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MANON LESCAUT

by

Abbé Prévost

I

Why did he love her? Curious fool, be still!
Is human love the fruit of human will?
BYRON.

Just about six months before my departure for Spain, I first met the Chevalier des Grieux. Though I rarely quitted my retreat, still the interest I felt in my child's welfare induced me occasionally to undertake short journeys, which, however, I took good care to abridge as much as possible.

I was one day returning from Rouen, where I had been, at her request, to attend a cause then pending before the Parliament of Normandy, respecting an inheritance to which I had claims derived from my maternal grandfather. Having taken the road by Evreux, where I slept the first night, I on the following day, about dinner-time, reached Passy, a distance of five or six leagues. I was amazed, on entering this quiet town, to see all the inhabitants in commotion. They were pouring from their houses in crowds, towards the gate of a small inn, immediately before which two covered vans were drawn up. Their horses still in harness, and reeking from fatigue and heat, showed that the cortege had only just arrived. I stopped for a moment to learn the cause of the tumult, but could gain little information from the curious

mob as they rushed by, heedless of my enquiries, and hastening impatiently towards the inn in the utmost confusion. At length an archer of the civic guard, wearing his bandolier, and carrying a carbine on his shoulder, appeared at the gate; so, beckoning him towards me, I begged to know the cause of the uproar. "Nothing, sir," said he, "but a dozen of the frail sisterhood, that I and my comrades are conducting to Havre-de-Grace, whence we are to ship them for America. There are one or two of them pretty enough; and it is that, apparently, which attracts the curiosity of these good people."

I should have passed on, satisfied with this explanation, if my attention had not been arrested by the cries of an old woman, who was coming out of the inn with her hands clasped, and exclaiming:

"A downright barbarity!--A scene to excite horror and compassion!" "What may this mean?" I enquired. "Oh! sir; go into the house yourself," said the woman, "and see if it is not a sight to rend your heart!" Curiosity made me dismount; and leaving my horse to the care of the ostler, I made my way with some difficulty through the crowd, and did indeed behold a scene sufficiently touching.

Among the twelve girls, who were chained together by the waist in two rows, there was one, whose whole air and figure seemed so ill-suited to her present condition, that under other circumstances I should not have hesitated to pronounce her a person of high birth. Her excessive grief, and even the wretchedness of her attire, detracted so little from her surpassing beauty, that at first sight of her I was inspired with a mingled feeling of respect and pity.

She tried, as well as the chain would permit her, to turn herself away, and hide her face from the rude gaze of the spectators. There was

something so unaffected in the effort she made to escape observation, that it could but have sprung from natural and innate modesty alone.

As the six men who escorted the unhappy train were together in the room, I took the chief one aside and asked for information respecting this beautiful girl. All that he could supply was of the most vague kind. "We brought her," he said, "from the Hospital, by order of the lieutenant-general of police. There is no reason to suppose that she was shut up there for good conduct.

"I have questioned her often upon the road; but she persists in refusing even to answer me. Yet, although I received no orders to make any distinction between her and the others, I cannot help treating her differently, for she seems to me somewhat superior to her companions. Yonder is a young man," continued the archer, "who can tell you, better than I can, the cause of her misfortunes. He has followed her from Paris, and has scarcely dried his tears for a single moment. He must be either her brother or her lover."

I turned towards the corner of the room, where this young man was seated. He seemed buried in a profound reverie. Never did I behold a more affecting picture of grief. He was plainly dressed; but one may discover at the first glance a man of birth and education. As I approached him he rose, and there was so refined and noble an expression in his eyes, in his whole countenance, in his every movement, that I felt an involuntary impulse to render him any service in my power. "I am unwilling to intrude upon your sorrows," said I, taking a seat beside him, "but you will, perhaps, gratify the desire I feel to learn something about that beautiful girl, who seems little formed by nature for the miserable condition in which she is

placed."

He answered me candidly, that he could not communicate her history without making himself known, and that he had urgent reasons for preserving his own incognito. "I may, however, tell you this much, for it is no longer a secret to these wretches," he continued, pointing to the guards,--"that I adore her with a passion so ardent and absorbing as to render me the most unhappy of human beings. I tried every means at Paris to effect her liberty. Petitions, artifice, force--all failed. Go where she may, I have resolved to follow her--to the extremity of the world. I shall embark with her and cross to America.

"But think of the brutal inhumanity of these cowardly ruffians," he added, speaking of the guards; "they will not allow me to approach her! I had planned an open attack upon them some leagues from Paris; having secured, as I thought, the aid of four men, who for a considerable sum hired me their services. The traitors, however, left me to execute my scheme single-handed, and decamped with my money. The impossibility of success made me of course abandon the attempt, I then implored of the guards permission to follow in their train, promising them a recompense. The love of money procured their consent; but as they required payment every time I was allowed to speak to her, my purse was speedily emptied; and now that I am utterly penniless, they are barbarous enough to repulse me brutally, whenever I make the slightest attempt to approach her. It is but a moment since, that venturing to do so, in spite of their threats, one of the fellows raised the butt-end of his musket. I am now driven by their exactions to dispose of the miserable horse that has brought me hither, and am preparing to continue the journey on foot."

