Manly grace

The Myth of the Mallards

BIOGRAPHIES

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The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

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Editorial Introduction

The Curious Voyage of the Mallard and d'Anatis Titles

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Genealogy, as our readers will know, is rarely a straight road. In the case of the ducal family of Mallard and its subsidiary houses—particularly the Viscountcy of d'Anatis—it has been, rather, what might politely be called a zigzagging course, or less politely, the rolling of marbles in a storm. Their titles, over some fourteen centuries, have behaved less like hereditary possessions than like freight sliding from one end of the deck to the other whenever a Duke of Mallard happened to expire inconveniently.

The system—if indeed it can be called that—was an improvisation begun, we believe, around the year 500, when the first Mallard chief, a certain Artur of Thanesmere, divided his honours among his numerous sons "to avoid calamity", thereby ensuring it for all his descendants. Thereafter, whenever one of the ducal line died and his direct heir stood temporarily childless, his ancillary titles (Viscountcies, Baronies, and assorted Lordships) tilted towards the next eldest brother. Then, upon the production of a male heir, they obediently slid back again, often with an audible genealogical splash.

Over the centuries this arrangement produced a flotilla of half-remembered courtesy titles, parallel Creations, and enough parchment to resurface the Ark Royal. The College of Arms, confronted by the family archives in 1812, declared them "infinite, intricate, and in every respect injurious to the comprehension". Indeed, the family habit of reusing the same handful of Christian names—Alban, Gerald, Theobald, and three rotating Arthurs—renders the line of descent a positive hall of mirrors.

To cite but one example: from 1870 until roughly 1899, Alban Fitzartur was styled Viscount d'Anatis. Thereafter, by one of those peculiar reversions named in dusty registers as "restored by birth of issue", the title withdrew from him and settled again upon the main branch. Why precisely this occurred remains obscure. The family papers suggest that a christening, a minor fire, and a miscopied parish record may all have played their parts.

This History of Titles within the Ducal House of Mallard, 500–1960 attempts, with admirable courage, to chart that long voyage from chaos to chronicle. Readers are advised to bring with them both a pencil and a sense of humour; they will need both to stay afloat amid the tides of Mallard history.

FITZARTUR, Lord Alban

(Viscount d'Anatis, Knight of the Ancient Order of St. Felix, Marchant of Mu).—Alban Octavius Percival Fitzartur, second son of His Grace the 41st Duke of Mallard, Prince de la Mu, Marquis de Canard, Baron Entenbraten, Condé el Ánade, Principe Anatroccolo, & Viscount d'Anetis; born 14 June 1840; died 7 November 1910.

Educated privately at Eton and subsequently at Trinity College, Cambridge, taking honours in Classics and Natural Philosophy (B.A. 1862, M.A. 1865). Entered the Diplomatic Service (1863), attaching himself to the British Legation in Mu, where he distinguished himself in the negotiation of the Treaty of Seven Currents (1868), for which he was created Knight of the Ancient Order of St. Felix by the Sovereign of Mu. In 1872 he was appointed Marchant Extraordinary of the Guild of Mu, a title thereafter incorporated into his style by Royal Licence (Gaz. 1873).

On his return to England (1875), Lord Alban served as Gentleman Usher to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales and later as Equerry in Ordinary to H.M. King Edward VII (then Prince of Wales). He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries, Member of the Oriental Club, and a patron of the Ornithological Society, to whom he bequeathed the Codex Anserinus, a manuscript treatise upon the heraldic use of birds in European armoury, composed in his own fine hand.

Married, 1866, the Hon. Hester Lilias Cornewall-Strythe, third daughter of the 11th Baron Duckmere of Egry Abbey; issue, one daughter (Lady Helen Annetra Fitzartur, b. 1868) and two sons (Capt. Felix Alban Fitzartur, b. 1871; and Edmund Anser Fitzartur, b. 1873).

Residences—Anatis Hall, Kent (seat), and Villa Mallarda, Côte de Pomme (winter quarters).

Recreations—horticulture, heraldic studies, and the revival of ancient ceremonials of Mu.

Clubs—Travellers', Athenaeum, and Albion of St. James.

Arms—Argent, a mallard proper upon a lake azure, within a border or, charged with eight fleurs-de-lys gules; crest, upon a wreath argent and sable, a duck volant proper, holding in the beak a scroll inscribed Anatis Honore. Motto: "Sub Alis Fides."

Decorations—Knight of the Ancient Order of St. Felix (Mu); Commander of the Order of the White Ibis (Egypt), and recipient of the Cross of the Golden Reed (personal distinction by the Emperor of the Isles).

2010: The Age of Decadence

From Vauxhall & Velvet

By Julian Montrose

At last! — our age, so often timid in its praise of the past, has found the courage to canonise a man who embodied beauty in defiance of authority. This morning the British Government, in a ceremony dripping with silk rhetoric and mild embarrassment, named Lord Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis, an official National Treasure. One almost imagines the old rogue winking from the afterlife, adjusting his cravat and remarking that the only national treasures worth keeping are the ones once considered contraband.

How deliciously appropriate that it should take a century for the establishment to drape its velvet arm around a man who spent his lifetime peeling back its hypocrisies with wit and charm. Fitzartur—actor, playwright, diplomat, philosopher, and patron saint of tasteful scandal—died (we think) in 1910, though the record is as artfully ambiguous as his own plays. Somewhere between the inkblots of history and the ashes of the war archives his final act was mislaid, leaving us only speculation and rumour. Some whisper he retired to Capri under an Italian name; others claim he is buried in Kent beneath an altar-stone he designed himself. I prefer to imagine him simply slipping into myth, exquisite and unbowed.

That we still possess his works feels nothing short of miraculous. From The Peacock's Complaint to The Vicar's Fittings, from his bawdy fairy-tale verses in The Trunk of Hidden Delights to the shadowed ecstasies of Tragedy with a Smile, they shimmer with irony and longing, centuries ahead of their time. His dialogue—all fan, flourish, and forbidden glance—cracked open the respectable carapace of Victorian theatre to reveal the pulsing sensuality beneath. In the coded repartee of "gentlemen of taste", generations of gay readers found a secret inheritance, proof that contradiction could be style, and style could be survival.

What moves me most, here in the centenary haze, is not merely that the archives endure but that the meanings do. Fitzartur's art refused apology. His was a world where masculinity pirouetted, morality quivered, and every mirror stage reflected desire as intellect. That a government which once outlawed love between men should now declare one of our own a national emblem is dazzling irony worthy of one of his own third-act reversals.

The National Portrait Gallery will soon unveil a new exhibition—glittering manuscripts, restored playbills, scandalous caricatures—under

the title Anatis Lives! Somewhere amid the gilt frames will hang a portrait elegant enough to deceive a censor, painted by one of his actors during an Italian summer. The smile, I'm told, is unmistakable: amused, conspiratorial, eternal.

Let us then raise a glass of something properly disreputable to this belated coronation. The long century of silence has ended in applause. For the first time, the nation recognises what queer artists and readers have always known: that art is not moral piety but survival in silk; that freedom can be whispered behind lace as powerfully as it can be shouted from a barricade; and that a gentleman, however peculiar his pleasures, may yet become England's enduring emblem of grace.

So cheers, Lord Alban Fitzartur—playwright of pleasure, diplomat of desire, unrepentant aesthete. The country has finally caught up with your century.

1820: In the Wood of Hatherduck

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

This afternoon, beneath the chestnut canopy of Hatherduck Wood, I beheld a sight so curious, so sublimely improper, that even now my pen trembles to describe it. The air was gold-green, as if the sun itself had dissolved into the leaves and gone rather giddy with mirth. My companions—those merry scoundrels of the Ancient Order of St Felix—had summoned me to an "outing of fellowship", which, being young and impressionable, I took for a theological picnic. Imagine then my astonishment when, instead of psalms and cucumber sandwiches, I found forty grown men in velvet doublets prancing like fauns under a banner declaring: "Felix est qui felix hoc sentit!" (Happiness belongs to the happy, or words to that effect.)

