashions; that was all,' Rosette answered.

— 'That, I don't believe; you seemed deeply immersed in exchanging sentiments; but, to distract you from your vapid conversation, I think it would be no bad thing if you were to ride

beside me. I've a new mare I wish to try. You may ride her too, Théodore, and we shall see what can be done with her.'

The three of us exited together, he lending me his arm, I giving mine to Rosette: the expressions on our faces were singularly varied. Alcibiades looked thoughtful, I quite at ease, Rosette excessively annoyed.

Alcibiades had arrived at just the right moment for me, and at the wrong moment for Rosette, who thus lost, or thought she had lost, all the fruit of her clever attacks and ingenious tactics. It was all for her to do again; a quarter of an hour more, and the Devil take me if I know what outcome the affair would have had. I can't see what it would have led to. Perhaps it would have been better if Alcibiades had not intervened at precisely the most delicate of moments, like a *deus ex machina*: one way or another, it would have had to have ended. During this whole scene, I was, two or three times at least, on the point of confessing what I was to Rosette; but the fear of passing for an adventuress, and my secret being divulged, kept the words from my lips, though ready to flee.

Such a state of affairs could not continue. My departure was the only way to put an end to this hopeless affair; so, at dinner, I officially announced that I was leaving the very next day. Rosette, who was seated next to me, almost fainted on hearing the news, and dropped her glass. A sudden pallor covered her beautiful face: she threw me a pained and reproachful look, which moved and troubled me almost as much as she did herself.

The old aunt raising her wrinkled hands, with a movement of painful surprise, asked, in a faint, trembling voice, which quavered even more than usual: 'Ah! My dear Monsieur Théodore, you are leaving us so soon? That is wrong of you; yesterday you seemed not in the least disposed to go. There was no post: so, you received no letters, and can have no reason. You promised us another fifteen days, and you are retracting; you really have no right to do so: a promise given may not be withdrawn. You can see what Rosette's face is like, and how she reproaches you; I warn you I shall reproach you at least as much as her, and make just as dreadful a face at you, and a sixty-eight-year-old face is somewhat more terrible than a twenty-three-year-old one. Now see what you voluntarily expose yourself to: the anger of both the aunt and the niece, and all for some whim that has momentarily seized you!

Alcibiades swore, thumping his fist on the table, that he would barricade the gate and hamstring my horse, rather than let me go. Rosette gave me so sad and pleading a look it would have required the ferocity of a tiger that had been fasting for eight days not to be touched by it. I yielded, and, though it greatly annoyed me, made a solemn promise to stay.

Dear Rosette would have gladly jumped on my neck, and kissed me on the mouth, at this kindness. Alcibiades enclosed my hand in his larger one, and shook my arm so violently he almost dislocated my shoulder, left my rings oval instead of circular, and scored three of my fingers quite deeply. The old woman, delighted, took a huge pinch of snuff.

However, Rosette failed to regain her cheerfulness completely; the idea that I might leave and harboured a desire to do so, an idea which had not clearly presented itself before to her mind, cast her into a deep reverie. The colour which the announcement of my departure had driven from her cheeks did not return as vividly as before; her cheeks remained pallid, and she still seemed marked

by anxiety. My conduct towards her surprised her more and more. After the marked advances she had made to me, she could not understand my motive for exercising such restraint in my relations with her: what she desired was to obtain my decided commitment before I left, not doubting that afterwards it would be quite easy for her to detain me as long as she wished.

In this she was right, and, if I had not been a woman, her calculation would have been wholly correct; for, whatever has been said about the satiety of pleasure and the disgust which ordinarily follows, every man whose heart is true, and who is not wretchedly jaded without recourse, feels his love increase with his happiness, and very often the best way of keeping a lover who seeks to leave, is to yield oneself to him with complete abandon.

Rosette intended to bring me to the requisite point, before my departure. Knowing how difficult it is to resume a relationship at the point where one has left it, and, moreover, being by no means certain of ever finding herself close to me and in such favourable circumstances again, she neglected no opportunity that might present itself to allow me to speak clearly, and abandon the evasive manner behind which I had taken refuge. Since I, for my part, had the quite decided intention of avoiding any kind of meeting similar to that in the rustic cabin, but could not, however, without appearing ridiculous, affect too much coldness towards Rosette or adopt a little girl's prudish manner, I knew not quite what attitude to take, and tried to ensure there was always a third person by us.

Rosette, on the contrary, did everything she could to be alone with me, and quite often succeeded, the *château* being far from the town and little frequented by the neighbouring nobility. My silent resistance saddened and surprised her; at times doubts and hesitations arose in her in regard to the power of her charms, and, seeing herself so little loved, she was sometimes not far from believing that she was ugly. Then she redoubled her attentions and coquetry, and though her mourning did not allow her to employ all the resources of her attire, she nevertheless knew how to adorn and vary it so as to be two or three times more charming each day, which is saying something. She tried everything: she was playful, melancholy, tender, passionate, considerate, coquettish, even simpering. She adopted, one after the other, all those adorable masks that suit women so well that one no longer knows whether they are indeed masks or their real faces; she successively assumed nine or ten contrasting roles, to discover which might please me, and settle on that. All by herself, she created a complete *seraglio*, in the course of which attentions I was merely required to submit; but nothing, of course, came of it.

Her lack of success, despite every stratagem, made her fall into a profound stupor. Indeed, she would have turned old Nestor's brain, and melted the ice of chaste Hippolytus, themselves, and I appeared no less of a Nestor or Hippolytus: though young, I possess a haughty and resolute air, a bold way of speaking, and, everywhere except in private, a very decided countenance.

She might have believed that all the witches of Thrace and Thessaly had cast a spell on my body, or that, at the very least, my 'cord was knotted', and might have formed a very poor opinion of my virility, which was indeed rather lacking. However, it seems the thought never occurred to her, and she simply attributed my singular reserve to a lack of love for her.

The days passed, and the affair failed to progress: she was visibly affected: an expression of anxious sadness had replaced the fresh smile that had previously always bloomed on her lips; the corners of her mouth, so joyfully arched, fell noticeably, forming a firm and serious line; a few

small veins were drawn in a more marked manner on her moistened eyelids; her cheeks, formerly like the skin of a peach, had retained only their imperceptibly velvety quality. Often, from my window, I saw her crossing the flowerbed in her morning-gown; she walked, barely lifting her feet, sliding along, her two arms limply crossed on her chest, her head inclined, more bowed than a willow branch over water, with something undulating and sagging about her, like an over-long piece of drapery whose end was touching the ground. At those moments, she looked like one of those ancient lovers fallen prey to Venus' anger, against whom the pitiless goddess acted in a completely ruthless manner: such is how I imagine Psyche to have been when Eros had forsaken her.

On the days when she was not trying to overcome my coldness and hesitation, her love had a simple and primitive allure that might have charmed me; it was a silent, trusting abandonment of self, a chaste readiness for caresses, an inexhaustible abundance and fullness of heart, all the treasures of a beautiful nature poured out without reserve. She had none of that pettiness and meanness that one finds in almost all women, even the most gifted; she never sought to disguise her feelings, and quietly allowed me to witness the full extent of her passion. Her self-esteem did not rebel for even a moment, even though I failed to respond to her many advances, for pride quits the heart the moment love enters it; and if ever someone was truly loved, it was myself, and by Rosette. She suffered, yet without complaint or bitterness, and attributed the small success of her attempts only to herself. However, her pallor increased every day, and the lilies had so engaged the roses in her cheeks, on the field of combat, that the latter had been decisively routed; this distressed me, but, in good conscience, I could do less than anyone to address it. The more I spoke to her in a gentle and affectionate manner, the more amorous she was with me, the more I plunged the barbed arrow of unrequited, and unrequitable, love into her heart. By consoling her at present, the greater the despair I was preparing for her in future; my remedy poisoned her wound while appearing to lull her to sleep. I repented, in a way, of all the pleasant things I had chosen to say to her, and would have liked, because of the great friendship I had for her, to find a means of making her hate me. One can carry disinterestedness no further. I might have lost my temper with her; which would have been better.

Indeed, I tried two or three times, to address her harshly, but quickly returned to complimenting her, fearing her tears even more than her smile. On such occasions, though loyalty of intent fully absolves me in all conscience, I was more touched than I should have been, and felt something not far from remorse. A tear can hardly be dried except by a kiss, and one cannot decently leave that office to a handkerchief, even if it is of the finest cambric in the world. I undid what I had done, the tear was soon forgotten, more swiftly than the kiss, redoubling, in the event, my degree of embarrassment.

Rosette, who now sees that I am about to escape her, clings stubbornly and miserably to the remains of her hopes, and my position becomes more and more complicated. The strange sensation I experienced in the little cabin, and the inconceivable disorder into which the ardour of my beautiful lover's caresses threw me, have been renewed in me several times, although less violently; and often, sitting near Rosette, her hand in mine, hearing her speak to me in a sweet cooing voice, I even imagine I am a man, as she believes me to be, and that, if I do not respond to her love, it is simply cruelty on my part.

One evening, I know not by what chance, I found myself, in that room decorated in green, opposite the old lady; she had some tapestry-work in her hands, for, despite her sixty-eight years, she never remained idle, wishing as she said, to finish, before dying, this decoration for a piece of furniture, which she had begun, and had been working on for a long while. Feeling a little tired, she set down her work, and leant back in her tall armchair: she looked at me most attentively, and her grey eyes sparkled behind her glasses with a strange vivacity; she passed her moisture-less hand two or three times over her wrinkled forehead, and seemed to be deep in thought. The memory of times that were no more, whose absence she regretted, gave her face a melancholy and tender expression. I remained silent, for fear of disturbing her thoughts, and for a few minutes there was a silence, which she finally broke.

‘Those are the real eyes of my Henri, my dear Henri, the same moist, shining look, the same set of the head, the same proud but gentle physiognomy; one might think you were he. You cannot imagine the extent of the resemblance, Monsieur Théodore. When I see you, I can no longer believe that Henri is dead; I think him returned at last from some long journey. The sight of you has given me much pleasure, and a deal of pain, Théodore: pleasure, by reminding me of my poor Henri; pain, by showing me how great the loss I suffered; sometimes I have taken you for his ghost. I cannot get used to the idea that you must leave us; it seems to me that I am losing my Henri once again.’

I told her that if it were really possible for me to stay longer, I would choose to do so with pleasure, but that my stay had already extended well beyond the limits set; that, moreover, I fully intended to return, and that the château would leave me too many pleasant memories to forget in haste.

— ‘As sorry as I am at your departure, Monsieur Théodore,’ she continued, pursuing the subject, ‘there is someone here who will be sorrier than I. You will understand who I mean without my naming her. I know not what we will do with Rosette when you are gone; this old château is a sad place. Alcibiades is always out hunting, and, for a young woman like her, the society of a poor cripple like me is scarcely entertaining.’

— ‘If any should regret it, it is neither you nor Rosette, madame, but I; you lose but little, I much; you will readily gain the company of those more charming than I, while it is more than doubtful that I can ever replace that of Rosette and yourself.’

— ‘I’ve no wish to decry your modesty, my dear sir, but I know what I know, and I say what is true: it is likely we will not see Madame Rosette in good spirits again for a long while, since it is you yourself who now determine the colour of her complexion. Her period of mourning is about to end, and it would be truly unfortunate if she were leave off happiness along with her last black dress; that would set a very poor example, and be quite contrary to custom. It is something you could prevent without too much trouble, and will surely prevent,’ said the old woman, emphasising the last words.

— ‘I’ll certainly try my best to ensure your dear niece remains cheerful, since you suppose I have such influence over her. However, I scarcely see how.’

— ‘Oh! How poor your vision is then! What use are those fine eyes? I never thought you so short-sighted. Rosette is free; she has an income of eighty thousand livres, which no one else has

any claim on, and women twice as ugly as her are considered very pretty. You are young, handsome, and, I think, unmarried; the thing seems to me the simplest thing in the world, unless you have an unconquerable dislike for Rosette, which is hard to believe...'

— 'And is not the case, and could not be, as her soul is equal to her person, and she is one who could appear ugly without anyone thinking or wishing them otherwise than they are...'

— 'She could appear ugly with impunity, yet, in truth, she is charming. That is doubly right; I do not doubt your words; she always presents herself well. As for her, I would willingly answer that there are a thousand people she dislikes, while, if she were questioned, she would end by confessing that perhaps you do not exactly displease her. You wear a ring there that would suit her, for your fingers are as slender as hers, and I am quite sure she would accept it with pleasure.'

The good lady paused for a few moments to see what the effect of her words might be, and I doubt she was satisfied with the expression on my face. I was cruelly embarrassed and knew not what to reply. From the start of the conversation, I had perceived where her insinuations were leading; and, though I had well-nigh anticipated her words, I still felt surprised and speechless. I could only refuse, but what valid reason could I give for such a refusal? I had none, except that I was, in reality, a woman: an excellent reason, true, but certainly one I could not confess to.

I could scarcely claim some ridiculous objection on the part of my parents; any parent in the world would accept such a union with delight. Had Rosette not been what she was, kind and beautiful, and of good family, the eighty thousand pounds that were hers would remove all difficulty. To declare that I did not love her would have been neither true nor honest, for I really loved her deeply, and more than a woman usually loves another of her sex. I was too young to pretend to be engaged elsewhere: the best I could do was to claim that, being a younger son, family interest required that I enter the Order of Malta, and did not allow me to think of marrying: a fact which caused me the greatest grief in the world now I had met Rosette.

This was not worth a fig as an answer, and I felt it perfectly well. The old lady was not fooled, and refused to regard it as definitive; she thought that I had spoken thus to give myself time to reflect and to consult my parents. Indeed, such a union was so advantageous to me, and out of the common, that she thought it scarcely possible for me to refuse, even if I loved Rosette little or not at all; it was hardly a piece of good fortune to be neglected.

