



MARCEL
PROUST
PISARZ

Fragments From Italian Comedy, Marcel Proust

Fragments From Italian Comedy

...As crabs, goats, scorpions, the balance and the water pot lose their meanness when hung as signs in the zodiac, so I can see my own vices without heat in... distant persons.

– Emerson*

1

Fabrizio's Mistresses

Fabrizio's mistress was intelligent and beautiful; nothing could console him for this fact. "She shouldn't know her own mind so well!" he groaned aloud. "I find her beauty is spoilt by her intelligence; would I still fall in love with the Mona Lisa each time I looked at her, if I had to listen at the same time to some critic sounding off, however exquisitely?" He abandoned her, and took another mistress who was beautiful and devoid of wit. But she continually prevented him from enjoying her charm, thanks to her merciless lack of tact. Then she aspired to intelligence, read a great deal, became pedantic and was just as intellectual as the first woman, but less naturally so, and with a ridiculous clumsiness. He begged her to keep quiet: even when she was not talking, her beauty cruelly reflected her stupidity. Finally, he struck up an acquaintance with a woman whose intelligence could be guessed at merely through her more subtle grace: she was happy just to live, and did not dissipate in cavilling conversations the alluring mystery of her nature. She was as gentle as the gracious, agile beasts with their deep gaze, and troubled people's minds like the morning memory, poignant and vague, of their dreams. But she could not be bothered to do for him what the two others had done – namely, love him.

2

Countess Myrto's Lady Friends

Myrto, Pretty, witty and kind, but with a weakness for everything that's in vogue, prefers Parthenis over her other lady friends; Parthenis is a Duchess and has a more brilliant social life than does Myrto; and yet she enjoys the company of Lalage, whose elegance is the exact equal of hers, and she is not indifferent to the agreeable sides of Cleanthis, who is of humble rank and does not lay claim to any distinction. But a woman Myrto cannot stand is Doris; Doris's social position is just below that of Myrto, and she seeks out Myrto, as Myrto does Parthenis, for her greater elegance.

If we can observe these likes and dislikes on Myrto's part, the reason is that Duchess Parthenis not only procures certain advantages for Myrto, but can also love the latter for herself alone; Lalage too can love her for herself, and in any case, as they are colleagues and on the same level, they need each other; and finally, by cherishing Cleanthis, Myrto feels with pride that she is capable of disinterested affection for someone, able to like them sincerely, understand them and love them – that, if necessary, she is elegant enough to do without elegance. Doris, on the other hand, merely expresses her desire for all that is in vogue, without being in a position to satisfy it; she comes to Myrto's like a little dog lurking near a big dog in the hope of snatching a bone from it; she wants to sniff out her duchesses and see if she can steal one of them for herself; she causes displeasure, as does Myrto, by the disagreeable disproportion between her real rank and the rank to which she aspires; she presents Myrto, in other words, with the mirror image of her vice. Myrto's friendship for Parthenis is the same as that which Myrto recognizes with displeasure in the attentions that Doris pays to her. Lalage, and even Cleanthis, reminded her of her dreams of ambition, and Parthenis at least was starting to realize them: Doris speaks to her only of her own pettiness. And so, too irritated to play the amusing role of protectress, she harbours for Doris exactly the same feelings which she, Myrto, would inspire in Parthenis, if Parthenis were not above snobbery: in other words, she hates her.

Heldemone, Adelgise, Ercole

Having witnessed a rather indelicate scene, Ercole does not dare to relate it to the Duchess Adelgise, but does not feel the same scruples in front of the courtesan Heldemone.

“Ercole,” exclaims Adelgise, “do you really think that such a story isn’t fit for my ears? Ah, I am sure that you would not behave the same way with the courtesan Heldemone. You respect me; you don’t love me.”

“Ercole,” exclaims Heldemone, “don’t you have more of a sense of decency than to tell me that story? Just tell me – would you treat the Duchess Adelgise the same way? You don’t respect me: so you can’t possibly love me.”

