

Transactions:

Transactions
More Passion

-- and more fashion!





Their confidential, friendly chatting began again. Maxime had lighted a cigar. Renée sipped her coffee and even allowed herself a glass of chartreuse. The room grew warmer and became filled with bluish smoke. She ended by setting her elbows on the table and by resting her chin between her two half-closed fists. Under this slight pressure her mouth grew smaller, her cheeks were slightly raised, and her narrow eyes shone more brightly. Thus unsettled, her little face looked adorable, under the stream of golden curls which now fell down upon her eyebrows. Maxime gazed at her through the smoke of his cigar. He found she had an original look. At certain moments he was no longer quite sure as to her sex; the long wrinkle which crossed her forehead, the pouting forwardness of her lips, the undecided air imparted by her shortsightedness, made a tall young man of her; the more so, as her long black satin blouse rose so high that one barely espied a white fatty strip of neck under her chin. She let herself be looked at with a smile, no longer moving her head, but with her eyes lost in vacancy and her lips closed.

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Then suddenly she woke up, and went to look at the mirror, towards which her dreamy eyes had turned since a few moments. She raised herself on tip-toe, and leant her hands on the edge of the mantelshelf to read the signatures, the coarse remarks which had shocked her before supper. She spelt the syllables with some little difficulty, laughed, and then still read on like a schoolboy who is turning over some pages of Piron in his desk.

"'Ernest and Clara'," said she, "and there is a heart underneath, which looks like a funnel. Ah! this is better, 'I love men because I like truffles.' Signed, 'Laure.' I say, Maxime, was it that woman d'Aurigny who wrote that?— Then here are the arms of one of these women, I fancy: a hen smoking a big pipe. And more names, a perfect calendar of saints: 'Victor, Amélie, Alexandre, Édouard, Marguerite, Paquita, Louise, Renée'—Ah, so there's one who is named like me—"

Maxime could see her ardent face in the looking-glass. She raised herself up still more, and her domino, drawn more closely behind, outlined the curve of her figure, the development of her hips. The young fellow's eyes followed the line of the satin which moulded her form like a chemise. He rose up in his turn and threw away his cigar. He was ill at ease and nervous. Something usual and accustomed was lacking about him.

"Ah, here's your name, Maxime," exclaimed Renée. "Listen—I love—"

But he had seated himself on a corner of the divan, almost at the young woman's feet. And after succeeding in taking hold of her hands with a prompt movement, and making her turn away from the looking-glass, he said in a strange voice:

"Pray don't read that."

She struggled, laughing nervously.

"Why not? Am I not your confidante?"

But he insisted in a more husky tone.

"No, no, not this evening."

He was still holding her, and she tried to free herself with little jerks of the wrists. Their eyes had an expression they were not acquainted with; there was a touch of shame in their long, constrained smile. She fell upon her knees at the edge of the divan. They continued struggling although she no longer made an effort to return to the mirror, and was already surrendering herself. And as the young fellow caught her round the body, she said with an embarrassed dying laugh:

"Come, leave me. You are hurting me—"

It was the sole murmur that came from her lips. Amid the profound silence of the room where the gas seemed to shoot up higher, she felt the ground tremble and heard the crash of a Batignolles omnibus which must have been turning the corner of the Boulevard. And it was all over. When they again found themselves, seated side-by-side on the divan, he stammered out, amid their mutual embarrassment:

"Bah! it was bound to happen one day or other."

She said nothing. With an overwhelmed air, she looked at the pattern of the carpet.

"Were you thinking of it?" continued Maxime, stammering more and more. "I wasn't, not at all. I ought to have mistrusted the private room."

But in a deep voice, as if all the middle-class uprightness of the Bérauds Du Châtel had been awakened by this supreme sin:

"What we have just done is infamous," she murmured, sobered, her face aged and very grave.