I do not know if the aunt made her overture to me at the instigation of her niece, but I am inclined to believe Rosette had nothing to do with it: she loved me too simply and ardently to think of anything other than possessing me, and marriage would certainly have been the last means she would have employed. The dowager, who had not failed to notice our intimacy, which she doubtless believed to be much greater than it was, had doubtless conceived this whole plan in her head, so as to have me stay to replace, as far as was possible, her dear son Henri, killed in action, to whom she had found I bore such a striking resemblance. She took delight in the idea, and had used this moment when I was alone with her to her advantage. I could see from her expression that she did not consider herself defeated, and that she intended to return to the assault, and soon, which irritated me to the last degree.

That night, Rosette for her part, made a last attempt on me, which had such serious results that I must render you separate account of it, and cannot do so in this already excessively inflated

letter. You will see to what a singular affair I was predestined, and how heaven has singled me out, in advance, to be the heroine of a novel. I am uncertain what moral one can draw from it all, but lives are not works of fiction, with every chapter ending in a fine sentence or two. Often life's only meaning is that it is not death. That's all for now. Farewell, my dear friend, I kiss you on your lovely eyes. You will receive the continuation of my wondrous biography shortly.

Chapter 13: D'Albert to Théodore

Théodore, or Rosalind, for I know not by which name to call you, I caught sight of you a moment ago, and now am writing to you. How I wish I knew your family name! It must sound as honey tastes, and flutter on the lips more sweetly and harmoniously than poetry! I would never have dared to say this, face to face, and yet I am dying to do so. What I have suffered, no one knows, no one could know, I myself can only give a faint idea of it; words cannot convey such anguish; I could force myself to contort the language, wilfully; drive myself to say new and singular things; to yield to the most extravagant exaggeration, and yet still describe what I experienced in images that barely sufficed.

O, Rosalind! I love you; I adore you; would there were a stronger word even than that! I have never loved, have never adored, anyone as I do you. I prostrate myself; I annihilate myself before you, and would like to force all creation to bend the knee before my idol; you are to me more than all Nature, more than myself, more than any god; it seems strange to me that the Lord himself does not descend from heaven to be your slave. Where you are not, all is desert, all is dead, all is darkness. You alone people the world for me; you are my life, my sun; you are my all. Your smile brings on the day, your sorrow the night. The heavenly spheres follow the movements of your body, and the celestial harmonies are regulated by you, O my beloved queen! O my real, and lovely dream! You are clothed in splendour, and you bathe in endless radiance.

I have known you for a mere three months, but have loved you a long while. Before I saw you, I already longed for you. I called to you, I sought you, and despaired of not meeting you on my life's path, for I knew I could never love another woman. How many times you have appeared to me, at the window of a mysterious château, leaning melancholically on the balcony, casting the petals of some flower or other to the breeze, or else, a lively Amazon, on a Turkish horse whiter than snow, galloping the dark alleys of the forest! Yours indeed were those proud and gentle eyes, diaphanous hands, and beautiful wavy hair, accompanied by a half-smile, so charmingly disdainful. Yet the goddess of my dream proves less beautiful, since the most ardent and unbridled imagination, that of the artist and poet, cannot attain to the sublime poetry of reality. There is in you an inexhaustible source of grace, an ever-flowing fount of irresistible seductiveness: you are a forever-open casket of the most precious pearls, and, your slightest movements, your most forgetful gestures, your most abandoned poses, exhibit at every moment, in regal profusion, beauty's inestimable treasures. If the soft undulations of contour, if the fleeting lines of a gesture could be fixed, and retained, by a mirror, those before which you passed would cause the divinest canvases of Raphael to be scorned, and regarded as no more than cabaret posters.

Every attitude, every expression of your head, every varying aspect of your beauty is engraved on the mirror of my soul in diamond point, and nothing in the world could erase its profound imprint. I recall how the shadows lay, how the light fell, the planes that the sun's rays illuminated, and the region where some stray reflection merged with the more softened tints of neck and cheek. I could draw you in your absence; your image is always before me.

As a child, I would stand for hours before the paintings of the old masters, eagerly searching the dark depths. I would gaze at those lovely figures of saints and goddesses whose flesh, white as wax or ivory, stood out so wondrously against a background darkened to charcoal by the fading of its colours. I would admire the simplicity and magnificence of their figures; the strange grace of their hands and feet; the proud, beautiful character of their features, at once so fine and so firm; and the grandeur of the draperies that fluttered about their divine forms, and whose purple folds seemed to lengthen to embrace those beautiful bodies. By dint of plunging my eyes, obstinately, beneath the smoky veil thickened by the centuries, my vision became blurred, the contours of objects lost their sharpness, and a kind of motionless, deadened life animated all those pale phantoms of vanished beauty. I ended by believing that those figures vaguely resembled the beautiful stranger whom I adored in the depths of my heart. I sighed at the thought that she whom I had been destined to love was perhaps one of them, yet had been dead for three hundred years. This idea often affected me to the point of making me weep, and I would feel anger within at not having been born in the sixteenth century, when all that beauty was alive. I felt it to be the result of an unpardonable, hapless, yet awkward error on my part.

As I grew older, the sweet phantom haunted me even more assiduously. I saw it, forever hovering between myself and each woman who was my mistress, smiling ironically, mocking their human beauty in all the perfection of its divine loveliness. It made me seek out ugly women, who were yet truly charming, and born to console any not enamored of that adorable shade whose body I did not conceive of as actually existing and whose beauty was only a presentiment of your own beauty. O Rosalind! How unhappy I was, on account of you, yet before I knew you! O Théodore! How unhappy I am, on account of you, now I have seen you! If you wished, you could open the paradise of my dreams to me. You stand at the threshold, like a guardian angel wrapped about by its wings, and hold the golden key in your beautiful hands. Say, Rosalind, say if you wish it so?

I await but a single word from you to determine if I live or die: will you pronounce it? Are you Apollo descended from heaven, or pale Aphrodite rising from the bosom of the sea? Where have you left your jewelled chariot drawn by four fiery horses? Or where, your mother-of-pearl shell, and your blue-tailed dolphins? What amorous nymph merged her body with yours in the midst of a kiss, O handsome young man, more charming than Cyparissus (*loved by Apollo*) or Adonis (*loved by Venus-Aphrodite*), more adorable than all women!

But you are, indeed, a woman; we no longer live in that age of metamorphosis. Adonis and Hermaphroditus are lost, and so great a degree of beauty is no longer attainable by a man; for, since the heroes and the gods are no more, you alone preserve in your marble form, like a Greek temple, the precious gift of that beauty devalued by Christianity; you alone show that Earth has nothing in heaven to envy; you represent, worthily, the first divinity of the world, the purest symbolisation of the eternal essence — Beauty.

As soon as I saw you, something tore within me, a veil fell, a door opened, and I felt myself inwardly flooded by waves of light. I understood that my life lay open before me, and that I had finally arrived at a decisive parting of the ways. The obscure, lost segments of that part-radiant figure I was trying to discern in the shadows was suddenly illuminated; the dark hues that had drowned the background of the painting were now softly lit; a tender rosy glow clothed the slightly-greenish ultramarine of the distance; the trees that had formed only vague silhouettes were highlighted more clearly; the dewy flowers starred the muted green of the lawn with bright points of light. I saw a bullfinch with scarlet breast at the end of an elderberry branch; a white rabbit with pink eyes and erect ears, poking its head forth between two sprigs of wild thyme, and running its paw over its muzzle; and a timid stag drinking at the spring, and admiring its antlers in the water. Since that morning when the sun of love rose over my life, all is changed. Where barely-seen forms flickered in the shadows, their ambiguity rendering them terrible, or monstrous, groups of flowering trees, here are elegantly outlined hills curving to graceful amphitheatres, and silver palaces their terraces adorned with statues and vases, bathing their feet in azure lakes, and seeming to waver between two skies. What, in the darkness, I took to be a gigantic dragon, its wings armed with claws, crawling through the night on scaly feet, is seen to be simply a felucca with silken sail, and painted and gilded oars, full of fair women and musicians; and that frightful crab I thought I saw, waving its hooks and pincers above my head, is only a fan-like palm tree whose long, narrow leaves are stirred by the night breeze. My chimeras, and mirages have vanished: I am in love.

Despairing of ever finding you, I thought my dream a lie, and quarrelled furiously with Fate, telling myself either that I was mad to seek such an ideal, or that Nature was infertile and the Creator inept in failing to actualise the simple thought of my heart. Prometheus, in his noble pride, wished to create man and rival the gods. I, I had created the ideal woman, and believed the punishment for my audacity to be a forever unrequited desire, that would gnaw my liver as the vulture did his. I anticipated being chained with diamantine fetters on some hoary rock, on the shore of the wild Ocean, though the beautiful sea-nymphs, the daughters of Oceanus, with their long green hair, raising their white and pointed breasts above the waves, revealing their mother-of-pearl bodies dripping with briny tears to the sun, would not come to lean against the rock, and speak to me, to console me in my sorrow as in Aeschylus' play (*Prometheus Bound*). Yet it was not so.

You appeared, and my imagination was to blame for its impotence. My torment was not, as I had feared, to be bound to a sterile rock, perpetually prey to an idea: yet I suffered no less. I had been made aware that you did, indeed, exist, that my presentiment had not deceived me on this point; but you presented yourself to me in the ambiguous, terrible, lovely form of the Sphinx. Like Isis, the hidden goddess, you were enveloped in a veil I dared not raise for fear of falling dead.

If you knew, beneath my distracted appearance, with what breathless, anxious attention I observed you, and followed your slightest movement! Nothing escaped me. How ardently I gazed at the little of your neck and wrists that was visible, to try to ascertain your sex! Your hands have been for me the subject of profound study, and I can say that I know the smallest sinuosity, the most imperceptible vein, the slightest dimple there; if you were hidden from head to toe beneath the most impenetrable domino, I would recognise you merely on seeing a single one of your fingers. I have analysed the undulations of your walk, the way you place your feet, the way you brush your hair away. I sought to surprise your secret by studying your bodily habits. I spied on

you, in those hours of softness, especially, those hours when the bones seem to absent themselves from the body, and the limbs sag and bend as if they were disjoined, to see if female contours would pronounce themselves more boldly, at moments of forgetfulness and nonchalance. No one has ever been watched as ardently as you.

I would lose myself in this contemplation for hours on end. Withdrawn to some corner of the drawing-room, holding an unread book, or crouching behind the curtain of my room, when you were in yours and the blinds of your window were raised, penetrated then by the marvellous beauty which spreads about you and creates a sort of luminous atmosphere, I would say to myself: 'Assuredly, this is a woman'. Then suddenly a swift, bold movement of yours, a forceful tone of voice, or cavalier's mannerism, would destroy in a minute my frail edifice of conjecture, and reawaken my initial doubts.

I was coursing, sails spread, over a boundless ocean of amorous reverie, when you came to seek me out to practice fencing or undertake a game of tennis; the girl of my thoughts, transformed into the youthful knight, dealt me terrible blows, making the foil fly from my hands, as nimbly and adroitly as the best of well-trained swordsmen; at every moment of the day, some like disappointment arose.

I was about to approach you and say: 'My dear and lovely one, it is you I adore,' when I saw you lean tenderly towards a lady's ear, and whispering through her hair, clouds of compliments. Judge of my situation. Or else some woman, whom, in a fit of jealousy, I would have flayed alive with the greatest delight in the world, would lean against your arm, and draw you aside to confide I know not what childish secrets to you, detaining you for hours on end in a window embrasure.

I was furious to see you conversing with women, since it made me believe you to be a man, and if you were so I could endure it only with extreme pain. When men approached you, freely and familiarly, I was more jealous still, because I thought you a woman and that they perhaps shared that suspicion. I was prey to the most conflicting passions, and knew not what to conceive.

I grew angry, I addressed the harshest reproaches to myself, for being thus tormented by such a love, and for lacking the strength to tear from my heart the maleficent plant which had grown there overnight, like a poisonous mushroom. I cursed you; I called you my evil genius. I even believed for a moment that you were Beelzebub himself, for I could not explain the sensation I felt when near you.

Whenever I felt quite convinced that you were in fact none other than a woman in disguise, the improbability of every reason for indulging in such a whim, reasons which might provide a justification for it, plunged me into uncertainty once more, and I again felt regret that the form I had dreamed of as embodying the love of my soul should belong to a person of the same sex as my own. I railed at chance, which had granted a man so charming an appearance, and, to my eternal misfortune, had led me to encounter him at the moment when I no longer hoped to view a realisation of that absolute idea of pure beauty I had cherished for so long in my heart.

Now, Rosalind, I entertain the profound belief that you are the most beautiful of women. I have seen you in the apparel of your sex. I have viewed your shoulders and arms, so pure and correctly rounded. Your throat and breast can only belong to a young girl: neither Meleager the handsome hunter, nor Bacchus the effeminate god, both of ambiguous form, though represented

in Parian marble and polished by the amorous kisses of twenty centuries, could never possess, or have possessed, such suavity of line or such delicacy of skin. I am no longer tormented in that regard. Moreover, since you are a woman, and my love is no longer reprehensible, I can yield myself to it without remorse, and abandon myself to the flood that bears me towards you. However great, however unbridled the passion that I feel, it is permitted and I may confess to it. But you, Rosalind, for whom I burn in silence, and who were, till now ignorant of the immensity of my love, you to whom this late revelation will perhaps only cause surprise, do you not hate me? Can you love me, do you love me? I know not, and I tremble, and am even more unhappy than before.