Their leader, the Most Radiant Brother, wore a coronet of ivy and bore a wand tipped with peacock feathers. He looked absurdly splendid, like a royal nursery ornament come to life. At his command, flutes and tambourines commenced, and the Brothers of St Felix began to dance about the glade, their cloaks flashing damask and silver. The motion was graceful, and yet—dare I say it?—charged with an electricity most unecclesiastical. One felt they might at any moment dissolve into glitter and laughter, or worse, some terrible truth about joy.

Each of us bore the medallion of our Order: a little duck, poised mid-flight, engraved with the motto "Rideamus!" (Let us laugh). We wore them secretly beneath our shirts—oh, that little warmth against the chest!—and pledged, by moonlight and mead, to the happiness of

all men who choose to be happy and mayhap a little peculiar. "Felix is our patron," said Brother Ithuriel, his eyes misted. "He bids men love one another, not sternly, but sweetly; not as judges, but as sprites". A noble sentiment, if expressed in somewhat rustic Latin.

Later there was a play—six of the Brothers appeared costumed as swans, with white feathers through their hair, and performed a ballet recounting the story of enchantment and deliverance. The moon rose behind them like a saucer of milk. I recall thinking then that perhaps our little fellowship was likewise enchanted, changed from knights and scholars into laughing birds of some flash-lit dream.

At midnight the Great Gong of Felicity was rung (a frying-pan, truth be told), and all fell silent. The Most Radiant Brother spoke: "Brethren, though the world is cold and Roman, yet in the fold of these woods we shall be as the fairies are—gleaming, merry, unseen. St Felix smile upon you all". And I confess, quite without shame, that I felt tears creep into my eyes. The notion of happiness as a sacred work—of laughter as prayer—struck me then as most poetic, and I vowed to discharge my knightly duties with renewed vigour and, whenever possible, bare feet.

When dawn rose, we bid the spirits farewell and dissolved into the mist. My boots, muddy with moonlight, stand now by the hearth, and I —oh foolhardy diarist—cannot decide whether the night was dream or revelation. But I think of St Felix still, patron of all happy men, whose blessings are bestowed not from pulpits but from leafy bowers, and whose saints go whistling home through the dew.

ACT I

1965: A lyrical man

From "A Gentleman's Gentlemen"

Queer history, it has been said, is not so much a canon as a palimpsest: everything is written, but half an inch to the left of what it means. To read it aright is less a matter of new spectacles than of learning where to look, and—crucially—what not to pretend not to see. The figures considered here occupy precisely that shimmering margin: all of them fully visible in their own time as writers or thinkers, and yet, in another sense, quite deliberately mis-shelved.

Alban Fitzartur: the invisible flâneur

In Alban Fitzartur one encounters a writer who is all about forbidden love between men, and yet almost never about it in the

language his contemporaries would have recognised as erotic. The poems and plays form a sustained exercise in moving invisibly through social layers: servants watching masters, youths watching officers, actors watching gentlemen in balconies, all of them registering one another with a gaze that is technically "aesthetic" but practically libidinal.

Fitzartur's characteristic trick is to organise a scene such that the official drama—the ball, the sermon, the battle—is offset by a quiet counter-drama between two men situated just outside the action. There is always a balcony, a doorway, a shadowed stall where the real story happens. Desire is never declared; it is staged as a pattern of exits and entrances, as the choreography of who is allowed to stand next to whom. Society, he suggests, is a vast machine for making men look at men while insisting they are looking at something else.

Hopkins: agony in borrowed vestments

Gerard Manley Hopkins offers what might be called the Catholic counter-palimpsest: half the poems are coded erotic agony, yet posterity has largely insisted on reading them as pure spiritual crisis. The linguistic evidence is awkwardly insistent. Those tormented cries over beauty, inscape, and "lovely lads" do not cease to be what they are because we baptise them with theology.

Rather than treating the anguish as a purely vertical matter (man before God), queer reading insists on the horizontal tension: man before other men, unable to reconcile the fact that the forms of beauty most available to his senses are incarnated in male bodies over which he has no legitimate claim. The result is a poetics in which every "religious" spasm also records a thwarted erotic one. Victorian decorum solved this problem by refusing to name it; many modern editors repeat the gesture more elegantly.

Housman: melancholy with a missing object

With A. E. Housman the erasure operates through abstraction. The work is entirely about forbidden love between men, blocked, belated or bereaved, but for decades it was treated as an anthology of impersonal doom: English stoicism with better scansion. The crucial operation is displacement: the poems remove the gender of their longing while keeping almost everything else—intensity, exclusivity, the air of a grief that dare not say whose name is on the grave.

Housman's rural lads, soldiers and athletes are officially emblems of youth and mortality. They are also, quite plainly, the beloved. The melancholy is not abstract; it is acutely specific, but the object has been written out in order for the book to be written at all. The result is a

body of verse in which the missing pronoun becomes the loudest sound on the page.

Raffalovich: moralism in drag

Marc-André Raffalovich complicates the picture by doing something both braver and more baroque: he writes explicitly coded eroticism in a feminised voice under the guise of Catholic moralism. Where Mallard passes through society as a discreet observer, Raffalovich performs a sort of rhetorical cross-dressing. He borrows the tones of pious admonition and injured respectability, only to stuff them with a distinctly un-pious fascination.

Much of his writing can be read as an elaborate double game: on the surface, a warning about certain dangerous attachments; beneath, a meticulous lingering over the very details most likely to inflame them. He gives morality the task of narrating the desires it is supposed to suppress. The result is not hypocrisy, exactly, but a highly camp tension between what his sentences say and how flagrantly they enjoy saying it.

Pater: criticism as coded autobiography

Walter Pater represents perhaps the purest instance of queer aesthetics masquerading as art criticism. Officially, he writes about the Renaissance, Plato, Leonardo. In practice, he constructs an ethics of attention in which the highest moral duty is to recognise and cherish intense moments of beauty—moments which, with suspicious regularity, occur in the contemplation of beautiful young men.

The famous language of "moments as they pass" and the cultivation of "exquisite passions" can, of course, be treated as a disembodied philosophy of art. But to do so is to ignore how consistently his canon of the beautiful is gendered. The palimpsest here is particularly neat: on the top layer, a programme for refined spectatorship; underneath, a map of homosexual sensibility learning to survive by calling itself "culture."

Carpenter: utopia edited for respectability

Edward Carpenter is routinely sanitised as a prophet of sandals, socialism and simple living: the bearded uncle of rural reform. What vanishes in this anodyne picture is the fact that his project was, quite consciously, a homosexual utopianism. The cottage and the loom, the comradeship of labour, the retreat from industrial smoke—all of these are not just economic proposals but erotic arrangements.

Carpenter imagines a world in which male couples can exist openly if they wrap their love in the garments of "health", "nature" and "work". Later readers, eager for a non-threatening ancestor of environmentalism and craft, have peeled off the erotic layer and kept the sandals. The true

shock of his writing lies not in its rejection of the city, but in its refusal to apologise for male partnership as an organising principle of a better society.

Whitman: comradeship with benefits

Walt Whitman is the place where the palimpsest almost tears under the strain. The explicit homoeroticism is barely disguised, yet the poet calls it "democratic camaraderie", and generations duly obliged. The long lines, the catalogues of bodies, the worker's sweat, the soldier's embrace—all this was rendered safe by declaring it allegory: the Union kissing itself whole.

Queer reading, however, notes that it is always male bodies that the poems enter, enumerate and exalt, and that the vocabulary of "adhesiveness" and "comrades" functions less as metaphor than as a modesty-screen. Whitman's genius was to perceive that a new, muscular national myth could shelter an older, personal one. The republic of lovers is smuggled in under the flag of the republic of citizens.