On the morrow, Renée awoke at a late hour from a heavy dreamless sleep. She had a large fire lighted, and said that she should spend the day in her room. This was her refuge in serious moments. Towards noon, as her husband did not see her come down to lunch, he asked her permission to speak with her a moment. She was already refusing the request, with a tinge of nervousness, when she decided otherwise. On the day before she had sent Saccard Worms's bill, amounting to a hundred and thirty-six thousand francs, a rather high figure, and, no doubt, he wished to indulge in the gallantry of giving her a receipt in person.

A thought came to her of the little curls of the day before; and she mechanically looked in the glass at her hair, which Céleste had knotted in large tresses. Then she ensconced herself in a corner by the fire-place, burying herself in the lace of her dressing-gown. Saccard, whose rooms also were on the first floor, corresponding with his wife's, came to see her in his slippers, in the true style of a husband. He barely set foot in Renée's room once a month, and then only for some delicate pecuniary matter. That morning he had red eyes, and the wan complexion of a man who has not slept. He kissed the young woman's hand gallantly.

"You are not well, my dear?" he said, as he sat down on the other side of the chimney-piece. "A little headache, isn't it? Excuse my coming to worry you with my business rigmaroles, but the matter is somewhat serious."

From one of the pockets of his dressing-gown he drew forth Worms's bill, the glazed paper of which Renée recognised.

Renée took a bath of a few minutes' duration every morning, and this bath filled the dressing-room with moisture, with a perfume of fresh, wet flesh for the whole day. At times an open scent bottle, a piece of soap left out of its dish, lent a dash of something stronger to this rather insipid smell. The young woman liked to remain there, almost in a state of nudity, until noon. The round tent itself was also naked. The pink bath, the pink tables and basins, the muslin of the ceiling and the walls, beneath which one seemed to see pink blood coursing, acquired the roundness of flesh, the curves of bare shoulders and bosoms; and, according to the hour of the day, one would liken the apartment to the snowy skin of a child or to the warm skin of a woman. It was one vast nudity. When Renée left her bath her fair form lent but a little more pink to all the rosy flesh of the room.

It was Maxime who undressed her. He understood that kind of thing, and his nimble hands divined pins, and glided round her waist with innate science. He let down her locks, took off her diamonds, and then dressed her hair for the night. And as he mingled jokes and caresses with his duties of chambermaid and hair-dresser, Renée laughed with a greasy stifled laugh, while the silk of her dress-body rustled and her petticoats were loosened one by one. When she saw herself naked, she blew out the tapers of the candelabrum, caught hold of Maxime round the body and all but carried him into the bedroom.

“**D**EAR madam and . . . friend,

“Thank you for the very spiritual lesson you gave me, exactly one week ago, and I am writing to apologize for not having sent the customary bunch of flowers, or having attempted the pious digestive visit, but that exquisite lesson has led, for your humble servant, to such disagreeable things that I judge it more necessary to become completely . . . the lowest of boors!

“Yes, dear madam, I feel so little enthusiasm for ancient vases in the form of a girl that I resolved, the very day after my expedition to the impossible, to cure myself of their burning memory by a little trip to the land of vulgar reality. (Please understand that I have thrown myself, prostrate, into the most dissolute debauchery!)

“I, madam, am playing, in the midst of the comedy of life, the role of the poor, austere boy, bothered because austere, barely going out except to hang around hospital rooms where he probes every human filth capable of smothering the ideal, which forces him to remain a very wretched materialist.

“I would have been a very good doctor, but I was too poor to be one.

"I am not sending you flowers. (Do you like tuberose?) And I will not pay a digestive call. (Which day can one find you at home without the niece of the innocent sleep, deaf brother-in-law or servant on a spring?) But . . . I do want to see you again.

"Besides, you know, I will break your colorless pot, I will knock it over, your hypocritical widow's funeral urn! Yes, yes, I will strangle that bottle neck stinking of alchemy! Do I have the right to ask for, to demand, the explanation of a Chinese juggling act? I do not love you, and it is very unlikely that I shall end up becoming jealous of a Tunisian jug, only, I swear to you that on Saturday, at around three o'clock, I am going to see if at your house there is any man besides a dotard or a valet.