At times, it seems to me that you do not hate me. When we performed our roles in 'As You Like It' you gave certain speeches a particular accent which heightened their meaning, and urged me, in some manner, to declare myself. I thought I saw, in your eyes and in your smile, a gracious promise of indulgence, and felt your hand respond to the pressure of mine. Lord, if I was mistaken, it is a thing on which I dare not reflect. Encouraged by all this, and urged to it by my love, I chose to write, thus, to you, for the attire you wear is ill-suited to such a confession, and a thousand times the words had died on my lips. Though I possessed the idea, the firm conviction, that I was speaking to a woman, your manly costume frightened away all my tender, amorous thoughts, and prevented them from taking flight towards you.

I beg you, Rosalind, if you do not love me, yet try to love me, I who love you in spite of everything, beneath the veil in which you wrap yourself, doubtless out of pity. Do not force me to devote the remainder of my life to the most dreadful despair, the gloomiest discouragement. Remember that I have adored you ever since the first inkling of an idea shone in my head, ever since you were revealed to me prematurely, and when I was very small, appeared to me in dreams with a crown of dewdrops, two prismatic wings, and that little blue flower in your hand. Remember that you are my goal, my means of life and its meaning; that, without you, I am nothing but vain appearance, and if you extinguish the flame you have lit, there will remain, deep within me, only a pinch of dust finer and more impalpable than that which dusts the very wings of death. Rosalind, you who possess many a remedy for curing lovesickness, cure me, for I am very ill. Play your part to the end, forgo the clothes of handsome Ganymede, and extend your white hand to the youngest son of that brave knight Sir Rowland de Boys.

Chapter 14: Théodore to Graciosa

I was at my window, watching the stars bloom joyfully in the flowerbeds of the sky, and breathing in the scent of the night-flowers carried to me on a dying breeze. The wind from the open window had doused my lamp, the last one left alight in the château. My thoughts had lapsed into vague reverie, and a kind of drowsiness began to overtake me; however, I remained a while leaning on the stone balustrade, fascinated by the charm of the night, or simply through nonchalance and forgetfulness. Rosette, no longer seeing my lamp alight, and unable to discern my presence due to a broad patch of shadow that fell precisely across the window, doubtless believed that I was lying down, which was what she had awaited before risking a last, desperate attempt. She opened the

door so quietly I did not hear her enter, and she was two steps from me before I noticed. She was most surprised to find me still awake; but, soon recovering from her surprise, approached me and took my arm, calling me twice by my name: 'Théodore, Théodore!'

— 'What! You, Rosette, here, at this hour, all alone, without a light, and in such a state of undress! I should tell you that the lovely woman had nothing on but an exceedingly thin cambric nightrobe, and the fine chemise edged with lace that I had not sought to reveal, on the day of that famous scene in the little cabin in the park. Her arms, smooth and cold as marble, were entirely bare, and the fabric that covered her body was so taut and diaphanous that it allowed the buds of her breasts to be seen, as if she were the statue of a bather covered with damp drapery.'

— 'Do you reproach me, Théodore? Or was that pure surprise? Yes, I, Rosette, a beautiful woman here, in your room, not in my own where I should be, at eleven in the evening or nearer midnight, without duenna, chaperone, or maid, almost naked, and in a simple robe; all very astonishing, is it not? I am as surprised as you are, and I know not how to justify it.'

As she spoke, she clasped one of her arms around my body, and let herself fall on the foot of my bed so as to draw me down beside her.

— 'Rosette,' I said, trying to free myself, 'I shall relight the lamp; nothing is as gloomy as a darkened room; and besides, it is truly painful not to be able to view you clearly now you are here, and deprive myself of the spectacle of your beauty. Allow me, with tinder and a match, to make myself a portable sun, that will highlight everything jealous night hides beneath its shadows.'

— 'Don't, please. I'd rather you were unable to see my blushes; my cheeks are burning, and it's enough to make me die of shame.' She buried her face against me; and remained like that for a few minutes, as if suffocated by emotion.

I, meanwhile, was running my fingers, mechanically, through the long curls of her loosened hair, while searching my brain for some honest way out of my difficulty, yet finding none, for I was cornered in my last entrenchment, and Rosette seemed perfectly determined not to leave the room as she had entered it. Her dress had a formidable casualness, which promised nothing good. I myself had on only a dressing-gown, which would have defended my incognito only poorly, thus I could not have been more worried about the outcome of the battle.

— 'Théodore,' listen to me, said Rosette, rising and tossing her hair back on both sides of her face, in the faint light that the stars, and a slender, rising crescent moon, cast into the room whose window had remained open; 'the way I am behaving is quite wild; everyone would blame me for acting so. But you will soon be leaving, and I love you! I cannot part from you like this without having explained myself. Perhaps you will never return; perhaps this is the first and last time I meet you. Who knows where you will travel to? But wherever you go, you will take my soul and my life with you. If you'd promised to stay, I would not have been driven to this extremity. The happiness of contemplating you, of hearing your voice, of living beside you would have been enough for me: I would have asked for nothing more. I would have imprisoned my love in my heart; You would have seen in me only a good and sincere friend; but now that cannot be. You say that you absolutely must leave. It troubles you, Théodore, to see me thus attached to you like a loving shadow, which can only follow you, and longs to merge with you; it must displease you to always find, at your

back, supplicating eyes and hands outstretched to grasp the edge of your coat. I know it, but cannot help it.

Besides, you can't complain; it's your fault entirely. I was calm, tranquil, almost happy before I met you. You arrive, handsome, young, smiling, like Phoebus that charming god. You show me the most attentive care, the most delicate attention; never was a gentleman wittier or more gallant. From your lips fell roses and rubies at every instant; everything became for you an occasion for some compliment, and you know how to turn the most insignificant phrases into adorable ones. Even a woman who had mortally hated you at first, would have ended by loving you, and I loved you from the moment I saw you. Why did you seem so surprised, having showed yourself so amiable, at being loved? Isn't it a perfectly natural consequence? I am neither mad, nor flighty, nor a romantic little girl who falls in love with the first swordsman she sees. I am worldly, and know what life is. What I am doing, any woman, even the most virtuous or the most prudish, would. What thought, and intention, did you have? That of pleasing me, I imagine, for I cannot suppose any other. How is it then that you possess something of an air of regret at having succeeded so well? Have I perpetrated, without meaning to, something that has displeased you? I beg your pardon. Do you no longer find me beautiful; have you discovered some fault in me that repels you? You have the right to be hard to please where beauty is concerned, but either you have lied most oddly, or you find me beautiful too! I am young like you, and I love you; why do you disdain me now? You embraced me so warmly, you held my arm with such constant solicitude, you pressed my hand so tenderly, you raised such languid eyelids to gaze at me, I abandoned myself to you: if you loved me not, what was the point of all your feigning? Are you so cruel that you would kindle love in a heart only to make it the subject of ridicule? Ah! that would be a dreadful mockery, an impiety, a sacrilege! It could only amuse a vicious mind, and I cannot believe that of you, however inexplicable your conduct towards me. What then is the cause of so sudden a change of heart? For my part, I see none. What mystery is at the root of such coldness? I refuse to believe you feel repugnance towards me. Your actions prove otherwise, for even if one were the greatest deceiver on earth, one does not court a woman towards whom one feels disgust so ardently. O Théodore, what have you against me? What caused this change? What have I ever done to you? If the love you seemed to have for me has vanished, mine, alas, remains, and I cannot tear it from my heart. Have pity on me, Théodore, for I am very unhappy. At least pretend to love me a little, speak a few sweet words to me; it will cost you little, unless you feel an insurmountable horror of me...'

At this point in her sad speech, her sobs stifled her voice, completely; she crossed her two hands on my shoulder, and leant her forehead against them, in an attitude of complete despair. All she said could not have been truer, and I found nothing to say in reply. I could not adopt a mocking tone. It would not have been right. Rosette was not one of those creatures who could be treated so lightly. I was, moreover, too deeply affected to be able to do so. I felt guilty for having thus trifled with the heart of a charming woman, prompting the most lively and sincere remorse in the world.

Finding that I made no reply, the dear girl heaved a lengthy sigh, and made as if to rise, but fell back, collapsing under the weight of her emotion; then she clasped her arms about me, their coolness penetrating my doublet, laid her face against mine, and began to cry, silently.

Feeling an endless stream of tears streaming down my cheek though not from my own eyes, had a singular effect on me. My own soon mingled with them, a bitter rainfall, enough to cause a new Deluge, if it had but lasted forty days.

At that moment moonlight lit the window; its rays plunged to the room's depths and illuminated that silent embrace in a bluish glow.

In her white nightrobe, arms, chest and throat bare, and almost as pale as its linen, her hair dishevelled, her expression sorrowful, Rosette looked like an alabaster statue of Melancholy seated on a tomb. As for me, I know not what figure I cut, since I lacked a mirror to view myself therein, but believe I might very well have posed for a statue of Uncertainty personified.

I was moved, and offered Rosette a few more tender caresses than usual; from her hair my hand descended to her velvety neck, and thence to her smooth, rounded shoulder, which I gently stroked, following its quivering contour. She vibrated at my touch, like a keyboard beneath the fingers of a musician; she trembled suddenly, and amorous shivers shook her body.

I myself felt a kind of vague and confused desire, whose purpose I could not discern, while taking great delight in running my hand over her pure and delicate form. I abandoned her shoulder, and, taking advantage of the opening in her robe, my hand suddenly enclosed her throat, which palpitated wildly like a turtledove surprised and fearful in its nest; from the outer line of her cheek, which I touched with a barely perceptible kiss, I arrived at her half-open mouth. We remained thus for some time. I know not whether it was a minute or two, or an hour; for I lost all notion of time, and knew not if I was in heaven or on earth, here or elsewhere, dead or alive. The heady wine we call voluptuousness had so intoxicated me, with the first sip I drank, that all reason had vanished. Rosette wrapped her arms about me more and more tightly, enveloping me with her body; she leaned over me convulsively and pressed me to her bare, panting breast; with each kiss, her life seemed to rush entirely to the place it touched, abandoning the rest of her person. Strange ideas passed through my head. If I had not feared betraying the truth of my disguise, I would have left Rosette's passionate impulses a free field, and perhaps would have made some mad, but vain attempt to add a semblance of reality to the shadow of pleasure my beautiful lover embraced with such ardour; I had not yet taken a lover; and her lively response and repeated caresses, the contact with that lovely body, the sweet endearments lost amidst kisses troubled me to the last degree, although they were those of a woman; and then her nocturnal visit, this romantic passion, the moonlight, all had for me a freshness, and novel charm, that well-nigh made me forget myself.

Not without an effort, I told Rosette that she was compromising herself dreadfully by coming to my room at such an hour, and staying so long, that her women might notice her absence, and observe that she had not spent the night in her apartment.

I said all this so lamely that Rosette's sole reply was to doff her cambric robe, shake off her slippers, and slide into my bed like a snake into a pool of milk; imagining that my clothing alone prevented me from arriving at a more solid demonstration of affection, and was the only obstacle restraining me. She believed, poor thing, that the decisive hour, so laboriously brought about, was at last about to strike on the clock; but it merely struck two in the morning, at the moment when, with my situation at its most critical, the door turned on its hinges, and gave way to the knightly form of Alcibiades, gripping a candlestick in one hand, and his sword in the other.

He advanced to the bed, directly, threw back the covers, and, casting light on the confused Rosette's face, said to her in a scornful tone: 'Good morning, sister.' Rosette lacked the strength to grant him a single word in reply.

— 'It would seem then, my most dear and virtuous sister, that judging, in your wisdom, milord Théodore's bed to be more comfortable than your own, you decided to sleep here? Or perhaps ghosts haunt your room, and you thought yourself safer in this one, under the protection of the aforementioned gentleman? It does indeed seem so. Ah! Monsieur le Chevalier de Sérannes, do you make advances towards my noble sister, and think no consequence will follow? I, on the contrary, consider it would be good for us to quarrel a little, and, if you would be so kind, I would be infinitely obliged to you. Théodore, you abuse the friendship I felt for you, and make me repent of the good opinion I formed, at first, of your honesty: this is bad of you, sir, very bad.'

I could not justify myself in any way: appearances were against me. Who would have believed me, if I had said, as was indeed the fact, that Rosette had come to my room of her own accord, and that, far from seeking to please her, I was doing everything possible to deter her? There was only one reply I could give, and did so: 'Milord Alcibiades, we shall quarrel in whatever way you wish.'

During this colloquium, Rosette had decidedly fainted, obeying every known rule of pathos. I took up a glass full of water in which the stem of a large, half-petalled white rose was immersed, and threw a few drops in her face, which brought her, promptly, to her senses.

Not knowing what to do, she huddled in the bed, and buried her pretty head under the covers, like a bird about to sleep. She gathered the sheets and cushions around her so closely, it would have been hard to discern what was hidden beneath the heap; only a few little piping sighs, which issued forth from time to time, allowed one to surmise that there lay a repentant young sinner, or at least a person extremely angry at finding herself a sinner only in intent, and not in fact: which was the case with the unfortunate Rosette.

The brother, no longer anxious for his sister, resumed the conversation, and said to me in a somewhat gentler tone: 'It is not absolutely indispensable to cut one another's throats immediately, one must always take time before employing extreme measures. Come: we are not an equal match. You are but a youth and much weaker than I. If we fought, I would kill you, or certainly wound you, and I have no desire to do so, it would be a great pity. Rosette, over there, under the blanket, who says not a word, would be angry with me forever; for she is spiteful and mean as a tigress, when she's aroused, that dear little dove. You are unaware, being her *Galaor* (see '*Amadis de Gaule*'), and seeing only her kindlier side; but she is not all goodness. Rosette is free, as you are, to marry. It would seem you are not irreconcilable; her widowhood is at an end, and all would be for the better. Wed her; and she will not need to return to her room to sleep, and I will be spared from making of you a scabbard for my sword, which would be pleasant neither for you nor I. What say you?'

My face must have revealed my feelings; since what he proposed was of all things the most impossible for me to execute. I could have crawled, like a fly, on the ceiling, or drawn down the moon, more easily than do what he asked, and yet his last option was undoubtedly more agreeable than the first.