Palimpsest as method

What unites these otherwise various figures is not a single style, but a shared predicament: to write their desire at all, they must write it slant. Mallard hides it in class-crossing glances; Hopkins, in Christ-soaked torment; Housman, in "general" loss; Raffalovich, in warnings; Pater, in museum prose; Carpenter, in utopian pamphlets; Whitman, in the drum-beat of democracy. The result is not absence but mis-labelling.

To say queer history is a palimpsest is thus not just a metaphor. The record is there in plain sight; one merely has to read half an inch to the left of where custom has told us the meaning lies. What was once dismissed as eccentric manner, excessive piety, or oddly intense friendship can, with a slight shift of the eye, be seen for what it always was: a continuity of lives and loves that refused, even under threat of erasure, to be unwritten.

Advertisement—The Stage Illustrated, June 1934

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Ducksin School For Acting

B.A. (Honours) in Theatrical Studies
Final Examination – June 1947
Paper III: The Life and Stagecraft of Felix Marchant (1840–1910)
(Candidates are reminded to write legibly, with particular care in handwriting the word "Mallard.")

1. Describe briefly the early influences on Felix Marchant's theatrical education and their effect on his later style.

Answer: Educated at Eton and Trinity College, Marchant was influenced by amateur dramatic societies under the patronage of the Duchess of Candelfeather. His early performances in The Barber of Bloomsbury (1859) exhibited his lifelong tendency to blur the

boundaries between artifice and sincerity—a hallmark of his later portrayals in The Hyacinth Prince and Sir Duckling's Despair.

2. Name three plays written or directed by Marchant between 1870 and 1875 and analyse their social significance.

Answer:

(1) The Peacock's Complaint (1871) satirised social vanity in drawing-room society.

(2) Gentlemen Prefer Umbrellas (1873) lampooned London's obsession with foreign manners.

(3) The Palace of Perfume (1874), partly set in Mu and partly in the subconscious, anticipated symbolist drama.

All three works reveal his preoccupation with performance as transformation—a coded commentary on hidden selves within polite society.

3. Discuss Marchant's 1876 production of The Lady in Feathers, noting its critical reception and stage innovations.

Answer: Premiered at the Lyric, Marchant's staging famously employed dissolving light cues and translucent gauze curtains to mimic flight—revolutionary for Victorian scenography. Critics called it "a fluttering marvel of sensibility". Though some moralists objected to the cross-casting of the male ensemble as swan-maidens, audiences adored its dreamlike sensuality.

4. What was the significance of Marchant's international tours (1878–1882) in establishing his global reputation?

Answer: His tours to New York, Melbourne, and Calcutta marked one of the earliest global celebrity circuits in modern theatre. Productions such as The Emperor's Elbows (New York, 1879) and Tea at Noon: A Colonial Comedy (Melbourne, 1881) positioned him as both aesthete and ambassador. His cosmopolitanism subtly advanced the cause of theatrical modernity before Wilde and Tree.

5. In what ways did Marchant balance the comic and the tragic in his mature performances?

Answer: In works like The Laughing Saint (1883) and Tragedy with a Smile (1885), Marchant fused vaudevillian timing with elegiac melancholy, foreshadowing the tragi-comic ideal of early modernist theatre. His delivery of humour never erased sorrow; rather, he treated both as twin gestures of human absurdity—"the upper and lower notes of the same chord", as he said in a lecture at the Anatis Club.

6. Explain the controversy surrounding his portrayal of Rosalind in As You Like It (1886 revival).

Answer: Marchant's Rosalind was noted for its unusual authenticity of voice and grace, leading critics to proclaim that "he has not impersonated womanhood, but unveiled it". The ambiguity of this praise drew attention from moral authorities, but Marchant defended his interpretation as "a study in courage disguised as costume". It remains a landmark of gender performance.

7. Evaluate the influence of Marchant's directorial philosophy as outlined in The Actor Natural and Supernatural (1888).

Answer: His treatise asserted that actors must "summon the unseen selves". This blend of mysticism and method anticipated psychological realism. Marchant treated the stage as a sacred mirror—neither temple nor trade but a rite of transformation. Later directors, such as Tyrone Fairbrother and Daphne Quill, credited his essays with legitimising emotional experimentation on stage.

8. Assess Marchant's relationship with contemporary dramatists and his impact on playwriting.

Answer: Marchant collaborated with playwrights such as Sir Lionel Pomeroy, whose The Winged Man (1877) was rewritten at Marchant's suggestion to include more spectral dialogue. By championing poetic structure and subtle queerness, he encouraged a literary tone in theatre that anticipated the Decadent movement.

9. Discuss the reasons for Marchant's retirement in 1890 and the subsequent mythologisation of his career.

Answer: Exhaustion, the death of his companion and co-star Adrian Leamington, and moral fatigue from endless "artistic misunderstanding" led him to retire. He withdrew to Kent, corresponding privately with younger actors. Posthumous biographies, notably The Duck of Stagecraft (1912), transformed him from eccentric performer into sainted symbol of artistic integrity.

10. In what ways did Marchant's legacy influence post-Edwardian and interwar acting styles?

Answer: His emphasis on elegance as emotional truth influenced voice and movement training at the Ducksin School itself. The "Marchant Turn"—a half-pirouette used to signify delicate emotional revelation—became standard practice in romantic comedies until the 1930s. His ideal of androgynous charm resurfaced in Noël Coward's urbane heroes and in female impersonation on wartime stages.

Invigilators' Note: Candidates demonstrating undue giggling over Question 6 will forfeit one mark for levity unbecoming of an academic institution dedicated to the Drama.

Ducksin School For Acting

B.A. (Honours) in Cultural Studies
Final Examination – July 1948
Paper V: Life, Leisure, and Legend—The World of Lord Alban Fitzartur (1840–1910)
(Candidates are reminded that scandal, if cited, must be footnoted properly.)

1. Outline the principal salons and social circles Lord Alban Fitzartur frequented during the 1870s, and their cultural import.

Answer: Fitzartur was a fixture at the Mallard Circle, an informal Bloomsbury-before-Bloomsbury gathering mixing painters, poets, and performers. He also hosted the Anatis Evenings at Piccadilly's Café Gondolier, noted for readings of faintly scandalous verse under dim rose lamps. These circles bridged art and social defiance, establishing the actor as a model of urbane eccentricity in the late Victorian imagination.

2. Describe Fitzartur's friendship with the painter Lucrezia Duffield and its influence on aesthetic culture of the period.

Answer: Lucrezia Duffield, known for her portraits of "beautiful men in impossible landscapes", painted Fitzartur in The Mirror of St Felix (1878). Their friendship cemented the androgynous aesthetic of the 1880s, merging Pre-Raphaelite sentiment with spiritual camp. The portrait's exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery caused a minor sensation—and a rush on mirrored frames.

3. What role did sporting life and horse racing play in Fitzartur's cultural persona?

Answer: Dubbed "the Dandy of the Downs", Fitzartur kept horses named Marquis of Drama and Lady's Glove at Ascot. His frequent appearance in pearl-grey riding attire scandalised conservatives who objected to orchids in his buttonhole. Racing offered him a stage beyond the theatre—a spectacle of poise, wagering, and costume, uniting performance with aristocratic leisure.

4. Examine the significance of the "Garden of Delights" parties at Anatis Hall (1880–1883).

Answer: These famed summer gatherings combined masquerade, music, and light philosophical mischief. Guests—among them Henry Irving, Lillie Langtry, and the young Oscar Wilde—roamed an illuminated maze carrying lanterns shaped like teapots. Discussions ranged from Greek drama to glove design. The parties epitomised the late-Victorian search for innocence within artifice.