4

Inconstancy

Fabrizio, who wants to love – and thinks he will love – Beatrice for ever, reflects that he wanted – and thought – the same when he loved, for six months at a time, Hippolyta, Barbara or Clelia. So he tries to find in the real qualities of Beatrice a reason to think that, once his passion ends, he will continue to frequent her home, since the thought that one day he might live without seeing her is incompatible with his feelings for her, feelings that have the illusion they will last for all eternity. Then, as a prudent egotist, he would not want to devote himself like this – concentrating on her his every thought, all his actions and intentions, and his plans for all possible futures – to the woman who shares only a few of his hours.

Beatrice is keen-witted and a good judge. “Once I have stopped loving her, what pleasure I will have in talking to her about others, about herself, and my dead love for her...” (which will thus revive, converted into a more durable friendship – he hopes). But, once his passion for Beatrice is over, he goes for two years without visiting her, without feeling any desire to do so, and without suffering at the thought that he feels no desire to do so. One day, when he is forced to go and see her, he curses, and stays there for just ten minutes. The reason is that he

now dreams day and night of Giulia, who is singularly lacking in wit but whose pale hair smells as nice as some aromatic herb, and whose eyes are as innocent as two flowers.

5

Life is strangely easy and gentle for certain persons of great natural distinction, witty and affectionate, but capable of every vice, even though they exercise none of these vices in public, and even though it is impossible to say for sure that they are guilty of a single one of them. There is something supple and secretive about them. And then, their perversity adds a certain piquancy to the most innocent occupations, such as going for a walk in the garden at night.

6

Cires perdues*

I

I saw you just now for the first time, Cydalise, and I immediately admired your blond hair, which placed as it were a little golden helmet onto your childlike, pure and melancholy head. A dress of a somewhat pale red velvet softened that singular face even more, whose lowered eyes seemed to have sealed up forever some mystery within. But you lifted up your gaze; it rested on me, Cydalise, and into the eyes that I then saw there seemed to have flowed the fresh purity of mornings, the running waters of the first days of spring. They were like eyes which had never gazed on anything which human eyes, are accustomed to reflect – eyes still virgin of earthly experience. But when I gazed at you more intently, you seemed above all to be expressing something full of love and suffering, like a woman to whom, even before birth, the fairies had refused what she would like to have possessed. The fabrics that you wore assumed on you a grace full of sorrow, adding a certain melancholy to your arms in especial, your arms that were just disconsolate enough to remain simple and charming. Then I imagined you as a princess come from far, far away, across the centuries,

enduring the tedium of never-ending life here with a resigned languor – a princess dressed in clothes of rare and ancient harmony, the contemplation of which would soon have become a sweet and intoxicating habit for the eyes. I would like to have made you tell me of your dreams and your troubles. I would like to have seen you holding in your hand a goblet, or rather one of those flagons, so proud and melancholy in shape, which, now standing empty in our museums, and presenting in their useless grace the spectacle of a cup drained dry, were in bygone days, like you, a delightful refreshment on the tables of Venice, whose last violets and last roses have left a still floating memory in the limpid currents of their foaming, cloudy glass.

II

“How can you prefer Hippolyta to the five others I have just mentioned, who are the most unquestionable beauties of Verona? To begin with, her nose is too long and too aquiline.” You might add that her skin is too delicate, and her upper lip too thin: it pulls her mouth up excessively when she laughs, making too sharp an angle. And yet her laughter makes a huge impression on me, and the purest profiles leave me cold in comparison with the line of her nose, in your opinion too aquiline, but in my view so touching – it reminds me of a bird. Her head is also rather like a bird’s, so long from her forehead to the blond nape of her neck, and even more birdlike are her piercing and gentle eyes. Often, at the theatre, she will lean on the edge of her box; her arm in its white glove rises erect up to her chin, propped on her bent fingers. Her perfectly formed body fills out her habitual gauze dresses like folded wings. She makes you think of a bird standing dreaming on one elegant and slender leg. It is charming, too, to see her feather fan fluttering next to her, beating its white wing. I have never been able to see her sons or her nephews, who, like her, all have aquiline noses, thin lips, piercing eyes and over-delicate skin, without being struck by the traces of her lineage, which doubtless issued from a goddess and a bird. Through the metamorphosis which today keeps some winged desire enchained in this feminine form, I can recognize the peacock’s petite and regal head, though behind it there no longer billows the sea-blue,

sea-green wave, or the foam of its mythological plumage. She gives one the idea of the fabulous, together with a frisson of beauty.