He seemed surprised that I did not accept with enthusiasm, and repeated what he had said as if to give me time to reply.

— ‘Alliance with your house,’ I said, ‘would be a great honour, one which I would never have dared to request. I know that it would be unheard-of good fortune for a young man without rank or standing in the world, and one that the most illustrious would consider themselves delighted by; yet, nonetheless, I can only persist in my refusal, and since I am free to choose between our duel and marriage I accept the former. It is a singular choice, and one that few people would make, but such is mine.’

At this, Rosette gave the most painful sob in the world, raised her head from beneath the pillow, but on seeing my impassive and deliberate countenance, immediately retracted it again, like a snail whose horns have been touched.

— ‘It is not that I do not love Rosette; I love her infinitely, but I have reasons for not marrying, which you yourself would find excellent, if it were possible for me to tell you of them. Besides, things have not gone as far as you might believe from appearances. Apart from a few kisses which a somewhat lively friendship is enough to explain and justify, there is nothing between us over which we should quarrel, and your sister’s virtue is assuredly intact and the purest in all the world.’ I owed her that testimony. ‘Now, when do we fight, Monsieur Alcibiades, and where?’

— ‘Here, and now!’ cried Alcibiades, mad with fury.

— ‘What are you thinking of? Before Rosette!’

— ‘On Guard, wretch, or I’ll murder you,’ he continued, brandishing his sword, and waving it over his head.

— ‘Let’s quit the room, at least.’

— ‘Watch out, or I’ll nail you to the wall like a bat, my beautiful Celadon (*see Honoré d’Urfé’s novel, L’Astrée*), no matter how you flap your wings, you won’t escape.’ And he swooped upon me, sword raised.

I drew my rapier, for he would have done as he said, and at first contented myself with parrying the blows he dealt.

Rosette made a superhuman effort to throw herself between our swords, the combatants being both equally dear to her; but her strength failed, and she fell swooning onto the bed.

Our blades gleamed, and clanged like hammers on an anvil, since the little space available forced us to engage our swords at close quarters.

Alcibiades almost struck me two or three times, and if I had not been trained by an excellent fencing master, my life would have been in the greatest danger; for he was astonishingly skilful, and prodigiously strong. He exhausted every trick and feint known to the art of fencing in attempting to pierce me. Enraged at not being able to do so, he occasionally left himself open. I declined to take advantage; but he returned to the charge with such fierce and savage passion that I was forced to take my chances; and then the noise and the glitter of whirling steel intoxicated and dazzled me. I indulged no thought of death; I lacked the slightest fear; the sharp and deadly point that flickered before my eyes each second had no more effect on me than if we had fought

with buttoned foils. I was merely indignant at Alcibiades' aggression, and the knowledge of my perfect innocence increased my indignation still further. I longed to prick his arm or shoulder and make the sword fall from his hands, for I had tried, but so far in vain, to disarm him, He had a wrist of iron, and the Devil himself could not have made him retreat.

Finally, he struck me with so swift a thrust and so strong I could only half-parry it; my sleeve was pierced, and I felt the cold iron against my arm; though I was unwounded. At this, anger gripped me, and, instead of defending myself, I attacked in turn. I forgot that this was Rosette's brother, and rushed upon him as if he were my mortal enemy. Taking advantage of a negligent waft of his sword, I thrust at him with so well placed a blow that I struck him in the side. He gave a cry, and fell backward.

I thought he was dead, but he was only wounded, and his fall was the result of a false step he had taken while trying to break away. I cannot express to you, Graciosa, the sensation I experienced; certainly, it is no very profound observation to make that in striking flesh with a thin, sharp point a hole will appear in it, and blood will spurt forth. However, I fell into a profound stupor when I saw crimson threads streaming down Alcibiades' doublet. I had doubtless failed to conceive that a sound might emerge, like a baby's burping; but I know that never in my life have I experienced so great a surprise, and felt something previously unheard-of had just occurred.

What was unprecedented, it seemed to me, was not that blood should flow from a wound, but that this wound should have been produced by myself, and that a young girl (I was going to write a young man, so deeply have I entered into the spirit of my role) should have felled a vigorous captain, as experienced in fencing as Alcibiades: and simply for the crime of being seduced and refusing marriage to a wealthy and very charming woman!



Les suites d'un duel
Paul Delaroche (French, 1797-1856)

[Artvee](#)

I was truly in a cruel predicament, the sister in a swoon, the brother perhaps slain, and myself who was not far from swooning or dying, like to one or the other. I clung to the bell-rope, and rang to wake the dead, as long as the cord remained in my hand; and, leaving, in the hands of the servants and the old aunt, the fainting Rosette and the disembowelled Alcibiades, I sped straight to the stable. My spirits immediately restored, I extracted my horse, saddled and bridled her myself, ensured that the crupper was tight, and the curb chain in good condition, adjusted the stirrups, and tightened the girth a notch: in short, I harnessed her with singular care given the situation, and with a calmness utterly inconceivable after a fight ended thus.

I mounted my steed, and crossed the park by a path I knew. The branches, laden with dew, whipped me and wet my face: one might have thought the ancient trees were stretching their arms out, to hold me back and bind me in marriage to their lovely lady of the manor. If I had been in a different frame of mind, or at all superstitious, I might well have believed them so many phantoms who wished to seize me, while shaking their fists at me. But in truth I was empty of any such thoughts; a leaden stupor, so great that I was hardly conscious of it, weighed on my brain, like an

over-tight helmet; only I seemed to recall I had killed someone there, and that must be why I was leaving. I felt, moreover, a terrible longing to sleep, either because of the lateness of the hour, or because the violence of the evening's emotions had caused a physical reaction that exhausted my strength.

I arrived at a small postern gate, which opened onto the fields. It was held by a hidden catch Rosette had shown me during our walks. I dismounted, worked the catch, and pushed open the gate. I remounted after having led my horse through, and put her to the gallop, till I reached the main road to C***, which I reached at the break of day.

So ends the faithful and detailed tale of my first affair, and my very first duel.

The End of Part V of Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin'

Part VI: Chapters 15 to 17

Chapter 15: Théodore to Graciosa

It was five in the morning when I entered the town. The place was astir, the bolder residents poking their noses out of doors, or revealing a benign face, surmounted by a pyramidal nightcap, behind their window panes. At the sound of my horse, whose hooves clattered on the stony and uneven paving, there emerged, from the skylights, the large, red faces, open-eyed with curiosity, and dishevelled shoulders, of the Venuses of the place, who were exhausting themselves attempting to divine the meaning of the uncommon apparition of a traveller, in C***, at such an hour, and in such attire, for I was untidily dressed, and of a suspicious character. A little rascal, his hair hanging over his eyes, raised its mop in the air to more readily discern me, and directed me to an inn. I gave him a few sous for his trouble, and a conscientious flick of the whip, which sent him off, shrieking like a plucked jay. Once in my room, I threw myself on the bed, and fell into a deep sleep. When I woke, it was three in the afternoon, though my sleep had hardly restored me completely. Indeed, it was far too brief to compensate for a sleepless night, a passionate encounter, a duel, and an over-rapid, though victorious, flight.

I was anxious with regard to Alcibiades' wound; but a few days later I was completely reassured, for I learned that it had led to no dangerous consequence, and that he was in full convalescence. This relieved me of a singular burden, for the idea of having killed a man tormented me strangely, even though it be in legitimate defence of myself, and against my own will. I had not yet arrived at that sublime indifference for the lives of men which I have since attained.

I met up with several of the young men I had spent time with at C***: this pleased me; I became more intimate with them, and they gave me access to several charming houses. I was perfectly accustomed to my clothes, and the rougher and more active life I had led, the violent exercises I had undertaken, had made me twice as robust as before. I followed these young fools everywhere. I rode horses, I hunted, I feasted with them, for, little by little, I had trained myself to drink. Without reaching the Germanic capacity of some of them, I emptied two or three bottles for my share, and was not too intoxicated, a very satisfactory achievement. I cursed heavily and, quite deliberately, kissed the girls at the inn. In short, I was an accomplished young cavalier and entirely in keeping with the latest pattern of such. I scorned certain provincial ideas I had once held regarding virtue and other like nonsense; on the other hand, I became so prodigiously delicate as regards points of honour that I fought a duel almost every day: this itself had become a necessity for me, a kind of indispensable exercise without which I would have felt ill all day. Also, whenever no one had looked at me or stepped on my foot, and I thus had no reason to fight, rather than

remain idle and sit on my hands, I served as a second to my comrades, or even to people I knew only by name.

I soon acquired a vast reputation for bravery, and it took nothing less to prevent the jests to which my beardless face and effeminate air would otherwise inevitably have given rise. But three or four extra buttonholes that I opened in doublets, and a few braided scars that I very delicately raised on some recalcitrant skins made me seem more virile than Mars himself, or Priapus, and you might have met people who swore they had stood godfather to my bastards at the baptismal font.

Throughout all this apparent dissipation, amidst a life thrown away and wasted, I never failed to pursue my original quest, that is to say, by a conscientious study of men, to discover the solution to the great problem of finding a perfect lover, a quest even more difficult to resolve than that of finding the philosopher's stone.

Certain ideas are much like the horizon, which certainly exists, since we see it before us whichever way we turn, but which stubbornly flees from us and which, whether we walk or gallop, always remains at the same distance; only able to manifest itself through the fact of being distant; it is seemingly approached by our advance, only to form further away in the fleeting, elusive azure, as we try to catch the edge of its trailing cloak, in vain.

The more I advanced in knowledge of the male creature, the more I saw how impossible my desire was of realisation, and how far what I demanded, in order to love happily, was beyond its very nature. I convinced myself that the man who proved himself most sincerely in love with me would find a way, even with the best will in the world, to render me the most wretched of women, and yet I had already abandoned many of my maidenly requirements. I had descended from the sublime clouds, not quite to the street and the gutter, but to a hill of moderate height, accessible, though a little steep.

The climb, would be hard for him, true; but I took pride in believing that I was well worth the effort, and that I would prove sufficient compensation for the trouble taken. I could never have brought myself to advance a step: rather I waited, perched, patiently, on my summit.

Here was all my plan: dressed in male attire, I would make the acquaintance of some young man whose appearance pleased me; I would live familiarly with him. By means of clever questioning, and false confidences designed to provoke true ones, I would soon arrive at a complete knowledge of his feelings and thoughts; and, if I found him as I wished, I would pretend to go on a journey. I would keep myself from him for three or four months to give him a little time to forget my features; then I would return in female costume. I would already have acquired in some secluded suburb, a seductive little house, buried among trees and flowers; then I would arrange things in such a way that he would visit me and pay me court; and, if he showed true and faithful in his love, I would give myself to him without restriction or precaution: the title of mistress would seem honourable to me, and I would seek no other.

But this plan will never be executed, since it is in the nature of plans that they are not, and it is here that the fragility of will, and pure nothingness, of men are chiefly apparent. The proverb 'what a woman wills, God wills' is no truer than any other proverb, which is to say that it is barely true.

As long as I saw them from afar and through the veil of my desire, men seemed beautiful to me, and the optics deluded me. Now, I find them quite frightening, and cannot understand how a woman can allow such things into her bed. As for me, it would turn my stomach; I could never bring myself to do so.

How coarse, ignoble, lacking in finesse and elegance are their features! What coarse, ungainly lines! What harsh, black, furrowed skin! Some are tanned like six-month-old hanged corpses, gaunt, bony, and hairy, with stringy fingers on their hands, large feet like drawbridges, filthy moustaches, rising to their ears, and always full of bits of food, heads of hair bristling like brooms, chins ending in a boar's snout, lips chapped and cooked by strong liquor, eyes rimmed by four or five dark circles, necks full of twisted veins, swollen muscles and prominent cartilage. Others are padded with reddened flesh, projecting before them bellies, encircled by their belts with immense difficulty. They blink tiny sea-green eyes, inflamed with lust, and look more like hippopotamuses in breeches than human beings. They always smell of wine, brandy, or tobacco, or of their natural odour, which is worst of all. As for those whose form is a little less disgusting, they simply look like ill-made women, that's all.

At first, I failed to note all this. I went through life my head in the clouds, my feet barely touching the ground. The scent of roses and the lilacs of spring filled my brain like too strong a perfume. I dreamt only of accomplished heroes, faithful and respectful lovers, ardour worthy of the altar, wondrous devotion and sacrifice, and I thought to find it in the first scoundrel who greeted me. However, that first and gross intoxication did not last long; strange suspicions seized me, and I found no rest until I had resolved them.

In the early days, the horror I felt at the male sex affected me to the utmost degree of exaggeration. I regarded them as frightful monstrosities. Their way of thinking, their bearing, their carelessly cynical language, their brutality, and their disdain for women, shocked and revolted me completely, so little did the idea I had entertained of them correspond to reality. They proved not monsters, if you like, but far worse! They proved to be excellent young men of most jovial humour, who drink and eat well, who will render you all sorts of services, who are witty and brave, fine painters and excellent musicians, and fit for a thousand things, except the one for which they were created, which is to serve as male counterparts to the creature called woman, with whom they have not the slightest connection, neither physical nor moral.

Having found difficulty in disguising the contempt they inspired in me, I became accustomed, little by little, to their manner of living. I felt no more piqued by the mockeries they hurled at women than if I myself were of the male sex. On the contrary, I offered up some very fine jests, the success of which strangely flattered my pride; certainly, none of my comrades went as far as I did, as regards my sarcasm and witticism on the subject. Perfect knowledge of the terrain granted me a great advantage, and my epigrams, besides the piquant turn they took, shone with the merit of an exactitude theirs often lacked. For, though all the bad things said about women are always well-founded to some degree, it is nevertheless difficult for men to maintain the composure necessary to mock us effectively, and there is often a great deal of affection in their invective.