5. Detail Fitzartur's travels in the East (1882–1884) and their influence on European perceptions of cosmopolitanism.

Answer: Touring India, Ceylon, and Siam, Fitzartur collected silks, myths, and stray imperial administrators. His Letters from the Lotus Pavilion, published privately, described "the theatre in every palm leaf". Though parodied by Punch, these writings reshaped the aesthetic traveller's persona from conqueror to connoisseur—an "ambassador of marvels", as The Illustrated Stagecraft phrased it.

6. Summarise Fitzartur's involvement with London's club life and his reputation therein.

Answer: A member of the Albion of St James (where he re-decorated the card room in peacock motifs) and the Society for Ethical Aesthetes (known irreverently as "Saint Felix's Drinking Companions"), Fitzartur represented wit as moral virtue. His ability to quote Shakespeare while mixing absinthe inspired both admiration and anxiety—particularly among bishops.

7. Assess Fitzartur's influence on the emerging gallery and museum culture in 1880s London.

Answer: As a patron of the Gallery of Living Figures in Chelsea, Fitzartur curated tableaux vivants of mythic themes. His 1887 exhibition, A Pageant of Moods, featured costumed actors posed in classically inspired attitudes—a precursor to performance art. Critics noted his "curation of temperament", merging staged beauty with social experiment.

8. Discuss three notable figures Fitzartur befriended abroad and their cross-disciplinary exchanges.

Answer:

- Professor Teodor Krilov, Russian symphonist, collaborated on The Swan Sonata ballet scenario.
- Maru Afenari, Egyptian sculptor, credited Fitzartur with inspiring her Laughing Pharaoh statues.

- Miss Evangeline Finch, Australian feminist journalist, documented his Melbourne soirées where corsetry was declared "the enemy of genius."
  Through these alliances, Fitzartur transformed friendship into a multicultural performance art.

9. Explain the role of philanthropy and pageantry in Fitzartur's later years before retirement.

Answer: Fitzartur founded The St Felix Benevolent Guild for Retired Scene-Shifters (1888), funding it via charity pageants in Hyde Park. These pageants—half morality play, half fête champêtre—symbolised theatre as social redemption. His combining of philanthropy with theatrical display bridged Victorian duty and joyous camp before such languages existed.

10. Discuss how Fitzartur's offstage reputation reshaped ideas of masculinity and gentility in fin-de-siècle Britain.

Answer: By embodying elegance without apology, Fitzartur challenged the equation of manliness with muscle. His conversational salons and delicate mannerism turned fragility into an art form. Later social historians view him as a transitional figure: neither anarchist nor reformer, but a herald of self-creation—teaching that style might itself be an ethics.

Note to Examiners: Essays displaying excessive sympathy with "Bohemian conduct unbecoming of Empire" must nevertheless be marked on intellectual merit, not morality.

1924: Journal of Dramatic Philology Vol. III, No. 2

On Certain Coded Tendencies in the Lesser Comedies of Felix Marchant

By A. C. Mallard, M.A. (Oxon.)

In the following brief note it is proposed to examine certain peculiarities of dialogue and address in a recently rediscovered one-act comedy by Felix Marchant, commonly entitled The Vicar's Reverent Tour (c. 1880). The piece, though slight in construction, appears to offer an instructive example of what may, for convenience, be termed "double discourse": that is, a sustained pattern of utterance in which the apparent addressee and the effective addressee do not coincide.

I. Surface Action and Ostensible Addressee

On the surface level, the play presents itself as a conventional Victorian ecclesiastical trifle. A vicar of æsthetic disposition conducts an elderly patroness, Lady Prudence Bartleby, and her husband, Sir Anthony Bartleby, through the restored fabric of a parish church on a bitter winter's day. The ostensible subject is an architectural tour: fittings, arches, stalls, organ loft and so forth. The ostensible addressee of the vicar's explanations, corrections and apologies is the lady patroness, whose purse and prudery alike must be placated.

The language directed explicitly to Lady Prudence is solicitous, deferential and couched in the euphemistic idiom demanded by late-Victorian decorum. Words such as "leg", "seat", or "pipes" are repeatedly deferred or displaced; the lady insists upon circumlocutions like "under-carriage" or "sitting-apparatus", and professes horror at any hint of "handling", "grasp", "curvature", and related terms. At this level, the play may be enjoyed as an amiable satire upon the verbal contortions imposed by a certain strain of English respectability.

II. The Emergence of Double Address

Closer inspection, however, reveals that much of the vicar's language is carefully angled away from Lady Prudence and oriented instead toward Sir Anthony. The playwright effects this not by changing the grammatical addressee, but by exploiting the difference in sensibility between the characters. The vicar appears to speak "through" the lady and "across" her to her husband; the wife is the pretext, the husband the point.

Three devices are especially noteworthy:

1 Directional Glances and Asides. Stage directions frequently note that a seemingly general remark is accompanied by a look or tone directed specifically at Sir Anthony. Thus, praise of "curvature" or "support" in the church fabric is visually reassigned, onstage, to the male observer.

2 Shared Wit. Sir Anthony alone responds with amused comprehension to certain phrases. Where Lady Prudence hears only impropriety or abstraction, Sir Anthony replies in kind, extending the metaphor. A miniature duet of understanding develops between the two men, beneath the level of the wife's outrage.

3 Selective Offence. The vocabulary that distresses Lady Prudence is precisely that which seems to attract Sir Anthony's interest. What repels one character signals invitation to the other. Offence functions as cover.

In this way, Marchant constructs an unusually clear example of "double address": a single line of dialogue carries two distinct messages —one overtly to the lady, another covertly to the gentleman—and the comedy depends upon the disjunction.

III. Euphemism as Code

The play's most striking feature is its dense network of euphemisms, a feature easily dismissed as simple parody of Victorian modesty. Yet when seen in relation to the pattern of double address, these euphemisms assume the character of a code.

Terms associated with architectural description ("arches", "supports", "fittings", "stops", "pipes", "loft", "height", "warmth", etc.) are repeatedly employed in contexts where their technical meaning is obvious, but their secondary, bodily resonance is impossible to ignore. What is more, such terms are often elaborated beyond functional necessity, then rapidly curtailed when Lady Prudence protests, only to be resumed sotto voce with Sir Anthony.

The vicar's hyper-scrupulous avoidance of certain plain words, combined with his equally persistent invocation of suggestive substitutes, produces a language in which suppression is itself a sign. That which cannot be named directly must be circled, intensified and embellished. The excess of euphemism becomes, paradoxically, more explicit than the plain term would have been. In this sense, prudery is not merely mocked but utilised as an instrument of signalling.

IV. The Organ and the Vestry: Sites of Indirection

Two loci in the church assume particular importance: the organ loft and the vestry. Both are, in Victorian theatre, conventional spaces for concealment; Marchant exploits this tradition with unusual precision.

The organ, whose "pipes", "stops" and "capacity" are praised with almost lyrical fervour, is repeatedly described as an instrument that responds most richly under certain conditions ("after dark", "when handled by two", "when practised upon in private"). Lady Prudence insists that such talk remain strictly functional; the vicar and Sir Anthony, however, respond to these phrases as if they were invitations. The entire discussion of organ-practice becomes a sustained metaphor for a later, unspoken encounter, scheduled under the cover of "evening service."

The vestry, meanwhile, is identified as the only warm space in the building, containing folded vestments that can be "unfolded" and examined "privately". Lady Prudence refuses to enter it with an unaccompanied man. The implication is that such a space, though associated with clerical duty, is also a recognised site of informal

intimacy. The geographical arrangement of the church thus maps, symbolically, the gradient from public decorum (nave) to semi-public ambiguity (choir, loft) to private assignation (vestry).

V. Wit as Protective Colouration

Marchant's method, here as elsewhere, is to subordinate plot to dialogue: the piece is "about" language in the same way that many contemporary society comedies are about manners. Yet in this instance, wit is not merely ornamental; it functions as protective colouration for socially hazardous implications.