"Answer me. I am waiting . . . "

Leon Reille

"Sir and dear lover,

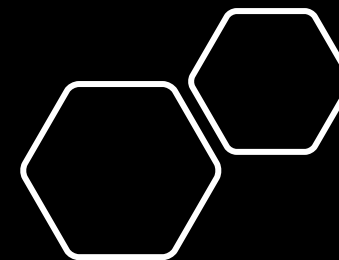
"I am at home on Fridays."⁴

Eliante Donalger

"Sir and . . . dear lover!" murmured Leon Reille confused by the little frosted card. "This woman is mad! What if I didn't go?"

HE arrived at around five o'clock the following Friday, to be more proper, more part of *her world*, and he found, at her house, a surprisingly bourgeois salon. He had entered by a door other than the one in the little garden, it was obvious at once.¹ An ordinary house, green plants with ordinary appearances, ordinary curtains from the Louvre, a maid who retained her country accent, and, in this salon, on the second floor, nondescript people; an old man with white whiskers who resembled a casino diplomat, two very fat ladies, one of them haloed by a hat decorated with an owl, a young girl of twenty trying to pass for ten and dressed in a choirboy's smock, her braided hair thumping against her back, finally Madame Donalger. That is to say Eliante, visiting Madame Donalger.

He no longer recognized this woman at all. She was wearing a tailored suit, black, of course, but ordinary and stained by an awful violet tie with white polka dots. Her hair was done in a very fashionable little fluffy puff, and she had a yellow complexion, without makeup, the ivory complexion of a woman who is suffering . . . or who has had too much fun.



Mademoiselle Marie Chamerot, known as *Missie*, the daughter of a dead sister of this Monsieur Donalger, the naval officer destined never to return, fortunately, was a tall person, taller than Eliante. She seemed endowed with perpetual motion, and she ingenuously broke the china saucers. Every second, she would stand up, pick up an object, a spoon, some sugar, a cup, move the furniture, and one would hear a shattering laugh, as sharp as verjuice, or shattering porcelain. She sneezed from time to time. She shivered with fever and cold under her choirboy's smock, and her braid, thumping against her back, a braid of light chestnut hair, gave her a comic animalness, since she was called *Missie*. She reminded one a bit of a thin, shivering greyhound with its tail between its legs. The worst of it is that she sat down at the piano, without having to be asked, and she sang, in spite of her cold, repeating that she was going to copy Yvette,² by sniffing at the end of each couplet. She emphasized all the smutty parts, and, returning to the Récamier couch from the piano, she lit a cigarette and crossed her legs:

"Do you smoke, dear sir? It's excellent for colds, you

"Why do you want to hurt me?" she said, pulling back her dress with the sudden movement of a schoolgirl who is frightened . . . or having fun. "I haven't broken anything of yours, have I, sir."

"Ah! You haven't broken anything of mine? You have just ruined my life for a week, I went on a binge at exactly that point in the book where I was supposed to study, and I began reading at exactly that point where the most elementary prudence recommends on the contrary that you have a thoroughly good time. . . . Nothing broken! What about my furniture! And my Dieulafoy! and my personal amphora? You call that nothing, do you!" (He furtively slid his hand onto her knee, and squeezed it, passionately.) "And I have debased myself into the bargain, because it is debasing to give the name of the woman you want to the one you don't desire. Moreover, just from the hygienic point of view, it's deplorable. Eliante, why do you write letters beginning with that colossal sentence: *Sir and dear lover!* If you think I'm going to give it back to you! . . . Hum! You have really compromised yourself, madam. I'm going to show that, I assure you, to all my friends in the Latin Quarter. Don't worry, I don't have many. *Sir and dear lover? I am at home on Fridays!* Your letter may not be long, but the devil take me if I can make out what you mean. You aren't my mistress . . ."