I noticed that it was the most tender, those who had the greatest feeling for women, who mocked them more than the rest, and who returned to the subject with particular relentlessness,

as if they had a mortal grudge against them for not being as they wished them to be, and by giving the lie to the good opinion they had initially formed of them.

What I demanded above all was not physical beauty, it was beauty of the soul, it was love itself; but love as I feel it is perhaps not within human grasp. And yet it seems to me that I could love thus, and would offer more than I ask. What magnificent madness! What sublime prodigality!

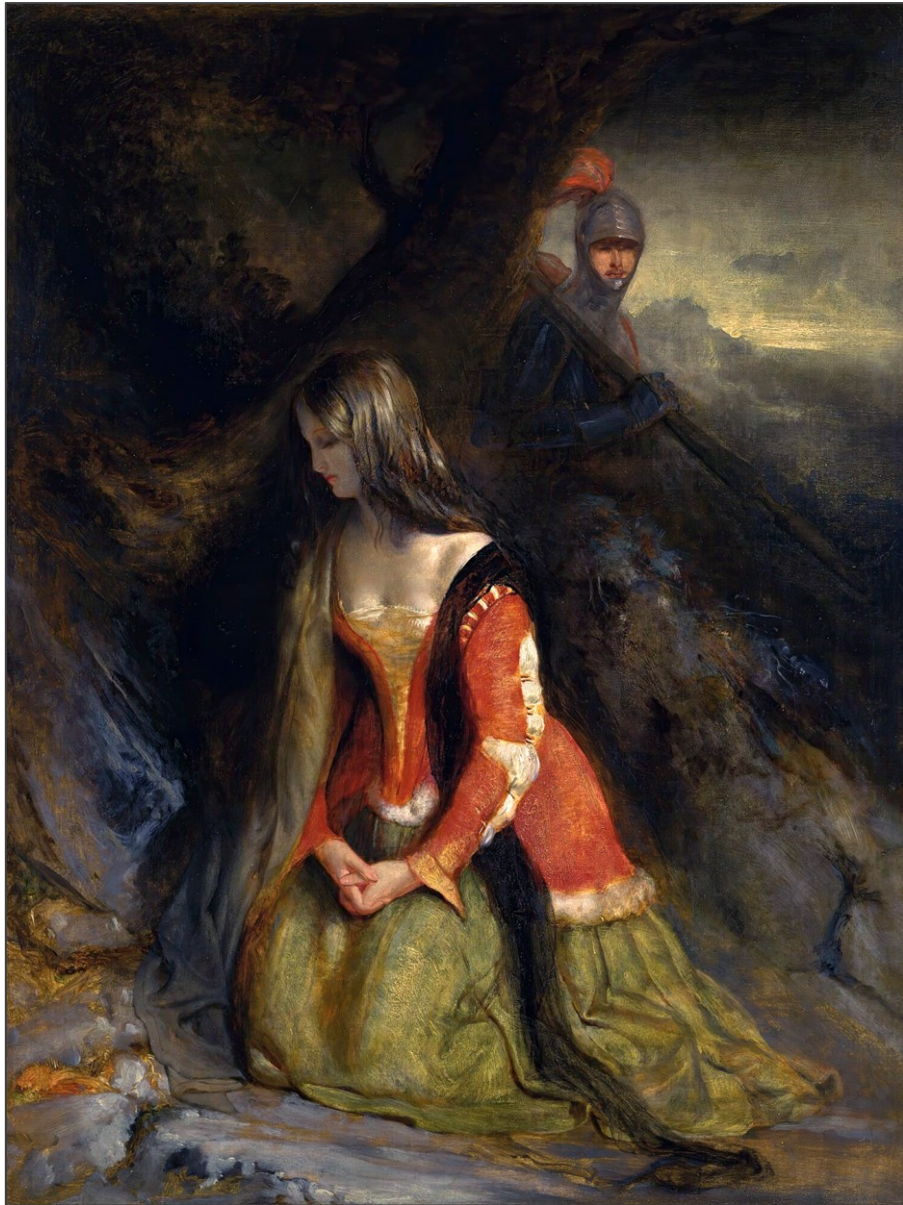
To surrender oneself entirely, without retaining anything of oneself, to renounce one's self-possession and free choice, to submit one's will to the embrace of another, to no longer see with one's own eyes, hear with one's own ears, to be a single entity in two bodies, both souls melted and mingled so as to no longer discern one from another, to absorb and radiate warmth continually, to be sometimes the moon, sometimes the sun, to find the whole world and all creation in a single being, to shift the centre of one's life, to be ready, at any moment, for the greatest sacrifice and the most absolute self-denial; to suffer the loved one's heartache, as if it were one's own; to doubly enhance one's own existence, oh, wondrously, by giving of oneself wholly: this is love as I understand it.

A closeness like that of ivy, intertwining the growing vine, a fidelity like that of turtledoves cooing, is, it goes without saying, the first and simplest requirement.

If I had stayed at home, dressed like the rest of my sex, melancholically working my spinning wheel, or weaving tapestry behind the panes of a window embrasure, what I have sought throughout the world might have found me of its own accord. Love is like good fortune; it is not won by being pursued. It prefers to visit those who fall asleep beside wells. Often the kisses of royal queens, or deities, descend upon closed eyes.

One may be deluded and deceived into thinking that all adventures occur, all happiness exists, only where one is not, and one calculates ill in saddling one's horse, or riding a stagecoach, in search of one's ideal. Many commit that error; many more will. The landscape, on the horizon, is always a most seductive shade of azure, yet when you arrive, the hills that compose it are often of bare, cracked clay, the colour of ochre washed by the rain.

I imagined the world to be full of delightful young men, and that, on the road, one would meet many an Esplandián, or Amadis, or Lancelot of the Lake, in pursuit of their Dulcinea, and was astonished to find that the male sex takes very little interest in so sublime a quest, content to sleep with the first woman that comes along. I have been well-punished for my curiosity, by acquiring mistrust. I have become jaded in the worst possible way, without tasting enjoyment. In my case, knowledge has exceeded customary bounds; the result of nothing more than hurriedly gained experience lacking the fruits of action. Complete ignorance would be a hundred thousand times better; it at least would see one commit many a stupidity that would serve to instruct and correct one's ideas; for, beneath the disgust of which I spoke, there is always a lively, rebellious element which produces the strangest disorders: the mind is convinced, the flesh is not and refuses to subscribe to the former's proud disdain. The youthful, robust body is agitated, and kicks like a vigorous stallion ridden by a feeble old man, yet it cannot unseat him, because the leather cavesson grips its head, and the bit tears its mouth.



A lady and her knight errant, possibly a scene from Ivanhoe
Robert Scott Lauder (Scottish, 1803 – 1869)

[Artvee](#)

Since I have lived among the male sex, I have seen many a woman shamefully betrayed, many a secret liaison imprudently divulged, the purest loves dragged carelessly through the mud, young men running to hideous courtesans after leaving the arms of the most charming of mistresses, the most well-established affairs suddenly and without plausible motive broken off, such that it is no longer possible for me to commit to a lover. It would be to throw myself, open-eyed and in broad daylight, into a bottomless abyss. However, my heart's secret wish is still to find a lover. The voice of Nature stifles the voice of Reason. I feel I will never be happy if I cannot love and be loved: but my misfortune is that I am only allowed a man as my lover, and men, though they are not entirely devils, are far from being angels. They may well glue feathers to their shoulder blades, and

place gold-paper halos on their heads, but I know them too well to be deceived. All the fine speeches they might utter would achieve nothing. I know in advance how they will start, and could continue their speeches myself. I have seen them study their roles, and rehearse them before going on stage. I know their main tirades, spoken for effect, and the passages on which they rely. Neither a pallid lovesick face nor lean and altered features could convince me. I know these prove nothing. A night's revels, a few bottles of wine, and two or three girls, suffice to restore them. I have seen this fine recipe practiced by a young marquis, of a most rosy and fresh complexion, who thus presented himself in the best possible manner. and who owed merely to a touching and undeserved pallor the consummation of his affair. I also know how the most languid Celadon consoles himself for the severity of his Astrea, and waits, patiently, for the crowning hour. I have seen the girls who serve as understudies for that prudish Ariadne of his.

In truth, given all this, the male sex fails to tempt me much; it lacks the beauty of womankind: beauty, that splendid garment which conceals the imperfections of the soul, that divine drapery cast by the deity over the world's nakedness, which provides an excuse for loving the vilest courtesan who haunts the gutter if she possesses that magnificent and regal gift.

In the absence of spiritual virtue, I demand, at least, an exquisite perfection of form, a satiny smoothness of flesh, a roundness of contour, a suavety of line, a delicacy of skin, all that renders women charming. Since I cannot have love, I would ask voluptuousness, to replace brother with sister as best I could. For all the men I have seen seem dreadfully ugly to me. My mare is a hundred times more beautiful, and I would find less repugnance in kissing her than certain wondrous fellows who think themselves most charming. Certainly, the fops I know would offer no brilliant theme to embroider with pleasure's variations. A swordsman would scarcely suit me either; cavaliers have something mechanical in their gait, and bestial in their faces, which makes me hardly consider them as human creatures; men of the cloth, dirty, oily, bristling, shabby, fellows with glaucous eyes and lipless mouths, smelling exorbitantly of rancid mould, delight me no more than soldiers; never would I wish to set my lips to their lynx's, or wolf's or badger's muzzles. As regards the poets, all they think of are rhyming endings, not even the penultimate syllables of words, and truth to tell they're hard to find a use for; more tedious than the others, they're also ugly and lack the least distinction or elegance in their bearing or their clothes, which is truly singular: people who occupy themselves all day with form and beauty yet fail to notice their boots are ill-fitting, and their hat ridiculous! Their look of provincial apothecaries, or out-of-work trainers of performing dogs, is enough to put you off poetry and verse for several lifetimes.

And as for painters, they too are enormously stupid; they see nothing beyond the seven colours of the rainbow. One of them, with whom I once spent a few days at R***, when asked what he thought of me, gave this ingenious reply: 'He is of a rather warm tone, and for the shadows one should employ, instead of white, pure Naples Yellow with a little earthy Cassel Brown.' Such was his opinion, and, what's more, he had a crooked nose and eyes as askew as his nose; which failed to improve his looks. Which of them should I take for a lover? A cavalier with an extravagant lace-collar, a clergyman with convex shoulders, a poet or a painter with a stupefied expression, or a skinny and insubstantial little fop? The occupant of which cage shall I choose amidst this menagerie? I haven't a clue, and feel no more inclination to one than another; they are all as perfectly matched as possible in stupidity and ugliness.

Given that, there is only one thing left to try, and that would be to take a man I felt love for, even if he were a porter or a gypsy; yet I love neither. Oh, unhappy heroine that I am! An unpaired turtledove, condemned to utter elegiac coos forever!

Oh, how often I've wished to be truly the man I appear to be! How many women I might have understood, whose hearts might have comprehended mine! How perfectly happy their delicate loving attentions, their noble impulses of pure passion, to all of which I might have responded, would have made me! What sweetness, what delight! How freely all the sensitive parts of my soul would have blossomed, without being obliged to retreat and close their petals, at every moment, beneath some coarse touch! What a charming flowering of invisible blooms which now will never open, whose mysterious perfume might have sweetly embalmed some fraternal soul! It seems to me it would have proved an enchanting life, an endless ecstasy with wings forever open; walking, hands clasped together, never quitting each other, on paths of golden sand, through groves of eternally-smiling roses, in parks full of lakes over which swans glide, and where alabaster vases stand amidst the foliage.

If I were a man, how I would have loved Rosette! What adoration she would have known! Our souls were truly made for each other, two pearls destined to fuse together and become one! How perfectly I would have realised the ideas she had formed of love! Her character suited me perfectly, and her kind of beauty pleased me. It is a shame our love was condemned to inescapable Platonism!

I met with an adventure recently. I was visiting a house, in which there dwelt a charming little girl of fifteen years old at most: I have never seen a more adorable little thing. She was blonde, but with a blondness so delicate and transparent that ordinary blondes would have appeared black as moles beside her; one would have thought her hair wrought of gold powdered with silver; her eyebrows were of such a soft, blended hue they were hardly visible; her pale-blue eyes had a most velvety look, and possessed the silkiest eyelids imaginable; her mouth, almost too small to insert a finger-tip, added still more to the delightful, childish character of her beauty, and the soft roundness of her dimpled cheeks conveyed the inexpressible charm of ingenuousness. Her whole dear little person ravished me beyond all expression; I loved her small, white, fragile hands that seemed almost transparent to sunlight, her birdlike feet that barely touched the ground, her waist that a breath might have snapped, and her mother-of-pearl shoulders, still unformed, that her shawl, worn askew, happily betrayed. Her babble, in which naivety gave a new piquancy to the wit that she naturally possesses, kept me occupied for hours on end, and I particularly enjoyed hearing her speak; she repeated a thousand delightful little jests, sometimes with an extraordinary delicacy of understanding, sometimes without seeming to comprehend their significance in the least, which rendered her a thousand times more attractive. I offered her sweets and pastilles, kept expressly for her in a pale tortoiseshell box, which pleased her very much, for she was as greedy as the real little kitten that she was. As soon as I arrived, she would run to me and feel my pockets to see if the treasured box of sweets was there. I would make her try my one hand after the other, and a little battle would ensue in which she would necessarily gain the upper hand and rob me of the prize completely.

One day, however, she greeted me simply, with a most serious air, and did not run, as usual, to see if the fount of sweets was in my pocket; she remained proudly upright in her chair, with her elbows straight.

— ‘Well, Ninon,’ I asked her, ‘do you like only sour things now; do you fear sweets will rot your teeth?’ And, saying this, I tapped the box, which, beneath my jacket, gave forth a sound suggestive of softness and fullness.

Her little tongue protruded, and she licked the edges of her lips, as if to savour the imagined sweetness of the offering, but she remained where she was sitting.

