



The Indifferent Man, Marcel Proust

The Indifferent Man

We heal as we console ourselves; the heart cannot always weep or always love.

—LA BRUYÈRE: CHARACTERS, CHAPTER IV, THE HEART

Madeleine de Gouvres had just arrived in Madame Lawrence's box. General de Buivres asked:

"Who are your escorts tonight? Avranches, Lepré? . . ."

"Avranches, yes," replied Madame Lawrence. "As for Lepré, I didn't dare."

Nodding toward Madeleine, she added:

"She's very hard to please, and since it would have practically meant a new acquaintanceship for her . . ."

Madeleine protested. She had met Monsieur Lepré several times and found him charming; once she had even had him over for lunch.

"In any case," Madame Lawrence concluded, "you have nothing to regret, he is very nice, but there is nothing remarkable about him, and certainly not for the most spoiled woman in Paris. I can quite understand that the close friendships you have make you hard to please."

Lepré was very nice but very insignificant: that was the general view. Madeleine, feeling that this was not entirely her opinion, was amazed; but then, since Lepré's absence did not cause her any keen disappointment, she did not like him enough to be perturbed.

In the auditorium, heads had turned in her direction; friends were already coming to greet her and compliment her. This was nothing new, and yet, with the obscure clear-sightedness of a jockey during a

race or of an actor during a performance, she felt that tonight she was triumphing more fully and more easily than usual.

Wearing no jewels, her yellow tulle bodice strewn with cattleyas, she had also pinned a few cattleyas to her black hair, and these blossoms suspended garlands of pale light from that dark turret.

As fresh as her flowers and equally pensive, she evoked, with the Polynesian charm of her coiffure, Mahenu in Pierre Loti's play *The Island of Dreams*, for which Reynaldo Hahn had composed the music. Soon her regret that Lepré had not seen her like this blended with the happy indifference with which she mirrored her charms of this evening in the dazzled eyes that reflected them reliably and faithfully.

"How she loves flowers," cried Madame Lawrence, gazing at her friend's bodice.

She did love them, in the ordinary sense that she knew how beautiful they were and how beautiful they made a woman. She loved their beauty, their gaiety, and their sadness, too, but externally, as one of their ways of expressing their beauty. When they were no longer fresh, she would discard them like a faded gown.

All at once, during the first intermission, several moments after General de Buivres and the Duke and Duchess d'Alériouvres had said good night, leaving her alone with Madame Lawrence, Madeleine spotted Lepré in the orchestra. She saw that he was having the attendant open the box.

"Madame Lawrence," said Madeleine, "would you permit me to invite Monsieur Lepré to stay here since he is alone in the orchestra?"

"All the more gladly since I'm going to be obliged to leave in an instant, my dear; you know you gave me permission. Robert is a bit under the weather. Would you like me to ask Monsieur Lepré?"

"No, I'd rather do it myself."

Throughout intermission, Madeleine let Lepré chat with Madame Lawrence. Leaning on the balustrade and gazing into the auditorium, she pretended to ignore them, certain that she would soon enjoy his presence all the more when she was alone with him.

Madame Lawrence went off to put on her coat.

"I would like to invite you to stay with me during the next act," said Madeleine with an indifferent amiability.

"That's very kind of you, Madame, but I can't; I am obliged to leave."

"Why, I'll be all alone," said Madeleine in an urgent tone; then suddenly, wanting almost unconsciously to apply the maxims of coquetry in the famous line from Carmen, "If I don't love you, you'll love me," she went on:

"Oh, you're quite right, and if you have an appointment, don't keep them waiting. Good night, Monsieur."

With a friendly smile she tried to compensate for what struck her as the implicit harshness of her permission. However, that harshness was impelled by her violent desire to keep him here, by the bitterness of her disappointment. Aimed at anyone else, her advice to leave would have been pleasant.

Madame Lawrence came back.

"Well, he's leaving; I'll stay with you so you won't be alone. Did you have a tender farewell?"

"Farewell?"

"I believe that at the end of this week he's starting his long tour of Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor."

A child who has been breathing since birth without ever noticing it does not know how essential the unheeded air that gently swells his chest is to his life. Does he happen to be suffocating in a convulsion, a bout of fever? Desperately straining his entire being, he struggles almost for his life, for his lost tranquillity, which he will regain only with the air from which he did not realize his tranquillity was inseparable.

Similarly, the instant Madeleine learned of Lepré's departure, of which she had been unaware, she understood only what had entered into his leaving as she felt everything that was being torn away from her.

And with a painful and gentle despondency, she gazed at Madame Lawrence without resenting her any more than a poor, suffocating patient resents his asthma while, through eyes filled with tears, he smiles at the people who pity him but cannot help him. All at once Madeleine rose:

"Come, my dear, I don't want you to get home late on my account."