7

Snobs

I

A woman does not hide the fact that she likes balls, races and even gambling. She says it straight out, or admits it quite simply, or even boasts about it. But don't try to get her to say that she likes whatever is in vogue: she would deny it indignantly, and get really angry. This is the only weakness that she takes care to hide, doubtless because it is the only one that humiliates one's vanity. She is happy to be dependent on the whim of cards, but not on that of dukes. Just because she commits some extravagance, she doesn't think that she is inferior to anyone; her snobbishness, on the other hand, implies that there are people to whom she is inferior, or might well become so, if she dropped her guard. And so we see a certain woman proclaiming that the question of what is or isn't in vogue is a completely stupid business, while lavishing on it the finesse, wit and intelligence that she could have employed on writing a fine short story or inventing some ingenious refinements in the pleasures and pains she gives her lover.

II

Women of wit are so afraid that someone might accuse them of liking what is in vogue that they never name it; if pressed in conversation, they resort to circumlocution to avoid having to name this potentially compromising lover. If need be, they jump at the name Elegance, which diverts suspicion and which at least seems to suggest that they organize their lives in accordance with artistic criteria rather than those of vanity. Only those women who are not yet in vogue or else are no longer so can name that quality, with all the ardour of unsatisfied or abandoned lovers. Thus it is that certain women launching themselves out onto the world or certain old women in their decline are happy to

speaking of the way others are in vogue, or, even better, not in vogue. Actually, if talking about the others not in vogue gives them the greater pleasure, talking about the others who really are so is meat and drink for them, providing their famished imaginations with, so to speak, more real and solid food. I have known some women for whom the thought of the brilliant relations a duchess had gained by marriage gave a frisson of pleasure even more than it aroused their envy. There are, it appears, out in the provinces, women shopkeepers whose skulls contain, as if locked up in a narrow cage, desires for whatever is in vogue that are as fierce and avid as wild beasts. The postman brings them *Le Gaulois*.^{*} Its news of the fashionable world is devoured in an instant. Those anxious provincial women are sated. And for a whole hour, their eyes, now bright and clear again, will shine all the more lustreously, filled to brimming with intense pleasure and admiration.

III

Against a Snobbish Woman

If you were not a member of high society, and someone told you that Éliante – young, beautiful, rich, surrounded by the love of friends and lovers as she is – suddenly breaks off with them, indefatigably implores the favours of men, sometimes ugly, old and stupid, whom she hardly knows, and meekly suffers their rebuffs, labours as hard to please them as if she were undergoing penal servitude, is first crazy and then more sensible about them, makes herself their friend by her unbounded attentiveness to their needs, so that if they are poor she becomes their support, and if they are sensual, their mistress, you would think: what crime must Éliante have committed, and who are these fearsome magistrates that she must at all costs bribe, to whom she sacrifices her friendships, her love affairs, her freedom of thought, the dignity of her life, her fortune, her time and her most intimate womanly aversions? And yet, Éliante has committed no crime. The judges she insists on trying to bribe hardly even spared her a thought, and would have left her to spend her pure and cheerful life in calmness and tranquillity. But a terrible curse weighs upon her: she is a snob.

IV

To a Snobbish Woman

Your soul is indeed, in Tolstoy's turn of phrase, a deep dark forest.* But the trees in it are of a particular species – they are genealogical trees. People say you're a vain woman? But for you the universe is not empty, but full of armorial bearings. This conception of the world is really rather brilliant and quite symbolic. Do not you, too, have your chimeras, shaped and coloured like those we see painted on coats of arms? Are you not well educated? Tout-Paris, Gotha and High Life have taught you your Bouillet.* While reading the story of the battles won by certain ancestors, you have come across the name of their descendants, whom you invite to dinner, and thanks to this mnemonics you have learnt by heart the entire history of France. Hence there is a certain grandeur in your ambitious dream, to which you have sacrificed your freedom, your hours of pleasure or meditation, your duties, your friendships and love itself. For the faces of your new friends are accompanied in your imagination by a long series of portraits of their ancestors. The genealogical trees that you cultivate with such care, and whose fruits you pluck each year with so much joy, have roots which plunge deep into the most ancient French soil. Your dream establishes a sense of solidarity between present and past. For you, the soul of the crusades gives new life to quite ordinary contemporary faces, and if you reread your list of engagements so feverishly, is this not because, at every name, you sense awakening, tremulous and almost singing, like a dead woman arising from her emblazoned funereal slab, all the pomp and circumstance of old France?