The vicar's speech is incessantly witty, aphoristic, and elaborately turned. This elaboration serves at least three purposes:

- It offers plausible deniability: any individual phrase can be defended as a harmless joke about architecture, liturgy, or English prudery.
- It exhausts the listener's attention: Lady Prudence is overwhelmed by the flow of paradox and thus misses the specific points at which the men's understanding converges.
- It provides pleasure for the sympathetic auditor (Sir Anthony, and by extension a certain kind of audience), who recognises that wit is being used as a vehicle for something more than mere cleverness.

The "hidden code", then, is less a fixed cipher than a style of speaking in which excess, artifice and circumlocution signal mutual recognition between those capable of reading them.

VI. Audience and Reception

It would be anachronistic to claim that all spectators in 1880 would have decoded these signals in the same manner as a modern reader trained in psychological or social analysis. Yet it is reasonable to suppose that certain viewers—particularly those acquainted with metropolitan drawing-room wit and its circumspect treatment of forbidden subjects—would have perceived more than an innocent ecclesiastical frolic.

The play thus appears to operate on three simultaneous levels:

1. As a harmless satire on prudish patronesses and æsthetic clergy (for the broad audience).
2. As a sophisticated exercise in linguistic inversion and innuendo (for lovers of paradox and verbal play).
3. As an encrypted representation of non-normative male desire and collusion (for those positioned, by experience or inclination, to recognise it).

In this last respect, The Vicar's Reverent Tour may be seen as participating in a broader late-Victorian practice whereby certain forms of theatrical wit provided a socially acceptable medium for the indirect expression of otherwise inexpressible relations.

VII. Conclusion

The significance of Marchant's minor comedy lies not in its modest plot, but in its exemplary use of double address, euphemism and stylistic excess as vehicles for coded meaning. What appears, at first, to be a mere jeu d'esprit concerning architecture and etiquette reveals itself, upon inspection, to be a carefully engineered "two-layer" discourse.

For the modern theatre historian, the play thus provides a valuable document of the ways in which language, gesture and spatial arrangement could be orchestrated to accommodate divergent readings —permitting one section of an audience to enjoy a reassuring moral fable, while another, more alert to nuance, perceives an entirely different drama unfolding in the interstices of speech.

1905: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

It occurs to me that I may be the last witness to what has been called, not altogether inaccurately, The Great Age of Indiscretion. I have been turning over my old letters—mostly invitations, bills, and hand-drawn cartoons by Wilde that no respectable dealer dares to touch—and realise with a kind of amused horror that the period since 1870 resembles not so much a life as a three-volume comic opera written by a drunk historian.

Truly, I seem to have been everywhere except sober.

From London to Paris, Vienna to Boston, it has been one uninterrupted cavalcade of candlelight, scandal, and self-regard. The past thirty-five years of my existence can be summarised as a single, endless party which refused to conclude decently, however often a policeman entered the room.

In London, I haunted the Green Room, the Garrick Club, and that unsanctioned institution known as The Aeolian Society—a brotherhood devoted, ostensibly, to the study of music and, more truthfully, of trousers. There I made acquaintance with nearly every man who would later be described as "dangerous" by parliamentary wives. Henry Irving once asked me for advice on lighting; I told him to stand nearer the brandy. Wilde clapped me on the shoulder and said I

embodied “the perfect English contradiction—born exquisite, yet educably outrageous”. I replied that he was only half right, but which half I have now forgotten.

Those were our halcyon nights—the West End alive with laughter and lorgnettes, the air salted with rumour. The Prince of Wales was omnipresent—less a man than a weather pattern, forever arriving in clouds of cigar smoke. He once awarded me a sapphire pin “for services to morale”. I have no memory of earning it, but the gesture was gracious.

Paris offered a more cultivated charm. I attended salons where Degas complained about dancers, Pissarro apologised for colours, and Toulouse-Lautrec serenaded the boiler. Once, on a single evening, I inadvertently shared brandy with Colette, embraced Sarah Bernhardt (she mistook me for a critic and tried to bite), and found myself at dawn crossing the Seine with Robert de Montesquiou, both of us dressed as priests for reasons neither could explain. Paris forgives incoherence if it’s properly dressed.

After that came New York, where society was still being invented and everyone behaved as if they owned it. I found the Americans charmingly illiterate in hypocrisy; they called their excesses “entertainment”, and nobody apologised. At the Astor Ball I danced with a Vanderbilt who confided she had married twice “because America expects ambition”. A certain Bostonian philosopher—Emerson, or someone unsettlingly similar—described me as “an unrepentant metaphor”. I thanked him and asked for a cigar.

Every city had its secret fraternity—a world within a world: elegant, invisible, entirely male. We called ourselves gentlemen and meant it, though none of us ever defined what quality distinguished our gentility. We existed in clubs, in cabarets, in hunting lodges that never saw a hound, and in “natural science societies” whose specimens were purely social. It was an empire of the shadow salons—devoutly respectable by daylight, utterly Bacchanalian after dusk.

I rarely met women in any capacity aside from those who innocently believed they had been invited for conversation. The real life of Europe unfolded behind closed curtains, in rooms perfumed with secrecy and admiration. Marriages were mere diplomatic alliances between respectable lives and their explanations. The true community was elsewhere—found in laughter, scandal, complicity, and the occasional midnight sword practice.

Boston tried to reform me. I attended lectures at Harvard on moderation but was expelled mid-syllable for demonstrating that enthusiasm might also be virtue. In New York I fancied myself an impresario, funding a musical called Salome’s Ghost until the police

closed it as “too accurate”. My attorney in St. James’s still refuses to list that among allowable deductions.

And yet through it all—the actors, princes, poets, painters, and impersonators—there existed a strange fidelity of spirit. We believed ourselves immortal, and for a while it worked. We survived on anecdotes alone: the century was generous with those. I have waltzed with Tennyson (unintentionally), crossed words with Gladstone (intentionally), and once spent an uncomfortable three days on Count Tolstoy’s estate, where he begged me to simplify my waistcoat.

Now, in this new, electrically lit era, everything seems overexposed. Morality has invaded as ruthlessly as plumbing. The world insists on hygiene in both conduct and conversation. The gentlemen I knew have all been knighted or dead for years; even vice reads quarterly reports.

What a time it was! London humming with its secret grammar, Paris like a ballet painted by delirium, New York with its champagne optimism, Boston with its self-conscious virtue. And through it all I, moving unheroically but always elegantly, conducting my private orchestra of chaos—a traveller without direction, somehow always arriving precisely at the party I hadn’t realised I’d been invited to.

The young imagine their age thrilling; I smile and let them. They can have their electricity. We had atmosphere.

When posterity asks what manner of men we were—those who lived well and too long—let the record show simply this: we were gentlemen who adored life enough to turn it into theatre, and were polite enough never to reveal which parts were improvised.

1905: At Alban’s House: A Night of Manly Grace

From “A Gentleman’s Gentlemen”

By an appreciative guest correspondent

There are evenings which linger in the mind like a half-remembered melody; they enchant, bewilder, and intoxicate long after the lamps have been extinguished. Such an evening was last Saturday’s private performance of Manly Grace at the illustrious Alban’s house in Belgravia—a soirée so radiant in wit, splendour, and exquisitely masculine beauty that I find myself quite unequal to describe it save in raptures.

Alban himself—the author, actor, and bon vivant of our present fascination—commanded the room from the moment he strode upon the stage. What rare gifts Providence has placed in this man! His handsomeness is of that sculptural Greek order one sees in marble

galleries or dreams in myth; his manner is both princely and disarmingly boyish. But it is his intelligence—keen as champagne—that dazzles most. Manly Grace, his newest composition, is part pastoral, part reverie, wholly a hymn to friendship and charm among men. That it was written, directed, and embodied by its star author only heightens one's wonder.