While slipping into her coat, she spotted Lepré, and in the anguish of letting him leave without her seeing him again, she hurried down the stairs.

"I'm devastated—especially since Monsieur Lepré is going abroad—to think he could assume he might offend me."

"Why, he's never said that," replied Madame Lawrence.

"He must have: since you assume it, he must assume it as well."

"Quite the contrary."

"I tell you it's true," Madeleine rejoined harshly. And as they caught up with Lepré, she said:

"Monsieur Lepré, I expect you for dinner on Thursday, at eight P.M."

"I'm not free on Thursday, Madame."

"Then how about Friday?"

"I'm not free on Friday either."

"Saturday?"

"Saturday would be fine."

"But darling, you're forgetting that you're to dine with Princess d'Avranches on Saturday."

"Too bad, I'll cancel."

"Oh! Madame, I wouldn't want that," said Lepré.

“I want it,” cried Madeleine, beside herself. “I’m not going to Fanny’s no matter what, I never had any intention of going.”

Once home again, Madeleine, slowly undressing, reviewed the events of the evening. Upon reaching the moment when Lepré had refused to stay with her for the last act, she turned crimson with humiliation. The most elementary coquetry as well as the most stringent dignity commanded her to show him an extreme coldness after that.

Instead, that threefold invitation on the stairway! Indignant, she raised her head proudly and appeared so beautiful to herself in the depth of the mirror that she no longer doubted that he would love her.

Unsettled and disconsolate only because of his imminent departure, she pictured his affection, which he—she did not know why—wanted to conceal from her. He was going to confess it to her, perhaps in a letter, quite soon, and he would probably put off his departure, he would sail with her. . . . What? . . . She must not think about that. But she could see his handsome, loving face approaching her face, asking her to forgive him. “You naughty boy!” she said.

But then, perhaps he did not love her as yet; he would leave without having time to fall in love with her. . . . Disconsolate, she lowered her head, and her eyes fell upon her bodice, upon the even more languishing eyes of the wilted blossoms, which seemed ready to weep under their withered eyelids.

The thought of the brevity of her unconscious dream about him, of the brevity of their happiness if ever it materialized, was associated for her with the sadness of those flowers, which, before dying, languished on the heart that they had felt beating with her first love, her first humiliation, and her first sorrow.

The next day she wanted no other flowers in her bedroom, which was normally filled and radiant with the glory of fresh roses.

When Madame Lawrence came by, she halted before the vases where the cattleyas were finally dying and, for eyes without love, were stripped of beauty.

“What, darling, you who love flowers so much?”

Madeleine was going to say, “It seems to me that I have only begun loving them today”; she stopped, annoyed at having to explain herself and sensing that there are realities that people cannot be made to grasp if they do not already have them inside themselves.

She contented herself with smiling amiably at the reproach. The feeling that no one, perhaps not even Lepré himself, was aware of her new life gave her a rare and disconsolate pleasure of pride.

The servant brought the mail; finding no letter from Lepré, she was overwhelmed with disappointment. Upon measuring the gap between the absurdity of her disappointment, when there had not been the slightest chance of hope, and the very real and very cruel intensity of that disappointment, she understood that she had stopped living solely a life of events and facts. The veil of lies had started unrolling before her eyes for a duration that was impossible to predict.

She would now see things only through that veil, and, more than all other things, those she would have wanted to know and experience the most concretely and in the most similar way as Lepré, those that had to do with him.

Still, she had one remaining hope—that he had lied to her, that his indifference was feigned: she knew by unanimous consensus that she was one of the most beautiful women in Paris, that her reputation for wit, intelligence, elegance, her high social standing added prestige to her beauty.

Lepré, on the other hand, was considered intelligent, artistic, very gentle, a very good son, but he was barely sought after and had never been successful with women; the attention she gave him was bound to

strike him as something improbable and un hoped for. She was astonished and hopeful. . . .

Although Madeline would, in an instant, have subordinated all the interests and affections of her life to Lepré, she nevertheless still believed—and her judgment was fortified by the universal judgment—that, without being disagreeable, he was inferior to the remarkable men who, in the four years since the death of the Marquis de Gouvres, had been dropping by several times a day to console the widow and were thus the most precious ornament of her life.

She very keenly sensed that her inexplicable inclination, which made him a unique person for her, did not make him the equal of those other men. The reasons for her love were inside her, and if they were a bit inside him too, they were not in his intellectual superiority or even in his physical superiority.

It was precisely because she loved him that no face, no smile, no conduct was as agreeable to her as his, and it was not because his face, his smile, his conduct were more agreeable that she loved him. She was acquainted with more handsome, more charming men, and she knew it.