8

Oranthe

You didn't go to bed last night and you still haven't had a wash this morning?

Why proclaim it aloud, Oranthe?

You are a man of brilliant gifts: don't you think they are enough to mark you out from everyone else? Do you feel that, in addition, you need to play such a melancholy role?

Your creditors are harassing you, your infidelities are driving your wife to despair, putting on evening dress would, for you, be tantamount to wearing livery, and nobody could ever force you to appear in society other than with your hair dishevelled. Sitting down to dinner, you do not take off your gloves to show that you are not eating, and at night, if you feel rather feverish, you have your victoria harnessed to go for a ride in the Bois de Boulogne.

You can read Lamartine* only on nights when it has snowed, and listen to Wagner only if you can have cinnamon burnt at the same time.

And yet you are a decent chap, rich enough not to incur debts unless you thought they were necessary to your genius, affectionate enough to suffer when you cause your wife a pain that in your view it would be too bourgeois to spare her; you do not go out of your way to avoid company, you can make yourself popular with others, and your wit, even without your long curly hair, would attract quite enough attention. You have a healthy appetite, you eat well before you go out into town to dine, and yet it drives you mad to have to deprive yourself of food when you get there. At night, during the excursions which you undertake only out of a desire to seem original, you catch the only illnesses from which you ever suffer. You have enough imagination to make snow fall or to burn cinnamon without your needing winter or a perfume brazier, you are literate enough and musical enough to love Lamartine and Wagner in spirit and in truth. And yet! – to the soul of an artist you add all the bourgeois prejudices, showing us their reverse side but without managing to deceive us.

9

Against Frankness

It is prudent to be equally wary of Percy, Laurence and Augustin. Laurence recites poetry, Percy lectures and Augustin tells truths. A

frank person – that is the latter's title, and his profession is that of being a true friend.

Augustin comes into a salon; verily I tell you, be on your guard and never forget that he is truly your friend. Remember that, just like Percy and Laurence, he never comes with impunity, and that he will not wait for you to ask him before telling you a few truths about yourself, any more than Laurence waited before delivering a monologue before you, or Percy before telling you what he thinks of Verlaine.* He does not let you wait for him or interrupt him, since he is frank in the same way as Laurence is a lecturer, not in your interest, but for his own pleasure. To be sure, your displeasure intensifies his pleasure, just as your attention intensifies the pleasure of Laurence. But he could forgo it if necessary. So here we have them, three impudent scoundrels to whom we should refuse all encouragement, all indulgence and anything, indeed, which feeds their vice. Quite the contrary, for they have their own special audience which they can live off. Indeed, the audience of Augustin the sayer of truths is quite extensive. This audience, misled by the conventional psychology of the theatre and the absurd maxim, "Who loves well chastises well", refuses to recognize that flattery is sometimes merely an overflow of affection, and frankness the foam and slobber of a bad mood. Does Augustin exercise his spite on a friend? His audience draws a vague mental contrast between Roman rough justice and Byzantine hypocrisy, and they all exclaim with a proud gesture, their eyes lit by jubilation at feeling themselves to be morally better, more down to earth, altogether rougher and tougher, "He's not someone to spare your feelings out of affection!... Let's honour him: what a true friend!..."

10

An elegant milieu is one in which the opinion of each consists of the opinion of all the others. And if the opinion of each consists in holding the opposite opinion to all the others, it's a literary milieu.

*

The libertine's desire to take a virgin is still a form of the eternal homage paid by love to innocence.