So, I took the box from my pocket, opened it, and began to swallow the pralines there, religiously, sweets which she loved above all others: the instinct of gluttony was for a moment stronger than her resolution; she put out her hand to take some, then immediately withdrew it, saying: ‘I’m too big to eat sweets!’ And she sighed.

— ‘I failed to see how much you’ve grown since last week; are you a mushroom sprouting overnight? Come, let me measure you.’

— ‘Laugh as much as you like,’ she continued with a charming pout; ‘I’m no longer a little girl; I wish to be a grown-up.’

— ‘An excellent resolution in which one need only persevere; can one, my dear young lady, be told how this marvellous idea entered your head? A week ago, you seemed to be very happy being small, and ate pralines without showing any fear of compromising your dignity.’

The girl gazed at me with a singular air, looked about her, and when she was sure that no one could hear us, leaned towards me in a mysterious manner, and declared: ‘I have an admirer.’

— ‘The Devil! I’m not surprised you’ve forsaken sweets; but you’re wrong not to take some, you can play at tea-parties with him, or exchange them for a paper-plane.’

The child gave a shrug of her shoulders, and looked at me with what appeared to be utter disdain. As she still maintained her attitude of an offended princess, I continued:

— ‘What is the name of this glorious personage? Arthur, I suppose, or Henri.’ They were the two little boys with whom she used to play, and whom she termed her husbands.

— ‘No, neither Arthur nor Henri,’ she said, fixing her clear, transparent gaze on me, ‘a gentleman.’ She raised her hand above her head to give me an idea of his height.

— ‘As tall as that? But this is getting serious. Who is this ever-so-tall lover?’

— ‘I’m happy to tell you, Monsieur Théodore, but you mustn’t tell anyone else, neither Mama, nor Polly (her governess), nor your friends who think I’m a child, and would make fun of me.’

I promised her the most inviolable secrecy, because I was most curious to know who this gallant personage was, and the little girl, finding I was turning the thing into a joke, hesitated to tell me the whole story.

Reassured by my giving her my word of honour to keep silent about it, she left her armchair, came to lean over the back of mine, and whispered very quietly in my ear the name of her beloved prince.

I was astounded: it was the Chevalier de G***, a slimy, incorrigible creature, with the morals of a schoolmaster, and the physique of a drum-major, the most crassly debauched man one could find, a real satyr, minus the goat’s feet and pointed ears. This inspired serious fears on my part for

dear Ninon, and I promised myself to put a stop to it. A group of people entering, the conversation ended there.

I withdrew to a corner, and searched my mind for ways to prevent the relationship from progressing further, since it would have been a downright crime for such a delightful creature to fall to such an out-and-out monster.

The little girl's mother was the bold sort of woman who organised card-evenings and held a salon. Bad verse was read at her house, and good money lost as if in compensation. She had little love for her daughter, who was for her a sort of living baptismal certificate hindering her in falsifying her true age. Besides, she was beginning to think herself of some importance, and the daughter's nascent charms gave rise to comparisons that were scarcely to the advantage of the latter's prototype, a mother already rendered a little rough at the edges, due to the friction of years and the attentions of the male sex. The child was therefore somewhat neglected, and defenceless against the assault of those scoundrels who haunted the house. If the mother had noticed her, it would likely only have been in order to take advantage of her youth, by exploiting her beauty and innocence. One way or another, the fate that awaited her was not in doubt. It pained me, for she was a charming little creature who certainly deserved better, a pearl of the finest water lost in a foul quagmire; the thought touched me to the point that I resolved to rescue her from that dreadful house at all costs.

The first thing to do was to prevent the knight from continuing his assault. The simplest and best tactic was to pick a quarrel with him, and make him fight me, which cost me all the trouble in the world, for he is as cowardly as can be, and fears a sword-thrust more than anyone in the world.

Finally, I offended him so much, with such hostile words, that he was forced to take the field, though very reluctantly. I even threatened to have my footman thrash him with a stick if he were not better behaved. He knew how to fence quite well, but was so fearful that as soon as we crossed blades, I found the means to give him a nice little thrust with the point, which put him to bed for a fortnight. That sufficed; I had little desire to kill him. I preferred to let him live to be hanged later; a touching gesture for which he should have shown more gratitude! With my opponent stretched out between the sheets, and duly wrapped in bandages, there was nothing left to do but persuade the little girl to leave the house, which was not excessively difficult.

I told her a tale, regarding the disappearance of her lover about whom she was extraordinarily concerned. I said he'd run off with an actress from the troupe that was then at C***: which roused her indignation, as you can imagine. I consoled her by relating all manner of evil stories concerning her knight, who was ugly, a drunkard, and far too old, and ended by asking her if she would not prefer me as her lover. She replied that she was happy to accept, since I was more handsome, and my clothes were more fashionable. This naïve reply, uttered with enormous seriousness, made me laugh till I cried. I sounded her praises, and so filled her head with them, that I persuaded her to leave the house. A few bouquets, as many kisses, and a pearl necklace I gave her, charmed her to a point that is difficult to describe, and when before her little friends she adopted an air of importance that could not have been more comical.

I had a very rich and elegant page's costume tailored to her size, for I could not receive her in her girl's attire, unless I dressed as a woman again, which I had no wish to do.

I bought a small, gentle horse, easy to manage, and yet a good enough goer to follow my lead when I chose to ride swiftly. Then I told the fair one to come to the house entrance in the evening, and I would meet her there: which she did very punctually. I found her standing guard behind the half-open door. I passed close to the house; she sped forth, I held out my hand to her, she placed her foot on the end of mine, and leapt very nimbly to the crupper, being marvellously agile. I spurred my horse and by taking to winding, deserted lanes, found a way to return home without anyone seeing us.

I made her remove her clothes to don her disguise, myself serving as her maid. She made a fuss, at first, and sought to dress herself; but I gave her to understand it would waste a great deal of time, and that, besides, since she was my mistress, there was not the slightest harm in it, and it was how things were done between lovers. It took little to convince her, and she lent herself to the occasion with the best grace in the world.

Her body was a marvel of delicacy. Her arms, a little thin like those of any young girl, were of an inexpressible suavity of lineament, and her childish breast promised such charms that no maturer a form could have borne comparison with it. She still possessed all the grace of the child, yet already displayed the charm of the woman to be; she was in that adorable state of transition from child to young girl: a fleeting state, that elusive, delicious age when beauty is full of hope and each day instead of taking something from the beloved adds a fresh perfection.

Her costume suited her perfectly. It gave her a mischievous little air, intriguing and entertaining, and she laughed aloud when I revealed her image in the mirror, so that she might judge the effect of her attire. I served her some biscuits dipped in Spanish wine, in order to give her courage, and help her bear the fatigue of the journey ahead.

The horses were saddled and waiting, in the courtyard. She mounted hers cautiously, I mounted the other, and we set forth. Night had fallen, and various lamps, being quenched from moment to moment, showed that the honest town of C*** was occupied most virtuously, as any provincial town should be on the stroke of nine.

We were unable to travel fast, for Ninon was no better a rider than necessary, and when her horse broke into a trot, she clung with all her might to its mane. However, the next morning, we were far enough away that none could catch us unless they made extreme haste; but none pursued, or at least, if they did, it was in a direction opposite to that which we had taken.

I became singularly attached to the little girl. I no longer had you beside me, dear Graciosa, and I felt an immense need to love someone or something, to have with me a dog or a child to caress familiarly. Ninon played that role; she slept in my bed, and fell asleep with her little arms around my body; she believed herself to be my mistress, in all seriousness, and believed I was a man, her youth and extreme innocence maintaining her in this error which I took care not to dispel. The kisses I gave her completed her illusion, for she had no idea beyond that, and her desires did not as yet speak loudly enough to make her suspect there was more to know. Besides, she was only half-mistaken.

For, in truth, between her and myself there existed the same difference as between myself and the male sex. She was so diaphanous, slender, light, of such a delicate and select nature that she seemed far more female than I who am a woman myself, but who seem like a Hercules beside her.

I am tall and dark, she is small and fair; her features are so soft that they make mine seem well-nigh hardened and austere, and her voice conveys such a melodious twittering that mine seems harsh beside hers. A man who possessed a voice like mine would shatter hers to pieces, and I always fear the breeze will bear hers away some fine morning. I would like to enclose her in a box filled with cottonwool, and hang it around my neck. You cannot imagine, my friend, how much grace and wit she possesses, how delightfully she flirts, all her childish dainty little ways and gentle manners. She is truly the most adorable creature in existence, and it would have been a real shame if she had remained with her unworthy mother. I took malicious joy in, thus, stealing this treasure from the rapacity of men. I was the eagle-headed griffin who prevented anyone from approaching, and if I could not enjoy her myself, at least no other did: always a consoling idea whatever the foolish detractors of selfishness may say.

I intended to keep her in the ignorance she enjoyed as long as possible, and to keep her with me till she no longer wished to stay, or till I had found a way to secure her fate.

I took her everywhere with me on my travels, in her boy's attire; that kind of life pleased her singularly, and the pleasure she took in it helped her to bear its fatigues. Everywhere I was complimented on the exquisite beauty of my page, and I have no doubt that it was 'he' who gave birth to an idea in many precisely opposite to that which was in fact the case. Several even tried to clarify the matter; but I never allowed her to speak to anyone, and the curious were simply disappointed.

Every day I discovered in the lovely girl some new quality which made me cherish her more, and applaud the resolution I had taken. Assuredly men were not worthy of possessing her, and it would have been deplorable if so many charms of body and soul had been delivered to their brutal appetites and cynical depravity.

A woman alone could love her delicately and tenderly enough. One side of my character, which would not have developed in any other kind of relationship, yet which revealed itself completely in this one, was the need and desire to protect, which is usually a male concern. It would have displeased me extremely, if I'd taken a male lover, and he'd appeared to smother me with attention; it is I who like to take care of those who please me, and my pride is better assuaged by playing the latter role than the former, though the former may indeed seem more agreeable. So, I felt happy to give my dear little one all the care I might have delighted in receiving myself, such as aiding her on the difficult tracks, holding her bridle and stirrup, serving her at table, undressing her and putting her to bed, defending her if someone insulted her, and finally doing for her everything the most passionate and attentive lover does for an adored mistress.

I was gradually losing my sexual identity, and barely remembered, from time to time, that I was in truth a woman. In the beginning, words often escaped me, without thinking, incongruous with the attire I was wearing. Now that no longer happens, and even, when I write to you, to you who know my secret, I sometimes display a pointless show of virility in my use of adjectives. If I ever take it upon myself to retrieve my skirts from the drawer in which I left them, which I very much doubt unless I fall in love with some handsome young man, I will have difficulty in forgoing this acquired habit, and, instead of a woman disguised as a man, I may well seem like a man disguised as a woman. In truth, neither one nor the other of those two sexes is mine; I have neither the imbecilic submissiveness, nor the timidity, nor the pettiness of womankind. Equally I lack the male

vices, the disgusting deceitfulness of men, and their brutal inclinations. I am of a third sex apart, which has not yet found a name, a sex below or beyond theirs, perhaps more defective, perhaps superior. I have the body and soul of a woman, the mind and strength of a man, and yet too much, or not enough, of both to be able to mate with either.

Oh, Graciosa! I shall never love anyone completely, whether man or woman; something unsatisfied always stirs within me, and the male lover or female friend each correspond to only one side of my character. If I had a male lover, the feminine in me would doubtless dominate the virile aspect for a time, but it would not last, and I feel I would only be half-satisfied; if I had a female friend, the idea of bodily pleasure prevents me from fully tasting the pure voluptuousness of spirit alone; so, I know not where to rest, and am perpetually drifting from one to the other.

My dream would be to possess each sex in turn to satisfy my dual nature: a man today, a woman tomorrow. I would reserve for my male lovers my languid tenderness, my submissive and devoted ways, my softest caresses, my little sighs, though melancholically spun, all that is catlike and feminine in my character; then, with my mistresses, I would be enterprising, bold, passionate, with all-conquering manners, my hat sloped over one ear, adopting the appearance of an officer and adventurer. My nature would thus be fully satisfied, and I would be perfectly happy, since true happiness is to be able to develop oneself freely in every direction, and be all that one can be. But such is impossible, and I must not think on it too deeply.

I had taken the little girl with me, with the idea of thwarting my inclination, and diverting towards her all the vague tenderness that flows within, and floods, my soul; I had taken her as a kind of release for my loving impulses; but I soon recognized, despite all the affection I felt for her, how immense a void, what a bottomless abyss remained, despite her, in my heart, and how little her most tender caresses satisfied me!... I resolved to take a lover, but a long time passed without my meeting someone who failed to displease me. I forgot to say that Rosette, having discovered where I had gone, wrote me a most heart-felt letter imploring me to visit her. I could not refuse, and went to join her in the country. I have returned there several times since, and even very recently. Rosette, desperate at not retaining me as her lover, had thrown herself into the whirlwind of society, and given way to dissipation, like all tender souls who are not religious, and who have been hurt in their first affection. She had been involved in many affairs, in no great time, and the list of her conquests was already very numerous, for not everyone had the reason for resisting her that I did.

She had with her a young man named D'Albert, who was at that time her close companion. I seemed to make a strong impression on him, and he took a most lively liking to me from the first. Although he treated her with great consideration, and displayed a tender manner towards her, at heart he did not love Rosette. His lack of ardour was not due to satiety or disgust, but rather because she failed to correspond to certain ideas, true or false, that he had formed as regards love and beauty. An ideal form interposed itself between himself and her, and prevented his being as happy as he should otherwise have been. Evidently his dream was not fulfilled in her, and he longed for something more. But he did not look elsewhere, remaining faithful to their friendship which weighed on him; for his soul possesses a degree more delicacy and honour than most men, and his heart is far from being as decadent as his mind. Ignorant of the fact that Rosette had never been in love with anyone but myself, and still was, despite all her intrigues and follies, he was afraid

of distressing her by letting her see that he did not love her: this consideration restrained him, and he sacrificed his own feelings in the most generous manner in all the world.