Thus, when Lepré entered Madeleine's drawing room on Saturday at a quarter past eight, he faced, without suspecting anything, his most passionate friend, his most clear-sighted adversary. While her beauty was armed to vanquish him, her mind was no less armed to judge him; she was ready to pick, like a bitter flower, the pleasure of finding him mediocre and ridiculously disproportionate to her love for him.

She was not acting out of prudence! She quite keenly sensed that she would continually be caught again in the magic net, and that once Lepré left, her prolific imagination would repair the meshes that her too incisive mind would have torn in his presence.

And in fact, when he walked in, she was suddenly calmed; by shaking his hand, she appeared to drain him of all power. He was no longer the sole and absolute despot of her dreams; he was just a pleasant visitor.

They chatted; now all her assumptions vanished. In his fine goodness, in the bold precision of his mind, she found reasons that, while not absolutely justifying her love, explained it, at least slightly, and, by showing her that something corresponded to it in reality, made its roots plunge deeper in that reality, draw more life from it. She also noticed that he was more attractive than she had thought, with a noble and delicate Louis XIII face.

All her artistic memories of the portraits of that period were henceforth tied to the thought of her love, gave it a new existence by letting it enter the system of her artistic sensibilities. She ordered a photograph from Amsterdam, the picture of a young man who resembled Lepré.

She ran into him a few days later. His mother was seriously ill; his trip was put off. She told him that she now had a picture on her table, a portrait that reminded her of him. He appeared moved but cold. She was deeply pained, but consoled herself with the thought that he at least understood her attention though he did not enjoy it.

Loving a boor who did not realize it would have been even crueler. So, mentally reproaching him for his indifference, she wanted to see the men who were enamored of her, with whom she had been indifferent and coquettish; she wanted to see them again in order to show them the ingenious and tender compassion that she would have at least wanted to obtain from him. But when she encountered them, they all had the horrible defect of not being Lepré, and the sight of them merely irritated her.

She wrote to him; four days wore by without a response; then she received a letter that any other woman would have found friendly but that drove Madeleine to despair. He wrote:

“My mother has improved; I am leaving in three weeks; until then, my life is quite full, but I will try to call on you once to pay my respects.”

Was it jealousy of everything that “filled his life,” preventing her from penetrating it, was it sorrow that he was going abroad and that he would come by only once, or even the greater sorrow that he did not feel the need to come and visit her ten times a day before his departure: she could no longer stay at home; she hastily donned a hat, went out, and, hurrying, on foot, along the streets that led to him, she nurtured the absurd hope that, by some miracle she was counting on, he would appear to her at the corner of a square, radiant with tenderness, and that a single glance of his would explain everything to her.

All at once she spotted him walking, chatting gaily with friends. But now she was embarrassed; she believed he would guess that she was looking for him, and so she brusquely stepped into a shop. During the next few days she no longer looked for him; she avoided places where she might run into him—she maintained this final coquetry toward him, this final dignity for herself.

One morning, she was sitting alone in the Tuileries, on the waterside terrace. She let her sorrow float, spread out, relax more freely on the broader horizon, she let it pick flowers, spring forth with the hollyhocks, the fountains, and the columns, gallop behind the dragoons leaving the Quartier d’Orsay, she let her sorrow drift on the Seine and soar with the swallows across the pale sky.

It was the fifth day since the friendly letter that had devastated her.

All at once she saw Lepré’s fat, white poodle, which he allowed to go out alone every morning. She had joked about it, had said to him that one day somebody would kidnap it. The animal recognized her and came over.

After five days of repressing her emotions, she was utterly overwhelmed with a wild need to see Lepré. Seizing the animal in her arms and shaking with sobs, she hugged it for a long time, with all her

strength; then, unpinning the nosegay of violets from her bodice and attaching it to the dog's collar, she let the animal go.

But, calmed by that crisis, also mollified, and feeling better, she noticed her resentment vanishing bit by bit, a little cheer and hope coming back to her with her physical well-being, and she perceived that she valued life and happiness again. Lepré would be leaving in seventeen days; she wrote him, inviting him to dinner the next day, apologizing for not responding earlier, and she spent a rather pleasant afternoon.

That evening, she would be attending a dinner; the guests probably included many artists and athletes who knew Lepré. She wanted to know if he had a mistress, any kind of attachment that prevented him from getting close to Madeleine, that explained his extraordinary behavior.

She would suffer greatly upon finding out, but at least she would know, and perhaps she might hope that in time her beauty would carry the day. She went out, determined to inquire immediately, but then, stricken with fear, she lost her nerve.

In the last moment, upon arriving, she was impelled less by the desire to know the truth than by the need to speak to others about him, that sad charm of vainly conjuring him up wherever she was without him. After dinner she said to two men who were near her, and whose conversation was quite free:

"Tell me, do you know Lepré well?"