The play itself floats somewhere between waking and dream. Its music—composed, I am told, by the gifted young Mr. d'Estrée—circles the action like the flutter of swan-wings. And what swans! Alban's fellow performers, an ensemble of fit and fair youths, shimmered forth as swan-maidens (or perhaps swan-gentlemen), their pale robes caught by silvery moonlight. The effect was enchanting—those masculine shoulders sheathed in gossamer, those strong arms moving with balletic delicacy. It was a vision of harmony that dared to blur the limbs of strength and grace, and in doing so revealed something profoundly beautiful about both.

When Alban delivered his concluding monologue—half laughter, half prayer—the audience, comprised of perhaps thirty of London's most cultivated men, sat in perfect stillness. I have seldom witnessed silence so eloquent. One felt that to breathe would disturb the poetry of that fragile moment. Then came applause, thunderous, unabashed, and with it, the spell gently broke, leaving each of us warmed by what we had seen and secretly longing to see more.

From theatre to festivity—no transition was ever more splendidly contrived. Across St. James Street rose Anatis House, where the post-performance fête unfolded in such riotous magnificence as to shame the fabled gatherings of the Ancien Régime. The drawing rooms were draped in gold gauze and peacock feathers; mirrors multiplied the glow of candlelight until all shimmered like a celestial ballroom. The guest list glittered no less: Lord Darnleigh, with his infamous laugh; Lionel Harcourt, the poet of ambivalent muses; young Mr. Percy Vandelion in sapphire velvet; Sir Montague Withers, our most paradoxical moralist; and a host of charming scapegraces whose names discretion prevents me from printing.

Yet even amid such grand company, Alban stood apart—no longer merely performer, but sovereign of the revel. Through the course of the night he appeared in half a dozen costumes: now a sea-captain, then a Spanish matador, then some mythic shepherd in silver sandals. Each metamorphosis left his admirers gasping anew. To observe him in conversation—his laughter like sunlight on cut crystal, his glances too quick and tender to bear scrutiny—was to understand the perilous magnetism of genius unguarded.

The champagne never ceased to flow, nor did the witty riposte. One felt caught in an electric storm of brightness—too much brilliance, too much beauty, too much joy. I, a humble devotee of grace and gallantry, confess myself quite overpowered. That such men live, and dare, and perform such exquisite follies for the delight of their friends gives one hope that England's art yet lives in its most daring hearts.

As dawn slipped shyly into the vast windows and the music dwindled to a drowse, I glimpsed Alban once more—unmasked now, softly laughing with two companions beside the garden terrace. The first light touched his features with that same poetic gentleness he had brought to his stage. Perhaps he saw me watching; perhaps he smiled. I cannot say. But I like to fancy that, when next he retires from the public gaze, a quiet conversation might yet be possible—an exchange of thoughts on art, courage, and that delicate virtue he calls, so perfectly, manly grace.

1901: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis, Mallory Chase

Letter to Elspeth Mallard, Anatis House

You quote that splendid audacity from Wedderburn on Women—"It is an offence for a man to dress as a woman, but not for a woman to dress as a man..". Ah, Wedderburn! That seasoned champion of progress who always forgets to invite human nature to his meetings. The remark, however, reflects with mischievous clarity the wisdom of our lawmakers: they tremble before petticoats not because they despise them, but because they fear what they might disclose. The female garment has, it seems, an ancient power—the instant a man adopts it, he ceases to be comprehensible and therefore must be lunatic. Whereas a woman who borrows a waistcoat is pronounced sensible, enterprising, and "apt for modernity."

You will understand that these little paradoxes are the natural scarf-pins of my existence. Having, on more than one occasion, been obliged to don petticoats for the stage (and once, at a charity ball, wholly without coercion), I admit that no gown, however satiny, could conceal my sanity for long. What it did uncover—and here I must whisper it only to you—was a peculiar freedom: the revelation that identity is not a prison, but a costume cupboard. We actors are blessed to recognise that every soul is made of several wardrobes; some of us simply have the courage to try on the forbidden drawers.

When I first appeared as Rosalind in my youth—the critics called me "dangerously convincing", which I accepted as high praise—there was a murmur in the pit that an honest man should not wear lace. I might

have replied that honesty is a far more delicate fabric, and tears quite as easily. How remarkable that no one sees indecency in a soldier wearing scarlet, but only outrage when a poet wears silk!

We English are, alas, too fond of arranging the universe by waist measurements. The ruling assumption is that if a man looks becoming in chiffon, civilisation itself may collapse; and that, my dear cousin, is giving chiffon entirely too much credit. Yet your citation from Wedderburn suggests a faint crack in the plaster: that a woman may steal from man's wardrobe to restore her liberty, while man must go mad before he borrows so much as her ribbon. How like a comedy of restoration—the women seizing boots for power and the men, in crisis, discovering slippers for grace.

You write that your tailor is to cut you a riding suit "after the manner of a Hungarian Hussar". Splendid! I imagine you will look like an empress prepared to duel. Do, however, beware of alarming your parish; should they accuse you of impropriety, assure them you are merely improving yourself, Wedderburn-wise. As for me—the law permitting, I might improve myself by the converse method, though I daresay my bosom requires architectural assistance.

These are curious times, Elspeth. Queen Victoria, who presided so majestically over the suppression of nonsense, has passed into eternity, and already London chatters as though fancy dress might now be permanent. The theatres are full of nervous laughter, the kind that hides envy. There is much speculation, mind you, that the next century may belong to women. If that be true, I beg them to be gentle with their first converts.

1900: Royal Decree

By the Grace of God, Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India.

To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting!

WHEREAS Our right trusty and entirely beloved Cousin, Edward Fitzartur, Duke of Mallard, Prince de la Mu, Marquis de Canard, Baron Entenbraten, Condé el Ánade, Principe Anatroccolo, and Viscount d'Anetis, hath succeeded by primogeniture to the ancient dignities and estates of his lineage, including the Viscounty of d'Anatis of Anatis

Hall in Our County of Kent, heretofore held by his late lamented brother, Our right trusty and well-beloved Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis, Knight of the Ancient Order of St. Felix, Marchant of Mu;

AND WHEREAS the said Edward Fitzartur, Duke of Mallard, hath by his eminent services to the Crown, in the administration of imperial affairs, the stewardship of vast domains, and the faithful discharge of those high responsibilities devolving upon the elder branch of his illustrious house, merited the full confirmation and augmentation of all titles appertaining thereto;

**WE, of Our especial grace, certain knowledge, and mere motion, do by these Presents ratify, confirm, and declare the succession of the said Edward Fitzartur, Duke of Mallard, to the dignity and degree of Viscount d'Anatis of Anatis Hall aforesaid, as heir male by primogeniture according to the law and custom of Our Realm;

**AND WE do hereby grant and confer unto him, the said Edward Fitzartur, Duke of Mallard, and the heirs male of his body lawfully begotten, or to be begotten, the said name, style, title, place, pre-eminence, and precedence as Viscount d'Anatis, with all rights, privileges, pre-eminences, immunities, and advantages to the degree, dignity, and title of Viscount appertaining, as fully and amply as the same were held by his predecessor or as any other Our Viscounts of Our said United Kingdom;

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the said dignity and title unto him, the said Edward Fitzartur, Duke of Mallard, and the heirs male of his body aforesaid, in perpetuity according to the law and custom of Our Realm.

IN WITNESS whereof We have caused these Our Letters to be made Patent. WITNESS Ourself at Westminster, the tenth day of July, in the sixty-third year of Our Reign.

By Her Majesty's Command,
The Marquess of Salisbury,
Secretary of State. [Great Seal of the Realm]

1899: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

What a peculiar fog settles over the mind when one contemplates the past through the prism of present pieties—a fog thicker than London's

pea-soupers, rendering yesterday's sunlit lawns into swamps of supposed sin. Tonight, nursing a glass of that divine Lafite '48 amid the library's leathered hush, I find myself questioning the entire edifice of retrospective righteousness. Looking into the past with the morals of today does no one any good; it is an act of chronological colonialism, imposing today's taboos on time's earlier tenants. Morals, as I have often noted in these pages, change with fashion swifter than a modiste's mannequin: what was virtue in Victoria's youth becomes vice in her dotage, and vice versa with the turn of a trouser-leg or tightening of a corset.