*

On leaving the **, you go to see the ***, and the stupidity, the malice and the wretched situation of the ** is dissected before your eyes. Overwhelmed by admiration for the lucidity of the ***, you at first blush with shame at having initially had any esteem for the **. But when you go back to see them again, they shoot holes through the *** using more or less the same tactics. To go from one to the other is to visit two enemy camps. But as the one side can never hear the shots fired by the other, it thinks that it alone is armed. Once you have noticed that the supply of arms is the same and that the strength, or rather the weakness, is more or less equal on each side, you cease to admire the side that is shooting and to despise the side under attack. This is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom itself would mean having nothing more to do with either side.

11

Scenario

Honoré is sitting in his bedroom. He rises and looks at himself in the mirror:

HIS CRAVAT: How many times have you languorously tied my expressive and slightly loose knot, and dreamily patted it into shape? So you are in love, dear friend; but why are you sad?...

HIS PEN: Yes, why are you sad? For a whole week you have been overworking me, Master, and yet I have really changed my lifestyle. I, who seemed destined for more glorious tasks, am starting to think that I will never write anything other than love letters, to judge from this writing paper you have just had designed for yourself. But those love letters will be sad – I can foresee as much from the attacks of hysterical despair during which you pick me up and put me back straight down again. You are in love, my friend, but why are you sad?...

ROSES, ORCHIDS, HORTENSIAS, MAIDENHAIR FERNS AND COLUMBINES (which fill the bedroom): You have always loved us, but never did you

summon us in such numbers together to charm you with our proud and winsome poses, our eloquent gestures and the touching intonations of our perfume! To be sure, we represent to you the fresh graces of your beloved. You are in love, but why are you sad?...

BOOKS: We were ever your prudent councillors, always being asked for advice and never heeded. But even if we have never impelled you to act, we did make you understand – and when you nonetheless rushed to your defeat, at least you did not find yourself struggling in the dark, as if in a nightmare: do not relegate us to a distant corner, like old tutors no longer required. You held us in your childish hands. Your eyes, still pure, were filled with astonishment as you contemplated us. If you do not love us for ourselves, love us for the way we remind you about yourself, about all that you have been, all that you might have been; and the fact that you might have been such a person means, does it not, that while you were dreaming of being it, to some extent you were it?

Come and hear our familiar, sermonizing voice; we will not tell you why you are in love, but we will tell you why you are sad, and if our child is filled with despair and begins to weep, we will tell him stories, we will cradle him as once we did when the voice of his mother lent its sweet authority to our words, in front of the fire flickering with all its flames, and with all your hopes and all your dreams.

HONORÉ: I am in love with her and I think I will be loved in return. But my heart tells me that I, who was once so changeable, will always be in love with her, and my good fairy knows that I will be loved by her for only a month. That is why, before entering the paradise of those brief joys, I halt on the threshold to wipe my eyes.

HIS GOOD FAIRY: Dear friend, I have come from heaven to bring you mercy, and your happiness will depend on you yourself. If, for a month, you are prepared to take the risk of spoiling, by an artificial stratagem, the joys you had promised yourself from this relationship, if you disdain the woman you love, if you contrive to behave with a certain coquetry and pretend to be indifferent to her, not turning up at the meeting

place you had arranged and refusing to place your lips on her bosom that she will proffer to you like a bouquet of roses, then your mutual, faithful love will rise up proud and strong for all eternity on the incorruptible foundation of your patience.

HONORÉ (jumping for joy): My good fairy, I adore you and I will obey you!

THE LITTLE DRESDEN CLOCK: Your lady friend is not punctual, my finger has already passed the minute you had been dreaming of for so long, the minute at which your beloved was supposed to arrive. I am fearful of marking time for you, with my monotonous tick-tock, as you languish in melancholy expectation; while I know what time is, I understand nothing of life; sad hours take the place of joyful minutes, and melt together within me like bees in a beehive...

The bell rings; a servant goes to open the door.

THE GOOD FAIRY: Remember to obey me: the eternity of your love depends on it.

The clock ticks feverishly, the perfume of the roses grows disquieted, and the orchids twist and turn towards Honoré in anxious torment; one of them has a malicious expression. His inert pen considers him, filled with sadness at not being able to move. The books do not cease from their grave murmuring. Everything tells him, "Obey the fairy and remember that the eternity of your love depends on doing so..."

HONORÉ (without hesitating): Of course I will obey! How can you doubt me?

The beloved enters; the roses, the orchids, the maidenhair ferns, the pen and paper, the Dresden clock and a breathless Honoré all quiver as if vibrating in harmony with her. Honoré flings himself onto her mouth, crying: I love you!...

EPILOGUE: It was as if he had blown out the flame of the beloved's desire. Pretending to be shocked by the indecent way he had just

behaved, she fled, and whenever he encountered her again, it was only to see her torturing him with a stern and indifferent gaze...

12

A Painted Fan

Madame, I have painted this fan for you.

May it, at your desire, evoke in your retreat the vain and charming shapes that peopled your salon, so rich as it then was in gracious living, but now for ever closed.

The chandeliers, all of whose branches bear great pale flowers, shed their radiance on objets d'art from every time and from every land. I kept the spirit of our age in mind while, with my paintbrush, I led the curious glances of those chandeliers to the varied range of your bibelots. Like them, that spirit has contemplated examples of the thought or the life of different centuries throughout the world. It has immeasurably extended the circle of its excursions. Out of pleasure, and out of boredom, it has made them as varied as if they were so many different paths down which to stroll, and now, disheartened at not finding its goal, or even the way to it, and feeling its forces fail and its courage abandoning it, it lies flat on its face on the ground so as to see nothing more, like a brute. And yet I painted the rays shed by your chandeliers with such tenderness; they caressed, with an amorous melancholy, so many things and so many people, and now they are extinguished for ever. Despite the small dimensions of the frame, you will perhaps recognize the persons in the foreground, and the way the impartial painter has given equal value, as does your evenly distributed affection, to great lords, beautiful women and men of talent. This was a bold way of reconciling them in the eyes of the world, albeit inadequate and unjust when judged by the tenets of reason, and yet it made of your society a microcosm, less divided and more harmonious than the other universe – a microcosm that was still alive, and that we will never see again. So I would not like my fan to be studied by an indifferent spectator who had never frequented salons such as yours

and would be surprised to see “politeness” bringing together dukes devoid of arrogance and novelists devoid of pretentiousness. But perhaps this stranger would also fail to understand the drawbacks of such a juxtaposition, whose excess soon leads to a mere exchange of absurdities. Doubtless he would find a pessimistic realism in the spectacle of the wing chair on the right, where a great author, with all the appearances of a snob, is listening to a great lord who seems to be holding forth on the poem he is leafing through, a poem of which, to judge by the expression in his eyes (if I have managed adequately to depict their inanity), he clearly understands nothing.

Near the fireplace you will recognize C***.

He is unstopping a small bottle and explaining to the woman next to him that he has created a concentrate of the most potent and most exotic perfumes.

B***, in despair at the fact that he cannot outdo his rival, and reflecting that the surest way of overtaking fashion is to be brazenly old-fashioned, is sniffing two pennyworth of violets and staring contemptuously at C***.

Did not you yourself try to get “back to nature” by resorting to these artificial means? I would like to have depicted (if such details had not been too tiny to be made out clearly), in a quiet corner of your musical library of that period, your Wagner operas, your symphonies by Franck and d’Indy pushed to one side, and on your piano some scores by Haydn, Handel or Palestrina,* all still open.

I had no compunction about depicting you on the pink sofa. T*** is there, sitting next to you. He is describing his new bedroom, skilfully treated with tar to evoke the sensations of a sea journey, and he is detailing for you all the quintessences of his dressing table and his furnishings.

Your disdainful smile bears witness to the fact that you have little esteem for that infirm imagination which finds that a bare bedroom is not in itself quite enough to contain within it all the visions of the

universe – an imagination which conceives of art and beauty in such a pitifully materialistic way.

Your most delightful lady friends are there. Would they ever forgive me if you were to show them my fan? I don't know. The most strangely beautiful of them, who seemed a living and breathing Whistler to our marvelling eyes, would not have recognized and admired herself unless she had been portrayed by Bouguereau.* Women incarnate beauty without understanding it.