My features pleased him extraordinarily, for he attaches extreme importance to outward form, so much so that he fell in love with me, despite my male attire and the formidable rapier I bear at my side. I confess I was grateful to him for his fineness of instinct, and esteemed him for having discerned the true self behind my disguise. At first, he believed himself to be endowed with a more deviant inclination than he possessed in reality, and I laughed inwardly to see him torment himself thus. Sometimes, when approaching me, he had a timorous expression on his face, which amused me more than anything, for the quite natural feeling which drew him towards me seemed to him a diabolical impulse which he was obliged to resist in every possible way.

On these occasions, he would turn to Rosette, throwing himself into their relationship with a fury, once more, and attempt in doing so to resume a more orthodox path; then he would return to me with a mind more inflamed than before. Then the bright idea that I might indeed be a woman entered his mind. To convince himself it might be true, he began to study me, observing me in minute detail. He must know every single hair on my head, and have numbered those same in both my eyelashes. My feet, my hands, my neck, my cheeks, the slight down at the corner of my lips; he examined, compared and analysed all, and from this investigation in which the artist within him aided the lover he seemingly realised, clear as day (if the day is ever clear), that I must be, and am indeed, a woman, and moreover that I represented his ideal, his type of beauty, the reality that matched his dream; a wondrous discovery!

All that remained was to woo me, and be granted the mercy within my gift as the beloved, that of permitting him to verify my sex completely. A play, a comedy, that the company enacted, in which I appeared as a woman decided him completely. I cast him a few equivocal glances, and pointed up a few passages of my speeches, the situation being analogous to our own, to embolden him, and encourage him in declaring himself, for, though I felt no passion for him, he pleased me enough not to let him wither on the vine; and as he had been the first to suspect that I was a woman since my transformation, it was only right that I should enlighten him on that important point, and I was resolved to leave him not the shadow of a doubt.

He came to my room several times, his declaration on his lips, but dared not utter it; indeed, it is difficult to speak of love to someone who wears the same attire as you, and who is donning their riding boots. Finally, not being able to say what he wished out loud, he wrote me a long letter, very Pindaric and laudatory in nature, in which he explained to me at great length all that I was more aware of than himself.

I am uncertain what to do, whether to grant his request or refuse it; the latter would be most immoderately virtuous of me; besides, he would be too deeply upset to regard himself as having been rejected. If we render unhappy the people who love us, what shall we do to those who hate us? Perhaps it would be more strictly proper to play the cruel beloved for a while, and wait at least a month before doffing the tigress' skin and donning a more humane covering. But, since I am resolved to yield, then better now than later, for I fail to quite comprehend those beautiful mathematically-graduated gestures of resistance which abandon one hand to the admirer today, the other tomorrow, then the foot, the leg, the knee, and so on but only as far as the garter; those intractable shows of virtue, where the beloved is ever-prepared to ring the bell violently, if the line

on the field of battle, beyond which they have resolved none shall pass that day, is exceeded. It makes me laugh to see some Lucretia retreat, methodically, while displaying every sign of virginal terror, and from time to time casting a furtive glance over her shoulder to make sure if the sofa on which she is about to fall is indeed directly behind her. That's a degree of caution I could not countenance.

I don't love D'Albert, at least not in the sense I give to the word, but I certainly have a taste and a liking for him; his mind pleases me, and his person does not repel me: there are few people of whom I can say as much. He does not have everything, but possesses something. What pleases me, as regards the man, is that he never seeks to satisfy himself aggressively like other men; he has a perpetual aspiration, an urge forever sustained, towards beauty; material beauty only, it is true, but still, it is a noble inclination, and one that is enough to keep him to the purer regions of male behaviour. His conduct with Rosette proves honesty of heart, an honesty rarer than that of the mind, if that is possible.

And then, I must confess, I am possessed by the most violent desire, I languish, and die of voluptuousness; for the clothes I wear, which involve me in various adventures with women, protect me only too perfectly from the enterprises of men; an idea of pleasure, never realised, floats vaguely in my head, and that flat, colourless dream wearies me and bores me. So many women, in the most chaste of environments, lead the lives of prostitutes, yet I, by somewhat laughable contrast, remain as untouched and virginal as chilly Diana herself, amidst the greatest dissipation, and surrounded by the wildest debauchees of the century. This innocence of the flesh, unaccompanied by a corresponding innocence of the mind, is the most wretched thing that exists. So that my body may not boast of being superior to my soul, I wish to defile it equally, if indeed it is any more a defilement than drinking or eating, which I doubt. In a word, I want to know what a man is, and what pleasure he can give me. Since D'Albert has recognised me beneath my disguise, it is only right that he be rewarded for his perspicacity; he is the first to divine that I am a woman, and I will prove to him, as best I can, that his suspicions were well-founded. It would be uncharitable to let him believe that he has but a deviant taste.

So, it is D'Albert who must resolve my doubts, and give me my first lesson in love: it is now only a matter of presenting the matter in a wholly poetic way. I feel like not replying to his letter, and showing him a chilly face for a few days. When I see him sad and desperate, inveighing against the gods, shaking his fist at creation, and looking into the well to see if it is not too deep to throw himself into, I will retreat to my room like *Donkeyskin* (see *Charles Perrault's fairytale*) and put on my dress rich with all the colours of the sky, that is to say, my Rosalind costume; for my own feminine wardrobe is very limited. Then I will go to his room, radiant as a peacock spreading its tail, ostentatiously showing what I usually hide most carefully, in my dress with a revealing lace neckline, and say to him, in the most pathetic tone I can adopt: 'O most elegiac and most perceptive young man, I am truly a young, modest, and lovely woman, who adores you, moreover, and who only asks to please you, and herself. Tell me if that suits you, and should you still retain any scruples, be reassured, go to work, sin as much as you please.'

This fine speech finished, I will let myself fall, half-swooning, into his arms and, while heaving melancholy sighs, will skilfully undo the clasp of my dress so as to be in a fitting state, that is to say, half-naked. D'Albert will do the rest, and I hope, by the next morning, to know all about those

vast delights that have troubled my brain for so long. By satisfying my curiosity, I will also know the pleasure of having made someone happy.

I also intend to pay Rosette a visit in the same costume, to show her that, if I did not respond to her love, it was neither out of coldness nor disgust. I wish her to hold a good opinion of me, and she deserves, as well as D'Albert, that I unmask myself in her favour. How will she regard the revelation? Her pride will be assuaged, but her heart will ache.

Farewell, my wholly good and beautiful friend; pray that sexual pleasure does not prove as slight to me as those who dispense it. I have spoken in jest in this letter, yet what I am about to attempt is a serious thing, and one which may influence the rest of my life.

Chapter 16: The Story Continued

It was already more than a fortnight since D'Albert had placed his amorous epistle on Théodore's table, and yet nothing appeared altered in the latter's manner. D'Albert knew not to what this silence could be attributed; it seemed as if Théodore had not read the letter; D'Albert thought it must have been diverted, regrettably, or lost; however, such an explanation seemed strange, for Théodore had returned to the room a moment later, and it would have been most extraordinary if he had not noticed the paper, all alone in the centre of the table, in such a way as to attract the most distracted of glances.

Was Théodore really male, and not female as D'Albert had imagined? Or, if a woman, did she feel such an aversion for him, such contempt, that she even disdained to take the trouble to answer him? The poor young man who, unlike ourselves, lacked the advantage of having rummaged through Graciosa's post, she being the confidante of the beautiful La Maupin, was in no condition to decide either of these important questions, either in the negative or affirmative, and experienced, sadly, a most miserable state of irresolution.

One evening he was in his room, his forehead pressed, in his melancholy, against the windowpane, staring at, without registering them, the chestnut trees in the park, which were already leafless and reddened. A dense fog drowned the distant landscape, night was falling, grey rather than black, cautiously treading with velvety step over the tops of the trees: a large amorous swan dipped and re-dipped its neck and shoulders into the misted water of the river, and its whiteness made it appear, in the shadows, like a large snowy star. It was the only living being enlivening the gloomy scene.

D'Albert's thoughts were as sad as those of any disconsolate man might be who found himself at five in the evening, in autumn, in foggy weather, with a harsh north wind for his only music, and the skeleton of a leafless forest filling the perspective.

He thought of hurling himself into the river, but the water seemed very dark and cold, and the swan's example only half-persuaded him to it; or of blowing his brains out, though he had neither pistol nor powder, and would have been sorry to have had either; or of taking a new mistress or even two: a most sinister resolution! But he knew none that suited him, nor even any who did not.

His despair reached as far as desiring to renew acquaintance with such women as were completely insufferable, and whom he had ordered his footman to whip from his house. He finally settled on something even more dreadful... the writing of a second letter. O sixfold foolishness!

He was at this point in his meditation, when he felt a hand settle on his shoulder, like a small dove landing on a palm tree. The comparison is somewhat inappropriate, in that D'Albert's shoulder bore scant resemblance to a palm tree: no matter, we retain it out of our deep love for the Orient.

The hand was attached to the end of an arm, which corresponded with a shoulder forming part of a body, none other than that of Théodore/Rosalind, Mademoiselle de Maupin, or Madeleine d'Aubigny, to call her by her original name.

To whom is this a surprise? Certainly not you or I, since we anticipated the visit. D'Albert, however, did not expect it in the least. He gave a little cry of astonishment, halfway between an 'oh!' and an 'ah!' However, I have every reason to believe that it was more 'ah!' than 'oh!'

It was indeed Rosalind, so beautiful and radiant that she brightened the whole room, with strings of pearls in her hair, her prismatic gown, her large lace ruffles, her red-heeled shoes, and her beautiful fan of peacock feathers, just as on the day of the performance. Only, and it was an important and decisive difference, she had neither mantle, nor wimple, nor ruff, nor aught else to conceal those two charmingly opposed companions, who, alas, too often tend to be reconciled.

Her bare, white, transparent throat, as if most exquisitely carved from the purest antique marble, boldly protruded from an extremely low-cut bodice, and seemed to demand to be kissed. It was a most reassuring sight; and indeed D'Albert, swiftly reassured, yielded, confidently, to the wildest emotion.

— 'Come, Orlando, do you not recognise your Rosalind?' said the lovely woman with the most charming of smiles. 'Or have you left your amorous thoughts hanging beside your sonnets on some bush in the forest of Arden? Are you really cured of the love-sickness for which you so earnestly requested a remedy? I am much afraid it must be so.'

— 'No, no, Rosalind, I am sicker than ever! I am dying, I am dead, or almost so!'

— 'You don't look too bad for a dead man; many of the living don't look so well.'

— 'What a week I've endured! You cannot imagine, Rosalind. I hope it will save me a thousand years in purgatory in the next world. But, as I dared write to you, why did you not reply to me sooner?'

— 'Why? I don't know, indeed, unless I lack a reason. But if that seems insufficient, here are three other reasons much less adequate; you may choose: firstly, because, carried away by your passion, you wrote illegibly, and it took me several days or more to guess what your letter was all about; or, secondly, because my modesty could not accustom itself sooner to so ludicrous an idea as taking a dithyrambic poet for a lover; or, thirdly, because I was inclined to see if you would blow your brains out, or poison yourself with opium, or hang yourself by your garter. Choose.'

— 'A wicked thought! You did well to come today, you might not have found me alive tomorrow.'

— ‘Really! Poor boy! Don’t look so tearful, or I shall be moved too, and that would render me less intelligent than all the creatures in the ark with old Noah. If I once let my feelings run free, you’ll be overwhelmed, I warn you. Just now I gave you three poor reasons, now I offer you three fine kisses; will you accept, on condition that you forget the reasons, in dealing the kisses? I owe you them, and more.’

With those words, the beautiful girl advanced on her doleful lover, and threw her beautiful arms around his neck. D’Albert kissed her effusively on both cheeks, and on her mouth. The last kiss lasted longer than the others, and might have counted for four. Rosalind realised that all she had done till then was pure childishness. Her debt paid, she sat on D’Albert’s knees, he being still quite moved, and, running her fingers through his hair, said to him:

— ‘All my harshness is exhausted, my sweet friend. It took this last fortnight to sate my natural thirst for cruelty. I will confess I found the days long. Don’t become over-conceited because I’m being honest with you, but it is true. I place myself in your hands; avenge yourself for my past rigour. If you were a fool, I would not have admitted it, nor aught else, since fools I disdain. It would have been easy enough to make you think me prodigiously shocked at your boldness, and that all your platonic sighs and most quintessential gibberish could scarcely excuse something with which I was, in fact, most pleased. I could, like many another, have bargained with you for hours, and given you only after lengthy resistance what I grant you freely and at once; yet I think you would not have loved me a single hair’s breadth more. I ask you neither for oaths of eternal love, nor exaggerated protestations. Love me as long as the good Lord wills. I, for my part, will do the same. I will call you neither perfidious nor a wretch, when you no longer love me. You must be kind enough, too, to spare me correspondingly odious titles, if I chance to leave you. I must simply be a woman who has ceased to love you, nothing more. There is no need to hate each other all our lives, because we slept together for a night or two. Whatever happens, and wherever fate takes me, I swear to you, and this is a promise that one may keep, that I shall always retain a charming memory of you, and, if I am no longer your mistress, I shall be your friend, as I was your comrade. I shed my male clothing for you this morning; I shall don it again tomorrow for all others to see. Remember that I am Rosalind only by night, while in daylight I am, and can only be, Théodore de Sérannes...’

Her sentence ended in a kiss, and was followed by many another, which went uncounted, and of which we shall not take exact account, since the number would be great, and their duration seem quite immoral to some, though I find nothing more moral or more sacred under heaven than the caresses shared between man and woman, when both are beautiful and young.