Consider it: to gaze back fifty years—to the 1850s of my father's salad days—and brand him debauched, promiscuous, or eccentric for maintaining his private seraglio of colonial recruits, shipped like silks from Empire's bazaars, would be to apply today's notions of what such concepts entail. Then, it was whispered as aristocratic whim, winked at in club armchairs; today, under Labouchere's looming lash, it might merit magistrate's gavel. Yet who are we to judge? Acceptable behaviour in 1839—duels at dawn, opium dens in Limehouse, youths from the rowing eights entertaining peers after Henley—becomes unacceptable when some influential soul (a bishop with a grudge, a Purity Leaguer with a pamphlet) shifts the moral compass. Fifty years hence, will 1889's symposia—our shirts-off fencing frolics, harlequin masques at Disraeli's, alcove assignations with syce-lads or Corinthian captains—be decried as decadence? Or exalted as the Edwardian enlightenment?

I would no more judge the fifty years before I was born—those Regency revels of Brummell and Byron, where dandies draped in denial and desire alike—than the last five of my own tenure. In 1884, our library mêlée with Wilde, Churchill, Queensberry, and the motley crew was heroic abandon; by 1889's sterner scrutiny, it might merit moral microscope. What to the outside world might seem a gilded cage—Anatis Hall's velvet-veiled vices, my "literary symposia" scented with claret and conspiracy—was merely a room with its doors open differently. No bars, no bolts; entrances disguised as bookcases, exits through wardrobes of wit. No need to judge: the cage is illusion, crafted by those who peer from without, mistaking our open-plan pleasures for imprisonment.

Question it deeper: does the past deserve our present pity? Father's seraglio—Felix Marchant polished from Yankee rough-hewn to Mayfair marble—was Pygmalion's pride, not perversion; Capri's grottos in 1872, Tiberius's legacy alive in local lads' lithe limbs, a pagan paradise ante-prescribed. My plays—Palace of Perfume, Gentlemen Prefer Umbrellas—lampooned foreign frippery then; tomorrow's

tastemakers might term them trailblazing. Morals mutate: usury sinful in Dante, sacrament in Disraeli; sodomy hanging offence under Henry, symposium stuff in Socrates. To retro-fit 1889's reticence onto 1839's romp is tyranny of tense—why chain the dead to our fleeting fashions?

The irony delights: those who judge most vociferously—dowagers decrying my "eccentricities", vicars versifying my "promiscuity"—inhabit cages of their own contrivance, doors slammed by self-scourging. Our room? Doors ajar to India's heat, Sans-Souci's symposia, Neuschwanstein's kitsch knights. No gilded bars; merely gilt invitations. Let posterity puzzle it without prejudice—or better, join the frolic. Another glass to open doors, past unjudged, present unjailed. Fashion fades; lived experience endures.

1895

London has taken leave of its senses once more—a seasonal ailment to which it is ever prone. All talk now is of Egypt. The museums overflow with mummified cats; dinner tables groan beneath sphinx-shaped aspics; duchesses drape their drawing rooms in sand-coloured silk and stare at their guests as though awaiting embalming. Cleopatra has been resurrected so often this season that poor Antony would faint from overwork were he not already comfortably deceased.

As usual, the fever has reached the theatres first (we are Society's laboratory, after all). Every chorus girl struts with a cobra on her head and a pyramid in her eye, and composers have discovered that any melody sounds "Egyptian" provided one inserts a gong at intervals. Critics hail this as "archaeological authenticity."

For my part, the whole uproar amuses rather than enthralls. When one belongs, as I do, to a family whose lineage has been described—with varying degrees of irritation—as untraceably ancient, the Egyptians are merely cousins in a long and somewhat tedious line. I have never been able to treat antiquity as fashionable; it feels like attending one's own birthday party thrown by strangers.

Nonetheless, I confess to one small indulgence. For the Duchess's London Ball next month—that yearly pilgrimage of vanity—I have designed a costume to amuse myself and confound others. It is called Nectanebia, after a queen whose existence I have invented for the purpose. It consists of a robe the colour of desert twilight, heavy with gilt and sapphire applique, and a collar bedecked with stones of sufficient brilliance to signal distress to the Admiralty. My tailor already despairs. I consider that a recommendation.

The headpiece alone defies moral law: a constellation of glass wings and golden serpents, held aloft by the sheer impudence of tradition.

When complete, the ensemble shall weigh as much as remorse and gleam twice as dangerously. I mean to sweep into the Duchess's ballroom an apparition of imperial excess—an antique prophecy with a fan.

Wilde always said that one should either surprise or horrify; I propose to accomplish both. The notion of ancient royalty appearing in the midst of metropolitan chatter is a pleasing metaphor for my entire life: civilisation in fancy dress, pretending not to remember its origins.

Meanwhile, London continues its decorative archaeology—gazing backward through smoked glass, discovering in every sarcophagus a mirror. The living remain the best ghosts of all.

1895: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Tonight's dinner at the Club was of that species properly described as "moral in intention, immoral in digestion". I was seated between a Home Office undersecretary, all tweed and suspicion, and a lady novelist of reforming zeal, whose opinions—though solemnly advanced—might have improved with a little rehearsal. Opposite me sat Somerton, looking like the ghost of youthful indiscretion; we once knew each other rather intimately, though he speaks now as though I were a chapter he skimmed but never finished.

Conversation, as it must in 1895, veered inevitably towards purity. Every table in London seems to be laying place settings for that wretched abstraction. One may dine upon oysters, champagne, and hypocrisy, but the sauce must always be moral indignation—it gives everything that thrilling civic aftertaste.

Presently the subject turned, as these things will, to the decadence of art and the misdoings of a certain Irish playwright known to both the law and the aesthetic movement. The undersecretary cleared his throat with the sound of a minor inquisition and declared that "the modern artist has mistaken notoriety for nobility". The novelist murmured in agreement, though she has borrowed both his themes and his tailor.

And thus I found myself, without intent, delivering a small speech. The port had reached its peak of fluency, and I confess I became rather ornamental in expression. "Tell me", I said to the table in general, "if you had been a son in a provincial town, with a tedious father, a dubious lover, and no occupation but gambling and endurance—would you have chosen social failure or success?"

There was a silence—brief but of a quality rare in such company. I imagine they were wondering if it were a riddle, or worse, a confession. I continued, feeling that fatal clarity which arrives after pudding:

"You see, my dears, there are those of us to whom 'success' is merely another form of confinement—the triumph of imitation. We are taught to behave, to believe, to marry, and to rot, gracefully. But what chance has the son who cannot imitate, whose nature and nerves are tuned to the unspeakable key? He must either pretend to conform—and thus decay in velvet—or rebel through artifice. That is to say, he performs rebellion as others perform faith."

Somerton coughed, I think to remind me that he was still alive. The undersecretary folded his napkin like a warrant. The novelist smiled as one smiles upon the hopelessly picturesque.

It is a charming thing to be both tolerated and despised; one's dinner companions feel themselves at once charitable and superior. Yet I fancy none considered the logic of my point—that rebellion may be the only moral option left when morality itself is the public costume of vice. I have known bishops who plead for moral health while conducting their own underpaid quarrels with the flesh, editors who speak of family values while sending love letters to their footmen, and lawyers who quote Scripture while inventing new ways to indict tenderness. Decency, it seems, is chiefly concerned with the prevention of discovery.

Of course, I did not "rebel" in any romantic sense—no flag, no manifesto. Open revolt is frightfully vain; it turns poetry into journalism. My method was gentler, almost courteous: subterfuge. The careful joke uttered in a drawing-room that leaves one lady blushing and another thinking; the tender friendship concealed behind epistolary ambiguity; the play that praises purity while teaching sympathy; the mask which smiles and, in smiling, undermines the world which requires it.