They will say, perhaps, "We merely like a beauty different from yours. Why should it be any less beautiful?"

Let them allow me at least to say this: how few women understand the aesthetic which makes them what they are! A Botticelli virgin would have found Botticelli himself gauche and artless, were it not for the dictates of fashion.

Accept this fan with indulgence. If one of the shades that, after flitting through my memory, have settled on it, happened – while still a participant in life – to make you weep, then recognize it without bitterness, reflecting that it is a shade and will not make you suffer any more.

I have managed to set down these shades innocently on this frail paper, to which the movement of your hand will give wings, only because they are too unreal and too insignificant to be able to do any harm...

No more harm, perhaps, than when you invited them to come for a few hours to forestall death and live the vain life of phantoms, in the artificial joys of your salon, under the chandeliers whose branches were covered with great pale flowers.

Why do we see you going to the theatre every evening, Olivian? Don't your friends have more wit than Pantaloon, Scaramouche or Pasquariello?* And would it not be nicer to have supper with them? But you could do better. If the theatre is the resort of conversationalists with tongue-tied friends or insipid mistresses, then conversation, however exquisite, is the pleasure of men without imagination. It is a complete waste of time trying to tell you, Olivian, what a man of wit does not need to have dunned into him, since he learns it quite simply by making conversation. The voice of the soul and the imagination is the only voice which can make the entire soul and imagination echo in harmony; and part of the time you killed in trying to make yourself popular would have given you – if only you had brought that time to life, if you had nourished it with reading or reverie, by your fireside in the winter or in your gardens in the summer – a rich memory of deeper and fuller hours. Have the courage to take up your spade and your rake. One day you will be filled with pleasure when you smell a sweet perfume rising from your memory, as from a wheelbarrow filled to brimming.

Why do you travel so much? Carriages take you so slowly to destinations you could reach so quickly in your dreams. In order to be at the seaside, you need only close your eyes. Let those who have only bodily eyes force their entire households to follow them and settle in Pozzuoli or Naples. You want to finish a book there, you say? Where will you work better than here in town? Within its walls, you can elaborate the most grandiose settings you desire; here you will avoid more easily than in Pozzuoli the lunches given by the Princess of Bergamo, and you will be less often tempted to go for a stroll without accomplishing anything. Above all, why do you insist so strenuously on enjoying the present, weeping when you cannot manage to do so? Man of imagination, you can enjoy things only in nostalgia or in anticipation: in other words, you can enjoy only the past or the future.

That is why, Olivian, you are discontented with your mistress, your holidays in the country, and yourself. The reason for these ills is something that you have perhaps already noted; but in that case, why do you continue to wallow in them rather than trying to be cured of

them? The fact is that you are thoroughly wretched, Olivian. You have hardly reached manhood, and already you are a man of letters.

14

Characters from the Social Comedy

Just as in comedies Scaramouche is always boastful and Harlequin always oafish, the behaviour of Pasquino is plotting and intrigue and that of Pantaloon avarice and credulity; likewise, society has decreed that Guido is witty but treacherous, and would not hesitate to sacrifice a friend for the sake of a clever joke; that Girolamo hoards, beneath an external appearance of rough-and-ready frankness, treasures of sensitivity; that Castruccio, whose vices anyone can castigate, is the most faithful friend and the most scrupulous son; that Iago, despite ten fine books, is a mere amateur, while a few poor newspaper articles have immediately meant that Ercole is acclaimed as a writer; and that Cesare must be something of a policeman – a reporter or a spy. Cardenio is a snob and Pippo's amiability is quite insincere, for all his protestations of friendship. As for Fortunata, the definitive verdict has been pronounced: she is nice and kind. Her plump curves are quite enough to guarantee the benevolence of her character: how could such a fat lady be a nasty person?

In addition, each person is by nature quite different from the character which society has fetched from the general store of roles and costumes and imposed on him once and for all, and deviates all the more from that character since the a-priori conception of his good qualities, by opening up for him a generous credit of the corresponding failings, gives him the benefit of a sort of impunity. His immutable character as a faithful friend in general allows Castruccio to betray each of his friends in particular. Only the friend suffers from it: "What a villain he must have been for Castruccio – such a faithful friend – to abandon him!" Fortunata can spill rivers of malicious gossip. Who would be foolish enough to seek the source of those rumours within the folds of her bodice, whose shapeless plumpness serves to conceal everything?