As D’Albert’s entreaties became more tender and livelier, instead of blossoming in radiant delight, Théodore’s handsome face assumed an expression of proud melancholy, which gave his lover some anxiety.

— ‘Why, my sovereign, do you bear the chaste and serious air of ancient Diana, when you should rather reveal the smiling lips of Venus risen from the sea?’

— ‘Well, you see D’Albert, I resemble Diana the huntress more. I assumed this male attire at a very young age for reasons that it would be tiresome and useless to explain. You alone have guessed the truth of my sex, and, if I have made conquests before, they were only of women; quite superfluous conquests by which I have been embarrassed more than once. In a word, though it

may seem an incredible and ridiculous thing, I am still a virgin, as virginal as the snow in the Himalayas, as the Moon before she slept with Endymion, or Mary before having made the acquaintance of that divine messenger, and I am as serious as any person about to undergo something of an irreversible change. It is a metamorphosis, a transformation I countenance. To change my title of maid to that of woman, to no longer be able to grant tomorrow what I possessed yesterday; to experience something of which I know nothing, and turn an important page in the book of life. That is why I look sad, my friend, yet not for a moment is the fault yours.' Saying this, she parted the young man's flowing hair with her lovely hands, and set her gently-pursed lips to his pale brow.

D'Albert, singularly moved by the sweet and solemn tone in which she had delivered her whole tirade, took her hands, and kissed her fingers, one by one, then very delicately undid the laces of her dress, opening her bodice to reveal her twin pale treasures in all their splendour, her gleaming breasts, clear as silver, displaying their sweet paradisial rosebuds. He lightly pressed the vermilion tips to his mouth, and traced their contours thus. Rosalind allowed all this, with infinite complaisance, and returned his caresses, in kind, as best she might.

— 'You must find me most awkward and cold, my poor D'Albert; but I hardly know how to go about this; you will have much to do to instruct me, and truly you are charged with a most difficult task.'

D'Albert gave the simplest of replies, none at all, and, embracing her in his arms with fresh passion, he covered her bare shoulders and breasts with kisses. The half-swooning girl's hair loosened, and her outer dress slipped to her feet, in an instant. She stood there, a pale apparition in her simple chemise of the most transparent fabric. The blissful lover knelt, and soon sent the two pretty little shoes with red heels to the opposite corner of the room; the embroidered stockings quickly followed.



The Kiss (1859)
Francesco Hayez (Italian, 1791 - 1882)

[Artree](#)

Her chemise, endowed with the happy spirit of imitation, pursued the dress: it slipped first from her unresisting shoulders; then, taking advantage of the moment when her arms were raised, freed itself neatly and fled to her hips, whose undulating contours half-restrained it. Rosalind, perceiving the perfidy of this final garment, raised her knee to prevent it from falling completely. Thus posed, she resembled to perfection those marble statues of goddesses, whose cleverly-disposed drapery, regretting its role in hiding such charms, reluctantly envelops their lovely thighs, yet, in a happy show of deceit, ends precisely beneath the place it was intended to hide. But, as Rosalind's chemise was not carved in marble, and its folds were unsupported, it continued its

glorious descent, sank onto her dress, completely, and lay curved about its mistress' feet, like a large pale greyhound.

A simple way to have prevented all this disorder, would have been to restrain the fugitive garment with her hand: this idea, though a most natural gesture, failed to occur to our humble heroine.

Thus, she remained, unveiled, her fallen clothes forming a sort of pedestal, in all the diaphanous splendor of her lovely nakedness, lit by the soft glow of the alabaster lamp that D'Albert had previously lit.

D'Albert, dazzled, contemplated her with rapture.

— 'I'm cold,' she said, crossing her two hands on her shoulders.

— 'Oh, please! One more minute more!'

Rosalind uncrossed her hands, rested the tip of her finger on the back of a chair, and stood almost motionless, swaying slightly which highlighted all the wealth of her undulating lineaments; she appeared not at all embarrassed; the imperceptible pinkness of her cheeks deepening not a shade more: only the slightly more rapid beating of her heart set the contours of her left breast trembling.

Our young enthusiast for beauty could not take his eyes from the spectacle: and I must say, to the immense credit of Rosalind, the reality on this occasion exceeded his dreams, and he experienced not the slightest disappointment.

All was united in the beautiful body that posed before him: delicacy and strength, form and hue; the lines of a Greek statue of the finest artistic period, the colour-tones of a Titian. There before him, palpable and finished, stood the previously-vague chimera whose flight he had so often tried to halt, though in vain: his vision was not constrained, as he had complained so bitterly to his friend Silvio, to a certain portion seen complete, and he unable to stray beyond it for fear of seeing something frightful. His gaze descended, lovingly, from head to foot, and rose again from feet to crown, his sight caressed gently by a harmonious rightness of form.

Her knees were admirably formed, her ankles elegant and slender, her legs and thighs of a proud and superb shape, her belly polished like an agate, her hips supple and powerful, her breasts enough to make the gods descend from heaven to kiss them, her arms and shoulders of the most magnificent character; a torrent of lovely dark tresses, slightly crimped, such as one sees on those heads painted by the old masters, descended her ivory back, whose whiteness they wondrously enhanced, in little waves.

The artist satisfied, the lover regained the ascendant; for, however much one loves art, there are things one cannot rest content with merely gazing upon. He lifted the beautiful girl in his arms, and bore her to bed; in a moment he himself was undressed and beside her.

She pressed herself against him, and embraced him tightly, for her breasts were as cold as the snow whose colour they displayed. This coolness made Albert burn ardently, exciting him to the highest degree. Soon the lovely girl was as heated as himself. He kissed her, in the wildest and most ardent manner, on breasts, throat, shoulders, neck, on her mouth, her arms, her feet; he would have liked to cover with a single caress all that beautiful body, which almost melted into his own,

so intimate was their embrace. Amidst a profusion of charming treasures, he knew not which to reach for.

They no longer kissed each other individually, rather Rosalind's perfumed breath became one with D'Albert's. Their breasts swelled, their eyes half-closed; their arms, relaxed in voluptuousness, no longer had the strength to clasp each other's body. The divine moment approached: the last obstacle was overcome, a supreme convulsive spasm agitated the two lovers, and the curious Rosalind was fully enlightened as to that question whose answer had worried her for so long.

However, as one lesson, however well-delivered, rarely suffices, D'Albert entered onto a second, then a third... Out of consideration for the reader, whom we do not wish to render envious, or drive to despair, I will carry my account no further, for the loveliest of my readers would surely pout at her lover, if I revealed the formidable heights to which D'Albert's love ascended, aided by Rosalind's profound curiosity. Let that lovely reader remember the most fulfilling and charming of nights, the night she would remember for a hundred thousand days and more, if she were not obliged to vanish long before; let her lay the book by her side, and calculate, on the tips of her charming fingers, how many times the one who loved her best, made love to her, and so fill the gap I leave in our glorious story.

Rosalind had a prodigious aptitude for learning, and made enormous progress in that one night alone. Her physical naiveté which was astonished by everything and her mental powers which were astonished not at all formed a most piquant and adorable contrast. D'Albert was delighted, lost, transported, and wished the night to last for forty-eight hours, like that on which Hercules was conceived. However, towards morning, after a superhuman effort, and despite an infinity of kisses and caresses, both the sweetest in the world and calculated to keep anyone awake, he was obliged to take a rest. A sweet, voluptuous sleep touched his eyes with the tips of its wings, his head sank, and he fell asleep between the twin breasts of his beautiful mistress. She considered him for some time with an air of melancholy, and profound reflection; then, as dawn cast its whitish rays through the curtains, she gently raised him, lowered him beside her, rose, and slid lightly over his body.

She collected her clothes and dressed swiftly, then returned to the bed, leaned over D'Albert, who was still asleep, and kissed his two eyelids and their long, silky eyelashes. After which, she retreated, still gazing at him.

Instead of returning to her own room, she went to Rosette's. What she said there, and what she did there, I have never been able to learn, though I have made the most conscientious efforts. I have found nothing in Graciosa's papers, nor in those of D'Albert or Silvio, in connection with her visit. But one of Rosette's maids informed me of this singular circumstance: that though her mistress had not slept with D'Albert that night, the bed was rumpled and unmade, and bore the imprint of two bodies. Moreover, she showed me two pearls, exactly like those Théodore wore in his hair when playing the part of Rosalind, which she had found between the sheets while re-making it. I leave this remark to the sagacity of my readers, who are free to draw whatever inference they wish. As for myself, I have made a thousand conjectures on this subject, each one more unreasonable than the last, and so absurd that I dare not relate them, even in the most cautious and circumlocutionary of styles.

It was quite noon when Théodore left Rosette's room. He failed to appear at dinner or supper, though D'Albert and Rosette seemed not at all surprised. He retired to bed very early, and next

morning, as soon as it was light, without warning, saddled his horse, and that of his page, and left the château, telling a footman that he was not to be expected at dinner, and might not return for a few days.

D'Albert and Rosette were astonished beyond measure, and knew not to what they should attribute this strange disappearance, especially D'Albert, who, after the exploits of the previous night, believed he had earned a second visit. Towards the end of the week, the unfortunate and disappointed lover received a letter from 'Théodore', which I am about to transcribe. I am afraid it will satisfy neither my male nor my female readers; but, in truth, the letter was thus and not otherwise, and this glorious novel can meet with no other ending.

Chapter 17: Madeleine to D'Albert

You will doubtless be most surprised, my dear D'Albert, at my actions, after my previous ones. I will allow there is reason. I would wager you've already bestowed on me at least twenty of those epithets which we had agreed to erase from your vocabulary: 'perfidious', 'inconstant', 'villainous', etc. is that not so? At least you cannot term me cruel or prudish, that is something gained. If you curse me, you are wrong to do so. You desired me, you loved me, I was your ideal. Very well, I granted you, at once, what you asked; it was in your hands to have attained it sooner. I served as the incarnation of your dream in the most complacent and satisfactory manner in the world. I have given you what I will certainly never give again to any, something on which, in your surprise, you could scarcely have counted and for which you should be more than grateful to me. Now I have satisfied you, I am pleased to depart.

What is so monstrous in that? I gave myself to you entirely, and without reserve, for a whole night; what more can you want? Another night, and then another? No doubt you would even apply yourself for days if needs be. You would continue so till you were disgusted with me. I can hear you, even at this distance, exclaiming most gallantly that I am not one of those who are capable of arousing disgust. Lord, it is my lot as it is that of others.

Our affair might last six months, two years, ten years even, if you like, but everything must have an end. You would retain me from habit, or because you lacked the courage to part from me. What point is there in waiting till then?

And it might be that I would cease to love you. I have found you charming; perhaps, by dint of seeing you often, I might find you detestable. Forgive the supposition. Living with you, in greater intimacy, I would doubtless have the opportunity to see you in a cotton night-cap, or embroiled in some ridiculous and comical domestic situation. The romantic and mysterious aspect of things, which endlessly seduces me, would vanish, as regards yourself, while your character, more thoroughly explored, would no longer seem of interest. I would pay less attention to keeping you near me, much as one often neglects those books one never opens because they sit nearby in one's library. Your mind, or even your nose, would no longer seem nearly as well-formed. I would note that your coat fitted badly, that your stockings were wrinkled. I would meet with a thousand disappointments of that kind which would make me suffer, singularly, and in the end I would reach

this conclusion: that you definitely possessed neither heart nor soul, and that I was destined never to be understood in love.

You adore me and I have repaid you. You cannot offer me the slightest reproach, and I have nothing in the least to complain about as regards yourself. I have been perfectly faithful to you, throughout our affair. I have not deceived you in aught. I possessed neither a false heart, nor false virtue. You were so extremely kind as to say that I was even more beautiful than you imagined. For the beauty I offered, you gave me much pleasure; we are both quits: I go my way, and you yours; perhaps we shall find ourselves at the antipodes.

Live with these thoughts. If you think I did not love you, simply because I am leaving, you will later realise the truth. If I thought less of you, I would have stayed, and poured and drunk the insipid brew to the dregs. Your love would soon have died of ennui. After a while, you would have completely forgotten me, and, re-reading my name on the list of your conquests, would have asked yourself: 'Who the devil was she?' I have at least this satisfaction of believing that you will remember me better than another. Your unsatisfied desire will open its wings once more to fly in search of me. I will always be something desirable to which your fantasies will be pleased to return, and I hope that, in the bed of any mistress you may take, you will sometimes think of that unique night you spent with me.

You will never be more lovable than you were on that happy occasion, and even if you seemed to be so, you would be less so; for, in love as in poetry, to rest where one is, is already to retreat. Hold to that thought, and you will do well.

You have made it hard for me to find another lover (if I choose to seek another), and no one will be able to erase your memory; they will all be merely 'the heirs of Alexander'.

If it grieves you too much to lose me, burn this letter, which is the only proof you possess that I exist, and believe you simply enjoyed a lovely dream. Who could blame you? The vision has vanished before dawn, at the hour when dreams return home through the gate of horn or the gate of ivory (*see Homer's 'Odyssey', XIX: 562-567. True dreams arrive through the former, false dreams through the latter*). How many have died and, less fortunate than you, failed to kiss their phantom even once!

I am neither capricious, wild, nor prudish. What I do arises from deep conviction. It is not to inflame you further, through a calculated form of coquetry, that I have departed C***. Don't try to follow me, or seek me: you will not succeed. My precautions, designed to hide my traces from you, are too well taken. You will always be, for me, the man who opened a world of fresh sensations. Such a thing as that, a woman does not easily forget. Though absent, I will often think of you, and far more often than if you were with me.

Console poor Rosette as best you can, who must be at least as angry as you, regarding my departure. Love each other in memory of me, whom you both have loved, and repeat my name sometimes, to each other, in a kiss.

The End of Part VI, and of Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin'