



Fragments of Commedia dell'Arte, Marcel Proust

## Fragments of Commedia dell'Arte

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.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

## Fabrizio's Mistresses

Fabrizio's mistress was intelligent and beautiful; he could not get over it. "She shouldn't understand herself!" he groaned. "Her beauty is spoiled by her intelligence. Could I still be smitten with the Mona Lisa whenever I looked at her if I also had to hear a discourse by even a remarkable critic?"

He left her and took another mistress, who was beautiful and mindless. But her inexorable want of tact constantly prevented him from enjoying her charm. Moreover she aspired to intelligence, read a great deal, became a bluestocking, and was as intellectual as his first mistress, but with less ease and with ridiculous clumsiness.

He asked her to keep silent; but even when she held her tongue, her beauty cruelly reflected her stupidity. Finally he met a woman who revealed her intelligence purely in a more subtle grace, who was content with just living and never dissipated the enchanting mystery of her nature in overly specific conversations.

She was gentle, like graceful and agile animals with deep eyes, and she disturbed you like the morning's vague and agonizing memory of your dreams. But she did not bother to do for him what his other two mistresses had done: she did not love him.

## Countess Myrto's Female Friends

Of all her friends, Myrto, witty, kind-hearted, and attractive, but with a taste for high society, prefers Parthénis, who is a duchess and more regal than Myrto; yet Myrto enjoys herself with Lalagé, who is exactly

as fashionable as she herself; nor is Myrto indifferent to the charms of Cléanthis, who is obscure and does not aspire to a dazzling rank.

But the person Myrto cannot endure is Doris: her social position is slightly below Myrto's, and she seeks Myrto out, as Myrto does Parthénis, for being more fashionable.

We point out these preferences and this antipathy because not only does Duchess Parthénis have an advantage over Myrto, but she can love Myrto purely for herself; Lalagé can love her for herself, and in any case, being colleagues and on the same level, they need each other; finally, in cherishing Cléanthis, Myrto proudly feels that she herself is capable of being unselfish, of having a sincere preference, of understanding and loving, and that she is fashionable enough to overlook fashionableness if necessary.

Doris, on the other hand, merely acts on her snobbish desires, which she is unable to fulfill; she visits Myrto like a pug approaching a mastiff that keeps track of its bones: Doris hopes thereby to have a go at Myrto's duchesses and, if possible, shanghai one of them; disagreeable, like Myrto, because of the irksome disproportion between her actual rank and the one she strives for, she ultimately offers Myrto the image of her vice. To her chagrin, Myrto recognizes her friendship with Parthénis in Doris's attentiveness to her, Myrto.

Lalagé and even Cléanthis remind Myrto of her ambitious dreams, and Parthénis at least has begun to make them come true: Doris talks to Myrto only about her paltriness. Thus, being too irritated to play the amusing role of patroness, Myrto feels in regard to Doris the emotions that she, Myrto, would inspire precisely in Parthénis if Parthénis were not above snobbery: Myrto hates Doris.

Heldémone, Adalgise, Ercole

After witnessing a slightly indelicate scene, Ercole is reluctant to describe it to Duchess Adalgise, but has no such qualms with Heldémone the courtesan.

“Ercole,” Adelgise exclaims, “you don’t think I can listen to that story? Ah, I’m quite sure you’d behave differently with the courtesan Heldémone. You respect me: you don’t love me.”

“Ercole,” Heldémone exclaims, “you don’t have the decency to conceal that story from me? You be the judge: would you act this way with Duchess Adelgise? You don’t respect me: therefore you cannot love me.”

### The Fickle Man

Fabrizio, who wants to, who believes he will, love Béatrice forever, remembers that he wanted the same thing, believed the same thing when he loved Hippolyta, Barbara, and Clélie for six months.

So, reviewing Béatrice’s actual qualities, he tries to find a reason to believe that after the waning of his passion he will keep visiting her; for he finds the thought of someday living without her incompatible with a sentiment that contains the illusion of its own eternalness. Besides, as a prudent egoist, he would not care to commit himself fully—with his thoughts, his actions, his intentions of the moment and all his future plans—to the companion of only some of his hours.

Béatrice has a sharp mind and a good judgment: “Once I stop loving her, what pleasure I’ll feel chatting with her about others, about herself, about my vanished love for her . . .” (which will thereby be revived but converted, he hopes, into a more lasting friendship).

But, with his passion for Béatrice gone, he lets two years pass without visiting her, without wanting to see her, without suffering from not wanting to see her. One day, when forced to visit her, he sits there fuming and stays for only ten minutes. For he dreams night and day about Giulia, who is unusually mindless but whose fair hair smells as good as a fine herb and whose eyes are as innocent as two flowers.

Life is strangely easy and pleasant with certain people of great natural distinction, people who are witty, loving, but who are capable of all vices although they do not indulge in any vice publicly, so no one can

state that they have any vice at all. There is something supple and secretive about them. Then too, their perversity adds a piquant touch to their most innocent actions such as strolling in gardens at night.

## Lost Waxes

### ONE

I first saw you a little while ago, Cydalise, and right off I admired your blond hair, like a small gold helmet on your pure and melancholy childlike head. A slightly pale red velvet gown softened your unusual head even further, and the lowered eyelids appeared to seal its mystery forever. But then you raised your eyes; they halted on me, Cydalise, and they seemed imbued with the fresh purity of morning, of water running on the first lovely days in spring. Those eyes were like eyes that have never looked at the things that all human eyes are accustomed to reflecting—yours were virginal eyes without earthly experience.

But upon my closer scrutiny, you expressed, above all, an air of loving and suffering, like a person whose wishes were already denied by the fairies before his birth. Even fabrics assumed a sorrowful grace on you, casting a gloom especially on your arms, which were discouraged just enough to remain simple and charming.

Then I pictured you as a princess coming from very far away, down through the centuries, bored forever here and with a resigned languor: a princess wearing garments of a rare and ancient harmony, the contemplation of which would have quickly turned into a sweet and intoxicating habit for the eyes.

I would have wanted you to tell me your dreams, your cares. I would have wanted to see you hold some goblet or rather one of those ewers with such proud and joyless forms, ewers that, empty in our museums today, raise their drained cups with a useless grace; and yet once, like you, they constituted the fresh sensual pleasures of Venetian banquets, whose final violets and final roses seem to be still floating in the limpid current of the foamy and cloudy glass.

## TWO

“How can you prefer Hippolyta to the five others I’ve just named: why, they’re the most undeniably beautiful women in Verona. First of all, her nose is too long and too aquiline.”

You can add that her complexion is too fine, that her upper lip is too narrow, and that, by pulling her mouth up too high when she laughs, it creates a very acute angle.

Yet I am infinitely affected by her laughter, and the purest profiles leave me cold next to the line of her nose, which you feel is too aquiline, but which I find so exciting and so reminiscent of a bird. Her head, long as it is from her brow to her blond nape, is also slightly birdlike, as are, even more so, her gentle, piercing eyes.

At the theater she often rests her elbows on the railing of her box: her hand, in a white glove, shoots straight up to her chin, which leans on her finger joints. Her perfect body makes her customary white gauzes swell like folded wings. She reminds you of a bird dreaming on a slender and elegant leg. It is also delightful to see her feathery fan throbbing next to her and beating its white wing.

Her sons and her nephews all have, like her, aquiline noses, narrow lips, piercing eyes, and overly fine complexions, and I have never managed to meet them without being distressed when recognizing her breed, which probably descends from a goddess and a bird. Through the metamorphosis that now fetters some winged desire to this female shape, I can discern the small royal head of the peacock without the froth or the ocean-blue, ocean-green wave of the peacock’s mythological plumage glittering behind the head. She is the epitome of fable blended with the thrill of beauty.

## Snobs

### ONE

A woman does not mask her love of balls, horse races, even gambling. She states it or simply admits it or boasts about it. But never try to

make her say that she loves high society: she would vehemently deny it and blow up properly. It is the only weakness that she carefully conceals, no doubt because it is the only weakness that humbles her vanity. She is willing to depend on playing-cards but not on dukes.

She does not feel inferior to anyone simply because she commits a folly; her snobbery, quite the opposite, implies that there are people to whom she is inferior or could become inferior by letting herself relax. Thus we can find a woman who proclaims the utter foolishness of high society yet devotes her mind to it, her finesse, her intelligence, whereas she could instead have written a lovely tale or ingeniously varied her lover's pains and pleasures.

## TWO

Clever women are so afraid they will be accused of loving high society that they never mention it by name; when pressed during a conversation, they shift into some paraphrase to avoid uttering the name of this compromising lover. They pounce, if need be, on "Elegance," a name that diverts suspicion and seems at least to pinpoint art rather than vanity as the basis for arranging their lives. Only women who are not yet part of high society or have lost their social standing refer to it by name with the ardor of unsatisfied or abandoned mistresses. Thus, certain young women who are just beginning to ascend and certain old women who are now sliding back enjoy talking about the social standing that others have or, even better, do not have.

In fact, while those women derive more pleasure from talking about the standing that others do not have, their talking about the standing that others do have nourishes them more effectively, providing their famished imaginations with more substantial fare. I have known people to thrill, more with delight than envy, at the very thought of a duchess's family connections. In the provinces, it seems, there are female shopkeepers whose brains, like narrow cages, confine desires for social standing that are as ferocious as savage beasts. The mailman brings them *Le Gaulois*. The society page is devoured in the twinkling of an eye. The fidgety provincial women are sated. And for an hour their eyes

glow with peace of mind, their pupils dilating with enjoyment and admiration.

### THREE: AGAINST A FEMALE SNOB

If you were not part of high society and were told that Élianthé, young, beautiful, rich, loved as she is by friends and suitors, had suddenly broken with them all and was endlessly courting old, ugly, stupid men whom she barely knew, begging for their favors and patiently swallowing their snubs, toiling like a slave to please them, losing her mind over them, regaining it over them, becoming their friend through her attentiveness, their support in case they are poor, their mistress in case they are sensual—if you were told all that, you would wonder: Just what crime has Élianthé committed, and who are those formidable magistrates whose indulgence she must buy at any price, to whom she sacrifices her friendships, her loves, her freedom of thought, the dignity of her life, her fortune, her time, her most private female aversions? Yet Élianthé has committed no crime. The judges whom she obstinately tries to corrupt barely give her a second thought, and they would let her pure and cheerful life keep flowing tranquilly. But a terrible curse lies upon her: she is a snob.

### FOUR: TO A FEMALE SNOB

Your soul is certainly, as Tolstoy says, a dark forest. But its trees are of a particular species; they are family trees. People call you vain? But the universe is not empty for you; it is filled with coats of arms. It is quite a dazzling and symbolic conception of the world. Yet do you not also have your chimeras in the shape and color of the ones we see painted on blazons? Are you not educated? *Le Tout-Paris*, the *Almanach de Gotha*, *La Société* et le *High-Life* have taught you the Bouillet.

In reading the chronicles of the battles won by ancestors, you have found the names of the descendants whom you invite to dinner, and this mnemonic technique has taught you the entire history of France. This lends a certain grandeur to your ambitious dream, to which you have sacrificed your freedom, your hours of pleasure or reflection, your duties, your friendships, and even love. For the faces of your new



friends are linked in your imagination to a long series of ancestral portraits.

The family trees that you cultivate so meticulously, whose fruit you pick so joyously every year, are deeply rooted in the most ancient French soil. Your dream interlocks the present and the past. The soul of the crusades enlivens some trivial contemporary figures for you, and if you read your guest book so fervently, does not each name allow you to feel an ancient and splendid France awakening, quavering, and almost singing, like a corpse arisen from a slab decorated with armorial bearings?

Oranthe

You did not go to bed last night and you still have not washed this morning?

Why proclaim it, Oranthe?

Brilliantly gifted as you are, do you not believe that this sufficiently distinguishes you from the rest of the world, so that you need not cut such a wretched figure?

Your creditors are harassing you, your infidelities are driving your wife to despair, putting on a tuxedo is for you like donning livery, and no one could prevent you from appearing anything but disheveled in society. At dinner you never remove your gloves to show you are not eating, and if you feel jittery at night you have your victoria hitched up and you go for a drive in the Bois de Boulogne.

You can read Lamartine only on a snowy night and listen to Wagner only when burning Chinese cinnamon.

Yet you are an honorable man, rich enough not to incur debts if you do not regard them as crucial to your genius; you are vulnerable enough to suffer from causing your wife a grief that you would consider it bourgeois to spare her; you do not flee social gatherings; you know how to get people to like you; and your wit, for which your long curls are not necessary, would suffice to draw attention.

You have a good appetite; you eat well before attending a dinner, where you nevertheless fret and fume about going hungry. It is during your nocturnal drives, an obligation of your eccentricity, that you acquire the only illnesses from which you suffer. You have enough imagination to make snow fall or to burn Chinese cinnamon without the help of winter or an incense burner, and you are literary enough and musical enough to love Lamartine and Wagner in spirit and in reality.

Well then! You have decked out an artist's soul with all the bourgeois prejudices, showing us only their reverse sides without managing to put us off the scent.

### Against Frankness

It is wise to fear Percy, Laurence, and Augustin equally. Laurence recites poems, Percy gives lectures, Augustin tells the truth. Frank Person: that is Augustin's title, and his profession is True Friend.

Augustin enters a drawing room; I urge you truly: be on your guard and simply do not forget that he is your true friend. Remember that he is never, any more than is Percy or Laurence, received with impunity, and that Augustin will not wait to be asked to tell you some of his truths any more than Laurence will to deliver a monologue or Percy to express his opinion of Verlaine. Augustin lets you neither wait nor interrupt because he is frank for the same reason that Laurence lectures: not for your sake, but for his own pleasure. Granted, your displeasure quickens his pleasure, just as your attention excites Laurence's pleasure. But they could, if necessary, proceed without one or the other. Here we have three shameless rascals, who ought to be refused any encouragement—the feast if not the food of their vice.

Still and all, they have their special audience, which keeps them alive. Indeed, Augustin the truth-teller has a very large following. His audience, led astray by conventional theater psychology and by the absurd maxim, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," refuses to recognize

that flattery is sometimes merely an outpouring of affection, and frankness the mud-slinging of a bad mood. Does Augustin practice his wickedness on a friend? In his mind this spectator vaguely compares Roman crudeness with Byzantine hypocrisy, and, his eyes all aglow with the joy of feeling better, rougher, coarser, he proudly exclaims: "He's not the kind who'd treat you with kid gloves. . . . We have to honor him: what a true friend! . . ."

A fashionable milieu is one in which each person's opinion is made up of everyone else's opinions. Does each opinion run counter to everyone else's? Then it is a literary milieu.

The libertine's demand for virginity is just another form of the eternal tribute that love pays to innocence.

After leaving the Xs you call on the Ys, and here the stupidity, the nastiness, the wretched situation of the Xs are laid bare. Filled with admiration for the acumen of the Ys, you blush to think that you originally felt any esteem for the Xs.

But when you return to the Xs, they tear the Ys to pieces and more or less in the same way. Going from either home to the other means frequenting both enemy camps. But since neither foe ever hears the other's fusillade, he believes that he alone is armed. Upon realizing that the weaponry is the same and that their strengths or rather their weaknesses are roughly equal, you stop admiring the side that shoots and you despise the side that is shot at. This is the beginning of wisdom. True wisdom would be to break with both sides.

## Scenario

Honoré is sitting in his room. He stands up and looks at himself in the mirror:

His Tie: You have so often loaded my knot with languor and loosened it dreamily—my expressive and slightly undone knot. You must be in love, my friend, but why are you sad? . . .

His Pen: Yes, why are you sad? For a week now, my master, you have been overworking me, and yet I have thoroughly altered my lifestyle! I, who seemed destined for more glorious tasks, I believe that henceforth I will write only love letters, to judge by this stationery that you have just had made. However, these love letters will be sad, as presaged by the high-strung despair with which you seize me and suddenly put me down. You are in love, my friend, but why are you sad?

Roses, Orchids, Hydrangeas, Maidenhair Ferns, Columbines (all of which fill the room): You have always loved us, but never have you rallied so many of us at once to enchant you with our proud and delicate poses, our eloquent gestures, and the poignant voices of our fragrances. For you we are certainly the very image of the fresh charms of your beloved. You are in love, my friend, but why are you sad? . . .

Books: We were always your prudent advisors, forever questioned, forever unheeded. But while we never caused you to act, we did make you understand; nevertheless you dashed to your doom, but at least you did not struggle in the dark and as if in a nightmare: do not thrust us aside like old and now unwanted tutors. You held us in your childhood hands. Your still pure eyes gaped at us in amazement. If you do not love us for ourselves, then love us for everything we remind you of about yourself, for everything you have been, for everything you could have been, and is not “could have been” almost “have been” while you dreamed about it?

Come listen to our familiar and admonishing voices; we will not tell you why you are in love, but we will tell you why you are sad, and if our child despairs and cries, we will tell him stories, we will lull him as we once did when his mother’s voice lent our words its gentle authority before the fire that blazed with all its sparks, with all your hopes and dreams.

Honoré: I am in love with her and I believe I am going to be loved. But my heart tells me that I, who used to be so fickle, I will love her forever, and my good fairy knows that I will be loved for only one month. That is why before entering the paradise of these fleeting joys I have paused at the threshold to dry my eyes.

His Good Fairy: Dear friend, I have come from the heavens to bring you your dispensation; your happiness will depend on you. If, during one month, you play any tricks, thereby running the risk of spoiling the joys you looked forward to at the start of this love, if you disdain the woman you love, if you flirt with other women and pretend indifference, if you miss appointments with her and turn your lips away from the bosom she holds out to you like a sheaf of roses, then your shared and faithful love will be constructed 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 Small Dresden Clock: Your beloved is late, my hand has already advanced beyond the minute that you have been dreaming about for so long, the minute at which your beloved was due. I fear that my monotonous tick-tock will scan your sensual and melancholy wait for a long time; though I tell time, I understand nothing about life; the sad hours follow the joyous minutes, as indistinguishable for me as bees in a hive. . . .

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

The Good Fairy: Remember to obey me and remember that the eternity of your love depends on it.

(The clock ticks feverishly, the fragrances of the roses waft uneasily, and the tormented orchids lean anxiously toward Honoré; one orchid looks wicked. Honoré's inert pen gazes at him, sad that it cannot move. The books do not interrupt their grave murmuring. Everything tells Honoré: Obey the fairy and remember that the eternity of your love depends on that. . . .)

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 the paper, the Dresden clock, and a breathless Honoré all quiver as if in harmony with her.)

Honoré flings himself upon her lips, shouting: "I love you!

Epilogue: It was as if he had blown out the flame of his beloved's desire. Pretending to be shocked by the impropriety of his action, she fled, and if ever he saw her after that, she would torture him with a severe and indifferent glance. . . .

### The Fan

Madame, I have painted this fan for you.

May it, as you wish in your retirement, evoke the vain and enchanting figures that peopled your salon, which was so rich with graceful life and is now closed forever.

The chandeliers, whose branches all bear large, pallid flowers, illuminate objets d'art of all eras and all countries. I was thinking about the spirit of our time as my brush led the curious gazes of those chandeliers across the diversity of your knick-knacks. Like them the spirit of our time has contemplated samples of thought or life from all centuries all over the world. It has inordinately widened the circle of its excursions. Out of pleasure, out of boredom, it has varied them as we vary our strolls; and now, deterred from finding not even the destination but just the right path, feeling its strength dwindling and its courage deserting it, the spirit of our time has lain down with its face on the earth to avoid seeing anything, like a brutish beast.

Nevertheless I have painted the rays of your chandeliers delicately; with amorous melancholy these rays have caressed so many things and so many people, and now they are snuffed forever. Despite the small format of this picture, you may recognize the foreground figures, all of whom the impartial artist has highlighted identically, just like your equal sympathies: great lords, beautiful women, and talented men. A bold reconciliation in the eyes of the world, though inadequate and unjust according to reason; yet it turned your society into a small universe that was less divided and more harmonious than that other world, a small world that was full of life and that we will never see again.

I therefore would not want my fan to be viewed by an indifferent person, who has never frequented salons like yours and who would be astonished to see “politesse” unite dukes without arrogance and novelists without pretentiousness. Nor might he, that stranger, comprehend the vices of this rapprochement, which, if excessive, will soon facilitate only one exchange: that of ridiculous things. He would, no doubt, find a pessimistic realism in the spectacle of the bergère on the right, where a great author, to all appearances a snob, is listening to a great lord, who, dipping into a book, seems to be holding forth about a poem, and whose expression, if I have managed to make it foolish enough, shows quite well that he understands nothing. Near the fireplace you will recognize C.

He is uncorking a scent bottle and explaining to the woman next to him that he has concentrated the most pungent and most exotic perfumes in this blend.

B., despairing of outdoing him, and thinking that the surest way to be ahead of fashion is to be hopelessly out of fashion, is sniffing some cheap violets and glaring scornfully at C.

As for you yourself, have you not gone on one of those artificial returns to nature? Had those details not been too minuscule to remain distinct, I would have depicted, in some obscure nook of your music library at that time, your now abandoned Wagner operas, your now discarded symphonies by Franck and d’Indy and, on your piano, several open scores by Haydn, Handel, or Palestrina.

I did not shy away from depicting you on the pink sofa. T. is seated next to you. He is describing his new bedroom, which he artfully smeared with tar in order to suggest the sensations of an ocean voyage, and he is disclosing all the quintessences of his wardrobe and his furnishings.

Your disdainful smile reveals that you set no store by this feeble imagination, for which a bare chamber does not suffice for conjuring up all the visions of the universe and which conceives of art and beauty in such pitifully material terms.

Your most delightful friends are present. Would they ever forgive me if you showed them the fan? I cannot say. The most unusually beautiful woman, standing out like a living Whistler before our enchanted eyes, would recognize and admire herself only in a portrait by Bouguereau. Women incarnate beauty without understanding it. Your friends may say: "We simply love a beauty that is not yours. Why should it be beauty any less than yours?"

Let them at least allow me to say: "So few women comprehend their own aesthetics. There are Botticelli madonnas who, but for fashion, would find this painter clumsy and untalented."

Please accept this fan with indulgence. If one of the ghosts that have alighted here after flitting through my memory made you weep long ago, while it was still partaking of life, then recognize that ghost without bitterness and remember that it is a mere shadow and that it will never make you suffer again. I could quite innocently capture these ghosts on the frail paper to which your hand will lend wings, for those ghosts are too unreal and too flimsy to cause any harm. . . .

No more so, perhaps, than in the days when you invited them to stave off death for a few hours and live the vain life of phantoms, in the factitious joy of your salon, under the chandeliers, whose branches were covered with large, pallid flowers.

Olivian

Why do people see you, Olivian, heading to the Commedia every evening? Don't your friends have more acumen than Pantalone, Scaramuccio, or Pasquarello? And would it not be more agreeable to have supper with your friends?

But you could do even better. If the theater is the refuge of the conversationalist whose friend is mute and whose mistress is insipid, then conversation, even the most exquisite, is the pleasure of men without imagination. It is a waste of time, Olivian, trying to tell you that which need not be shown an intelligent man by candlelight, for he sees it while chatting.



The voice of the soul and of the imagination is the only voice that makes the soul and the imagination resonate thoroughly and happily; and had you spent a bit of the time you have killed to please others and had you made that bit come alive, had you nourished it by reading and reflecting at your hearth during winter and in your park during summer, you would be nurturing the rich memory of deeper and fuller hours. Have the courage to take up the rake and the pickax. Someday you will delight in smelling a sweet fragrance drifting up from your memory as if from a gardener's brimming wheelbarrow.

Why do you travel so much? The stagecoaches transport you very slowly to where your dreams would carry you so swiftly. To reach the seashore all you need do is close your eyes. Let people who have only physical eyes move their entire households and settle in Puzzuoli or Naples.

You say you want to complete a book there? Where could you work better than in the city? Inside its walls you can have the grandest sceneries that you like roll by; here you will more easily avoid the Princess di Bergamo's luncheons than in Puzzuoli and you will be less tempted to go on idle strolls. Why, above all, are you so bent on enjoying the present and weeping because you fail to do so? As a man with imagination you can enjoy only in regret or in anticipation—that is, in the past or in the future.

That is why, Olivian, you are dissatisfied with your mistress, your summer holidays, and yourself. As for the cause of these ills, you may have already pinpointed it; but then why relish them instead of trying to cure them? The fact is: you are truly miserable, Olivian. You are not yet a man, and you are already a man of letters.

### Characters in the Commedia of High Society

Just as Scaramuccio is always a braggart in the *commedia dell'arte*, Arlecchino always a bumpkin, Pasquino's conduct is sheer intrigue and Pantalone's sheer avarice and credulity, so too society has decreed that

Guido is witty but perfidious and would not hesitate to sacrifice a friend to a bon mot; that Girolamo hoards a treasure trove of sensitivity behind a gruff frankness; that Castruccio, whose vices should be stigmatized, is the most loyal of friends and the most thoughtful of sons; that Iago, despite the ten fine books he has published, remains an amateur, whereas a few bad newspaper articles have anointed Ercole a writer; that Cesare must have ties with the police as a reporter or a spy.

Cardenio is a snob, and Pippo is nothing but a fraud despite his protestations of friendship. As for Fortunata, it has been settled definitively: she is a good person. The rotundity of her embonpoint is enough of a warranty for her benevolence: how could such a fat lady be a wicked person?

Furthermore, each of these individuals, so different by nature from the definitive character picked out for him by society from its storehouse of costumes and characters, deviates from that character all the more as the a priori conception of his qualities creates a sort of impunity for him by opening a large credit line for his opposite defects.

His immutable persona as a loyal friend in general allows Castruccio to betray each of his friends in particular. The friend alone suffers for it: "What a scoundrel he must be if he was dropped by Castruccio, that loyal friend!"

Fortunata can disgorge torrents of backbiting. Who would be so demented as to look for their source in the folds of her bodice, whose hazy amplitude can hide anything? Girolamo can fearlessly practice flattery, to which his habitual frankness lends the charm of surprise. His gruffness to a friend can be ferocious, for it is understood that Girolamo is brutalizing him for his friend's own good.

If Cesare asks me about my health, it is because he plans to report on it to the doge. He has not asked me: how cleverly he hides his cards! Guido comes up to me; he compliments me on how fine I look. "No one is as witty as Guido," those present exclaim in chorus, "but he is really too malicious!"

In their true character, Castruccio, Guido, Cardenio, Ercole, Pippo, Cesare, and Fortunata may differ from the types that they irrevocably embody in the sagacious eyes of society; but this divergence holds no danger for them, because society refuses to see it. Still, it does not last forever. Whatever Girolamo may do, he is a benevolent curmudgeon. Whatever Fortunata may say, she is a good person.

The absurd, crushing, and immutable persistence of their types, from which they can endlessly depart without disrupting their serene entrenchment, eventually imposes itself, with an increasing gravitational pull, on these unoriginal people with their incoherent conduct; and ultimately they are fascinated by this sole identity, which remains inflexible amid all their universal variations.

Girolamo, by telling his friend “a few home truths,” is thankful to him for serving as his stooge, enabling Girolamo “to rake him over the coals for his own good” and thereby play an honorable, almost glamorous, and now quasi-sincere role. He seasons the vehemence of his diatribes with a quite indulgent pity that is natural toward an inferior who accentuates Girolamo’s glory; Girolamo feels genuine gratitude toward him and, in the end, the cordiality which high society has attributed to him for such a long time that he finally holds on to it.

While expanding the sphere of her own personality, Fortunata’s embonpoint, growing without blighting her mind or altering her beauty, slightly diminishes her interest in others, and she feels a softening of her acrimony, which was all that prevented her from worthily carrying out the venerable and charming functions that the world had delegated to her.

The spirit of the words “benevolence,” “goodness,” and “rotundity,” endlessly uttered in front of her and behind her back, has gradually saturated her speech, which is now habitually laudatory and on which her vast shape confers something like a more pleasing authority.

She has the vague and deep sensation of exercising an immense and peaceable magistrature. At times, she seems to overflow her own individuality, as if she were the stormy yet docile plenary council of benevolent judges, an assembly over which she presides and whose approval stirs her in the distance. . . .

During conversations at soirées, each person, untroubled by the contradictory behavior of these figures and heedless of their gradual adaptation to the imposed types, neatly files every figure away with his actions in the quite suitable and carefully defined pigeonhole of his ideal character; and at these moments each person feels with deeply emotional satisfaction that the level of conversation is incontestably rising.

Granted, we soon interrupt this labor and avoid dwelling on it, so that people unaccustomed to abstract thinking will not doze off (we are men of the world, after all). Then, after stigmatizing one person's snobbery, another's malevolence, and a third man's libertinism or abusiveness, the guests disperse, convinced that they have paid their generous tribute to modesty, charity, and benevolence; and so, with no remorse, with a clear conscience that has just shown its mettle, each person goes off to indulge in his elegant and multiple vices.

If these reflections, inspired by Bergamo's high society, were applied to any other, they would lose their validity. When Arlecchino left the Bergamo stage for the French stage, the bumpkin became a wit. That is why a few societies regard Liduvina as outstanding and Girolamo as clever.

We must also add that at times a man may appear for whom society has no ready-made character, or at least no available character, because it is being used by someone else. At first society gives him characters that do not suit him.

If he is truly original, and no character is the right size, then society, unable to try to understand him and lacking a character with a proper

fit, will simply ostracize him; unless he can gracefully play juvenile leads, who are always in short supply.

The end