Girolamo can practise flattery without fear, since his habitual frankness makes it seem even more piquantly unexpected.

He can treat one of his friends with a rudeness bordering on ferocity, since it is understood that this brutality is all in the friend's best interests. Cesare asks me about my health: it is so he can report back to the Doge. He didn't even ask me how I am: how well he knows how to hide his hand! Guido comes up to greet me, he compliments me on how well I am looking. "Nobody is as witty as he is, but he really is too spiteful!" chorus all those present.

This divergence between the true characters of Castruccio, Guido, Cardenio, Ercole, Pippo, Cesare and Fortunata, and the type they irrevocably incarnate in the oh-so-wise eyes of society, is quite without danger for them, since society refuses to see this divergence. But this divergence itself has its limits. Whatever Girolamo may do, he is a rough diamond. Whatever Fortunata may say, she is kind. The absurd, massive, unchanging persistence of the type, from which these people may ceaselessly diverge without ever disturbing its serene immutability, ends up by imposing itself on them with an increasing force of attraction: they are people of no great originality and little consistency in behaviour, and they are eventually hypnotized by this fixed identity which alone remains forever the same amidst their universal variations.

Girolamo, telling a friend a few "home truths", is grateful to be able to act as his stooge in this way and, by "scolding him for his own good", he ensures that his friend allows him to play an honourable, indeed brilliant role – one that is now almost sincere. He tempers the violence of his diatribes with an indulgent pity that is perfectly natural towards an inferior who thereby acts as a foil to his own glory; he is really grateful to him, and is finally filled with the very same cordial affection that people have attributed to him for so long, that he has ended up really feeling it. Fortunata, whose increasing plumpness, without adversely affecting her wit or diminishing her beauty, has somewhat diminished her interest in others the more the sphere of her own personality has expanded, feels a mellowing of the tetchiness that

alone prevented her from fulfilling the venerable and charming functions which society had delegated to her.

The meaning of the words “generous”, “kind” and “big-hearted”, ceaselessly uttered in her presence and behind her back, has slowly soaked into her own conversation, in which she now usually expresses a praise on which her vast rotundity confers, as it were, a more flattering authority. She has the vague but deep sense that she is exercising a considerable and pacific magistracy. Sometimes this appears to overflow her own individuality, and then it appears as the plenary assembly, stormy and yet easily swayed, of the benevolent judges over whom she presides and whose assent is her foremost concern...

And at those evening gatherings where people are busily conversing, all of them – without finding the inconsistencies in the behaviour of these characters in the slightest problematic, and without noticing how they have gradually adapted to the type imposed on them – carefully tidy away their actions into the correct drawer (neatly labelled and docketed) of their “ideal characters”, and feel with more than a touch of satisfaction that the level of conversation is unquestionably rising.

Of course, they soon interrupt this labour so as not to overburden or overstrain heads which are not really in the habit of abstract thought (one is a man of the world, after all). Then, after lambasting the snobbery of the one, the spite of the other and the libertinage or hard-heartedness of a third, they go their separate ways; and each of them, sure of having paid a generous tribute to kindness, modesty and charity, goes off to indulge – without remorse, in the tranquillity of a clear conscience that has just shown its mettle – in the elegant vices that he practises simultaneously.

These reflections, inspired by the society of Bergamo, would, if applied to a different one, lose much of their truth. When Harlequin left the stage of Bergamo for that of France, he stopped being oafish and became a wit.

It is thus that in certain societies Liduvina passes for a superior woman and Girolamo for a man of wit. One should also add that a man sometimes appears for whom society has no ready-made character or at least no character available, since someone else is already playing that role. First, society tries out on him characters that don't suit him. If he really is an original man and no character is worthy of him, society, incapable of resigning itself to trying to understand him, and lacking a character that will fit him, excludes him – unless, that is, he can gracefully play the role of romantic lead, something we can never have enough of.

The End