Although he seemed to recite this story tranquilly enough, I observed the tears start to his eyes as he concluded. This adventure struck me as being not less singular than it was affecting. "I do not press you," said I to him, "to make me the confidant of your secrets; but if I can be of use to you in any way, I gladly tender you my services." "Alas!" replied he, "I see not the slightest ray of hope. I must reconcile myself to my destiny in all its rigour. I shall go to America: there, at least, I may be free to live with her I love. I have written to a friend, who will send me money to Havre-de-Grace. My only difficulty is to get so far, and to supply that poor creature," added he, as he cast a look of sorrow at his mistress, "with some few comforts upon the way." "Well!" said I to him, "I shall relieve you from that difficulty. Here is some money, of which I entreat your acceptance: I am only sorry that I can be of no greater service to you."

I gave him four louis-d'ors without being perceived by the guards; for I thought that if they knew he had this money, they might have raised the price of their concessions. It occurred to me, even, to come to an understanding with them, in order to secure for the young man the privilege of conversing with his mistress, during the rest of the journey to Havre, without hindrance. I beckoned the chief to approach, and made the proposition to him. It seemed to abash the ruffian, in spite of his habitual effrontery. "It is not, sir," said he, in an embarrassed tone, "that we refuse to let him speak to the girl, but he wishes to be always near her, which puts us to inconvenience; and it is just that we should be paid for the trouble he occasions." "Let us see!" said I to him, "what would suffice to prevent you from feeling the inconvenience?" He had the audacity to demand two louis. I gave them to him on the spot. "But have a care," said I to him, "that we

have no foul play: for I shall give the young man my address, in order that he may write to me on his arrival; and be assured that I am not without the power to punish you." It cost me altogether six louis-d'ors.

The graceful manner and heartfelt gratitude with which the young unknown thanked me, confirmed my notion that he was of good birth and merited my kindness. I addressed a few words to his mistress before I left the room. She replied to me with a modesty so gentle and so charming that I could not help making, as I went out, a thousand reflections upon the incomprehensible character of women.

Returned to my retreat, I remained in ignorance of the result of this adventure; and ere two years had passed, it was completely blotted from my recollection, when chance brought me an opportunity of learning all the circumstances from beginning to end.

I arrived at Calais, from London, with my pupil, the Marquis of ----. We lodged, if I remember rightly, at the "Golden Lion," where, for some reason, we were obliged to spend the following day and night. Walking along the streets in the afternoon, I fancied I saw the same young man whom I had formerly met at Passy. He was miserably dressed, and much paler than when I first saw him. He carried on his arm an old portmanteau, having only just arrived in the town. However, there was an expression in his countenance too amiable not to be easily recognised, and which immediately brought his features to my recollection. "Observe that young man," said I to the Marquis; "we must accost him."

His joy was beyond expression when, in his turn, he recognised me.

"Ah, sir!" he cried, kissing my hand, "I have then once again an

opportunity of testifying my eternal gratitude to you!" I enquired of him whence he came. He replied, that he had just arrived, by sea, from Havre, where he had lately landed from America. "You do not seem to be too well off for money," said I to him; "go on to the 'Golden Lion,' where I am lodging; I will join you in a moment."

I returned, in fact, full of impatience to learn the details of his misfortunes, and the circumstances of his voyage to America. I gave him a thousand welcomes, and ordered that they should supply him with everything he wanted. He did not wait to be solicited for the history of his life. "Sir," said he to me, "your conduct is so generous, that I should consider it base ingratitude to maintain any reserve towards you. You shall learn not only my misfortunes and sufferings, but my faults and most culpable weaknesses. I am sure that, even while you blame me, you will not refuse me your sympathy."

I should here inform the reader that I wrote down the story almost immediately after hearing it; and he may, therefore, be assured of the correctness and fidelity of the narrative. I use the word fidelity with reference to the substance of reflections and sentiments, which the young man conveyed in the most graceful language. Here, then, is his story, which in its progress I shall not encumber with a single observation that was not his own.

II

I loved Ophelia! forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.
SHAKESPEARE.

"I was seventeen years old, and was finishing my studies at Amiens, whither my parents, who belonged to one of the first families in Picardy, had sent me. I led a life so studious and well regulated, that my masters pointed to me as a model of conduct for the other scholars. Not that I made any extraordinary efforts to acquire this reputation, but my disposition was naturally tractable and tranquil; my inclinations led me to apply to study; and even the natural dislike I felt for vice was placed to my credit as positive proof of virtue. The successful progress of my studies, my birth, and some external advantages of person, made me a general favourite with the inhabitants of the town.

"I completed my public exercises with such general approbation, that the bishop of the diocese, who was present, proposed to me to enter the church, where I could not fail, he said, to acquire more distinction than in the Order of Malta, for which my parents had destined me. I was already decorated with the Cross, and called the Chevalier des Grieux. The vacation having arrived, I was preparing to return to my father, who had promised to send me soon to the Academy.

"My only regret on quitting Amiens arose from parting with a friend, some years older than myself, to whom I had always been tenderly attached. We had been brought up together; but from the straitened circumstances of his family, he was intended to take orders, and was to remain after me at Amiens to complete the requisite studies for his sacred calling. He had a thousand good qualities. You will recognise in him the very best during the course of my history, and above all, a zeal and fervour of friendship which surpass the most illustrious examples of antiquity. If I had at that time followed his advice, I should have always continued a discreet and happy man. If I had

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