"We've been running into him every day forever, but we're not very close."

"Is he a charming man?"

"He's a charming man."

"Well, perhaps you can tell me. . . . Don't feel obligated to be too benevolent—you see, I have a very important reason for asking. A girl I love with all my heart likes him a bit. Is he a man whom a woman could marry with an easy mind?"

Her two interlocutors paused for a moment, embarrassed:

“No, that’s out of the question.”

Madeleine, very courageously, went on, all the more quickly to get it over with:

“Does he have any long-term attachment?”

“No, but still, it’s impossible.”

“Tell me why, seriously, I beg you.”

“No.”

“But still, it would be better to tell her after all. Otherwise she might imagine worse things or silly things.”

“Very well! This is it, and I don’t think we’re hurting Lepré in any way by revealing it. First of all, you are not to repeat it; besides, the whole of Paris knows about it anyway; and as for marrying, he’s far too honest and sensitive to even consider it.

Lepré is a charming fellow, but he has one vice. He loves the vile women that are found in the gutter, he’s crazy about them; he occasionally spends whole nights in the industrial suburbs or on the outer boulevards, running the risk of getting killed eventually; and not only is he crazy about them, but he loves only them.

The most ravishing socialite, the most ideal girl leave him absolutely indifferent. He can’t even pay them any attention. His pleasures, his preoccupations, his life are somewhere else. People who didn’t know him well used to say that with his exquisite nature a great love would rescue him.

But for that he would have to be capable of experiencing it, and he’s incapable of doing so. His father was already like that, and if it doesn’t happen to Lepré’s sons, then only because he won’t have any.”

At eight the next evening, Madeline was informed that Monsieur Lepré was in the drawing room. She went in; the windows were open, the lamps were not yet lit, and he was waiting on the balcony. Not far from there, several houses surrounded by gardens rested in the gentle evening light, distant, Oriental, and pious, as if this had been Jerusalem.

The rare, caressing light gave each object a brand-new and almost poignant value.

A luminous wheelbarrow in the middle of the dark street was as touching as, there, a bit further, the somber and already nocturnal trunk of a chestnut tree under its foliage, which was still basking in the final rays. At the end of the avenue the sunset was gloriously bowing like an arch of triumph decked out with celestial flags of gold and green.

In the neighboring window, heads were absorbed in reading with familiar solemnity. Walking over to Lepré, Madeleine felt the appeased sweetness of all these things mellow her heart, half open it, make it languish, and she held back her tears.

He, however, more handsome tonight and more charming, displayed sensitive kindness such as he had never exhibited to her before. Then they had an earnest conversation, and now she first discovered how sublime his intelligence was. If he was not popular socially, it was precisely because the truths he was seeking lay beyond the visual horizon of intelligent people and because the truths of high minds are ridiculous errors down here.

His goodness, incidentally, sometimes lent them an enchanting poetry the way the sun gracefully colors the high summits. And he was so genial with her, he acted so grateful for her goodness that, feeling she had never loved him this much and abandoning all hope of his requiting her love, she suddenly and joyously envisaged the prospect of a purely friendly intimacy that would enable her to see him every day; she inventively and joyfully revealed the plan to him.

He, however, said that he was very busy and could hardly spare more than one day every two weeks. She had told him enough to make him understand she loved him—had he wanted to understand. And had he, timid as he was, felt a particle of love for her, he would have come up with even negligible words of friendship. Her sickly gaze was focused so

intently on him that she would have promptly made out those words and greedily feasted on them.

She wanted to stop Lepré, who kept talking about his demanding agenda, his crowded life, but suddenly her gaze plunged so deep into her adversary's heart that it could have plunged into the infinite horizon of the sky that stretched out before her, and she felt the futility of words. She held her tongue, then she said:
"Yes, I understand, you're very busy."

And at the end of the evening, when they were parting, he said:
"May I call on you to say goodbye?"
And she gently replied: "No, my friend, I'm somewhat busy; I think we should leave things as they are."

She waited for a word; he did not utter it, and she said:
"Goodbye."

Then she waited for a letter, in vain. So she wrote him that it was preferable for her to be frank, that she may have led him to believe she liked him, that this was not the case, that she would rather not see him as often as she had requested with imprudent friendliness.

He replied that he had never really believed in anything more than her friendship, for which she was famous, and which he had never meant to abuse to the point of coming so often and bothering her.

Then she wrote him that she loved him, that she would never love anyone but him. He replied that she must be joking.

She stopped writing to him, but not, at first, thinking about him. Then that also stopped. Two years later, weighed down by her widowhood, she married the Duke de Mortagne, who was handsome and witty and who, until Madeleine's death—for over forty years, that is—filled her life with a glory and affection that she never failed to appreciate.

The end