She was playing with a little spoon, affectedly stirring a mixture of tea, rum and lemon.

"You thought of giving it back, then," she asked, half

are inside your chest? No, no, keep my letter . . . or burn it, but I think you already have."

"All right, I'll keep it . . . like a marriage vow. You have seduced me, I am the gentleman victim. I am entitled to reparation."

"Certainly! Marry my niece, since you find her charming?"

"Oh! no, I don't like women whose arms and legs are like prison bars. Thank you very much. Besides, raised by you, she must have unusual ideas about *stock pots*."

"Raised by me, sir, she would have been, I am convinced, either a beautiful and decent wife, or a great and witty courtesan. But Monsieur Donalger sent her to school. She will only be a clever monkey, ignorant of the art of being a woman . . . you are perhaps wise not to marry her. You are too . . . young."

"And I assure you, dear Eliante, that I have no desire to get married, neither now nor later." (He pressed a little against her hip under the pretext of reaching the sugar bowl.) "Is it sugar you are looking for, madam?" he shouted very loudly, to provoke a response from the old diplomat.

"Pah!" said he, his head in the ashes. "Our town council

about to go to bed.
"My dear aunt . . . oh my dear, dear aunt . . . I love you so much! I adore you, even . . . kiss me, you aren't angry . . . what's more you're so good, my beautiful dear aunt!"

Standing, nervously, in front of the two women as they kissed, the young man felt like asking for his share. Fortunately, the old diplomat slipped a box of Havana cigars under his nose.

"Ah," said Monsieur Donalger clicking his tongue. "Isn't she amusing, my little niece? She is the joy of our household."

One hour later the two women reappeared all dressed up. Eliante in a dress of spangled black tulle with a satin background, and Missie wearing a violent blue with tufts of daisies, nevertheless a bit babyish for her robust twenty years. To erase the marks of her head cold, she had borrowed her aunt's rice powder and had smeared it on with touching care, putting it everywhere except where it was needed. One eye and her nose were still streaming, she displayed hollow collar bones,

elbows with points like nutcrackers, and plebeian, badly cared-for hands, since they wouldn't fit into Madame Donalger's old gloves, which she insisted on preferring to her own new ones, because they were more *stunning*, from the best store, and she had put her hair up in a loose bun to copy Eliante, who, for her part, had gone back to her original hairstyle, the bonnet of smooth hair, stuck to the temples and setting off her superb eyes like a velvet brim overhanging two jewels. Simply but carefully made-up, slimmed by a sheath dress like a torrent of ink, Eliante had the appearance of a black siren, agile on her sinuous tail, as though more free without feet.

For one minute, Leon and she found themselves together at the bottom of the stairs, Missie having forgotten her fan.

"The young lady your niece seems to love you tenderly?" said the young man gnawing the edge of his hat.

"Oh! she's a good girl, not at all fanciful, only sometimes she weighs heavily on me, the dear! She is noisy, untidy, much too modern for my feeble lazy nature, and I'm afraid I won't see her married before . . ."

"Before you?" interrupted Leon very disturbed.

"Me? I don't want to remarry, my dear child, I have passed the age . . . I have to remain free. I insist on running around at whatever time I choose, going out alone, getting away frequently from where I live, because I'm a little wild, I have to seek adventure according to my capricious nature of a beast brought up on all fours.⁹ Creoles, sir, are not put in diapers and strapped up in *swaddling clothes*, they are left naked wandering on the ground in the very first days of their infancy. A custom of the land. These days, I close myself up in extremely high-necked dresses in order to earn a compensation. Since people realize that I am not a coquette, I can go very

apparently.

“I love you very much, sir and dear Leon, because I have resolved to love you. You know my existence. I am a free recluse, a sort of emancipated nun, a lay priestess. I want only to convert you to my religion, which is the only one. If you hadn't come, I would not have thought to go looking for you, but I understood, when I saw you cross my path like a poor hounded wild animal, that you were destined for me. So I dare to grab hold of you. I call you my lover, and I have no desire to withdraw from you the proof of this complete gift of my person, because I want you to know once and for all, that I don't mean ordinary passion. Other women are very afraid to admit the gift of their person, and with reason, *since they are admitting a state of inability to conceive love*. When I become your mistress in the physical sense of the word, I shall hide myself, I shall be troubled, mainly in front of you, and I shall belong to you only if I want to stop loving you, or get rid of the importunity of your body standing between you and me. Meanwhile I find it pleasant to have you for my master without

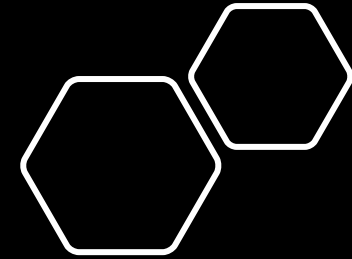
trembles, quite naturally, to think that she will lose everything . . . that I will always get everything before her.

"I wouldn't be the great criminal I am if I weren't absolutely loyal. I propose then that you marry Missie. I will give her, whatever happens, a very appropriate dowry, and she will be my beneficiary if she marries you. A serious doctor (you will surely become a serious doctor) is not obligated to his wife when she brings him a fortune. The man who works seriously, in a couple, even if he didn't earn a cent, is always the protector of his companion and owes her nothing.

"Don't imagine I'm setting a trap for you or that I want to put you to the test. It's more serious.

"If you please me, I want to preserve you like the Tunisian vase, and I have to put you in the shadows of happiness. Happiness is me, and Missie is the curtain. She will screen you . . . from my light! besides, you can easily refuse my offer, only, watch out! Don't try, later on, to obtain through personal intrigues what you have been offered wholeheartedly and loyally, reasonably. I don't forgive tricks that are vulgar.

"Next, don't think that I'm trying to marry off the girl with a stain.



being *myself*.

"Now, just as I had to use intermediaries to obtain an alabaster vase with a rare expression of form, I am obliged to . . . act as go-between to give you the chance to stay close to me, to both be happy through me.

"And I want to settle the deal *before* any other kind of transaction. Generally, women with experience don't have such lucidity, pronounced *loyalty*, in matters of love.

"Think about it! Bills of exchange of this kind should be signed in our blood. I warned you I didn't know how to write, but I know how to sign. I'm not being funny, I'm saying what is, what I think, everything I want. But you are free to not come back.

"I'll expect you on Sunday, around noon, at my rooms, come via the garden. We'll have lunch together.

"Depending on your answer, *I remain your servant for life*, and this phrase is not banal coming from my pen, o my little love friend."

Eliante Donalger

(By return post)

"No! I'm splitting my sides! . . . One would think them the revelations of a clairvoyant:

"You will be a serious doctor . . . you will be the husband of an ugly young person, but rich . . . you will be . . .

"I'll be your lover and that's all there is to it, eh! or I'll teach you what stuff women like you are made of! If I had beaten you that night of our big sport, in front of the pot, you would love me without so much fuss!"

Leon Reille

is she hiding?"

"No symbol, I neither can nor do I want to marry you, so I'm offering you eternity in another form . . . since you're always mixing people up . . . "

"Let's not joke any more! Do you love me, do you, Eliante? Do-you-love-me?"

He put his elbows on the set table and stared at her, forcing himself to stay calm.

Surrounded by the nuptial enchantment of her robe, she seemed very young, and her arms could be seen in the wide sleeves of the gown, her arms whiter against the lining of yellow silk. They were small like those of a child, neither thin, nor chubby, only small, giving rise to a feeling of childishness, and her small powerful hands ran, like separate individuals, carrying skirts trimmed with lace, rummaging around objects, creatures always in a state of agitation. Leon's pupils gradually dilated as he watched her hands dancing, so timidly, always fleeing, and the cruel irony of his mouth melted,¹ in the end, into a real smile of hope.