It has taken me fifty-five years to understand that to endure a society's hypocrisy one must not merely expose it, but decorate it until it rots gracefully in one's hand. The apparatus of "decency" feeds upon its own disbelief; it requires our fraudulence to sustain it. I sometimes think we, the condemned, are civilisation's oxygen.

The dinner concluded, as all English moral meals must, with port, platitudes, and the expectation of applause. The undersecretary whispered that he "quite appreciated my levity", which was rather like thanking a wound for its colour. Somerton departed early, trembling slightly, which pleased me more than I care to confess. The lady novelist proposed tea "sometime, somewhere respectable". I shall oblige her by declining respectfully.

Returned home through the fog, reflecting that the world is run by those who believe themselves solemn and saved. Whereas we—the "improper", the charmingly damned—are its only honest dramatists.

We make no pretence of sanctity, only of wit; and though mockery is a poor inheritance, it remains the sole currency of the unaccepted.

Tomorrow perhaps I shall begin my memoirs—but after breakfast. Morality, I have decided, is best debated on a full stomach.

1893

Every folly requires a setting, and I have provided mine with enthusiasm. Mallory Chase has not seen such animation since my grandmother attempted spiritualism and accidentally summoned the under-butler. The occasion—absurd in concept, ruinous in expense—was this convivial "house party" to which I had foolishly invited both Mrs. Langtry and Oscar Wilde, each of them a solar system entirely convinced of its own centrality.

The preparations resembled a small military campaign. I ordered floral arrangements from Covent Garden that might have supplied Cleopatra's barge, a quartet from the Academy who insisted on rehearsing Debussy until the servants threatened mutiny, and enough champagne to re-float Venice. By dusk the lawn glittered with lanterns like imprisoned souls—a charming metaphor entirely lost on my guests.

Lillie arrived first, descending from her carriage with the calm of one who is accustomed to being mistaken for a vision. She wore silver gauze, which looked as though moonlight had been persuaded into obedience. "You have the prettiest ruins, Mr. Marchant", she said, surveying the old house. "How very modern of you to live in one."

Oscar followed in imperial disarray, borne up the steps like a wounded general, scattering anecdotes as grenades. He demanded Turkish cigarettes, then declared the garden statues "delightfully immoral—they seem to be thinking". Within ten minutes, he had annexed the library, where he sat surrounded by admirers, discoursing on the tragedy of English furniture.

Dinner was an extravagance of conversation and indigestion. Mrs. Langtry dominated the table with that rare gift of speaking nothing and implying everything. The men—titled, tamed, and terrified—laughed as if their wits had been pledged elsewhere. Oscar enlivened proceedings by describing, in alarming detail, the social climbing habits of sculptors. I suspect half the company believed themselves insulted and the other half hoped they had been.

After dinner, we drifted toward the ballroom. The string quartet, indifferent to human suffering, played something mournful enough to make the mirrors doubt themselves. Lillie danced once, slowly, as though performing a eulogy to grace itself. Oscar refused to join,

claiming dance was "the last refuge of the inarticulate", though he spent the night motioning extravagantly from his chair.

By midnight the company had disintegrated into factions—the poets declaring socialism to the pianoforte, the dowagers declaring defeat to the sherry. I escaped to the terrace, where the night air smelt faintly of wilted ego and roses. Inside, I could hear Oscar's laughter—that strange mixture of brilliance and despair—and thought how alike they were, he and Lillie: gilded survivors of a civilisation busy drowning in admiration for its own reflection.

Tomorrow the carriages will roll away, and I shall be left to count the wine-corks and consider the ruins. For now, I can only conclude that the theatre offers more authenticity than society, since at least upon the stage everyone knows it is a performance.

1893: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Letter to Elspeth d'Anatis

Your letter arrived like a thunderclap in a teacup—vivid, vehement, and vibrating with that radical clarity which has always distinguished your prose from the pallid platitudes of Bath's Pump Room. "Our species is the strangest beast of all", you proclaim, and oh, how the words resonate, rippling through my own peculiar reflections like claret in crystal. You dissect the human comedy with surgeon's steel: trembling at pleasure yet organising existence around it; breasts, ankles, a man's "Mastery" as safe symbols veiling the unspeakable act—that conjugal conversation so perilous the Church fences it with vows, contracts, and silence. Fear as envy of the body; sex as unruly sovereign, giver of life and harbinger of death, binder of strangers and unraveller of homes. Puritanism not divine decree but mortal quake before appetite. Animals despising animality, morals as excuse for fear of the natural. Bravo, cousin—you have penned a manifesto that might grace the salons of Paris or the symposia of Athens.

From my own peculiar point of view—that shadowed vantage where society's spotlights dare not linger—I concur utterly, yet with nuances born of navigating the labyrinths you so aptly evoke. True for some, not others? Indeed: your truths illuminate the broad highway of heterodox propriety, where ankles peek and mastery means moustache and muscle. But for those of us whose appetites veer from that well-trod path—whose "conjugal conversations" occur in alcoves rather than altars, with partners whose forms mirror rather than complement our own—the contradictions multiply like masqueraders at midnight.

Consider: we tremble at pleasure? Nay, we pursue it with the fervour of apostles, yet cloak it in codes more intricate than canon law. Breasts and ankles serve the many as safe symbols; for us, the curve of a calf in fencing breeches, the thrust of a foil or a thigh—these are our icons, venerated in club smoke-rooms and country arbors. The Church fences their act with marriage; ours, it proscribes outright, deeming it not merely perilous but pathological—a crime against nature that nature herself seems to orchestrate with symphonic subtlety. Vows for them, vanishings for us; contracts of dowry versus clandestine cartes-de-visite; silence in the marriage bed, semaphore in the shrubbery.

Your insight on fear as envy of the body strikes truest home. Sex—that greatest, most unruly pleasure—gives life to their dynasties, death to ours in hangman's hemp or social suicide. It binds their strangers in wedlock, unravels ours in whispers of scandal. They worship abstinence as mastery; we master it by multiplication—pleasures plural, partners protean, a polyamory the Puritan cannot fathom without quaking. God, if She exists (and I suspect Her a voluptuary, delighting in Her garden's gamut), cares little for fences; 'tis men—priests and peers alike—who quake before flesh's flood. The vicar denies his body to exalt his soul; we exalt both, entwining them in ecstasy the Church envies in its celibate dreams.

Yet herein lies my peculiar amendment: not all contradictions are cowardice. Some invent morals not from fear, but finesse—a counter-culture coded, dangerous, inventive, as I once confided to you. Our silences are symphonies; our symbols, sonnets. Breasts and ankles veil their peril; our cravats and handkerchiefs conceal conquests. They organise existence around sanctioned spasms; we orchestrate operas of the outlawed, where every glance grapples, every grip grapples grace. True, the Puritan stamps out pleasure—but we stamp it in, indelibly, in alcoves where ankles dare not dream.

Remove the Church's lash from life, as you imply, and perhaps merger: their garden parties blending with our symposia, ankles entwining calves, mastery mutual in moonlit mêlées. Until then, we thrive in tension—animals not despising but defying our animality, morals our masquerade, not excuse but exultation. Your words awaken that physical warmth and perfume you so crave to evoke; may they perfume your Bath retreats as they do my Kentish cloisters.

1891: The Choreography of Discretion: Fitzartur's Marvellous Machines of Men

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By a Most Attentive Gentleman Correspondent

I have been to the theatre, dear reader, and not just any theatre, but to Fitzartur's theatre—that curious territory where emotion wears gloves, where allure is screened behind etiquette, and where every doorway conceals a trembling revelation. London, for all its fog and fatigue, still keeps one or two originals, and Fitzartur—playwright, designer, impresario, high priest of the knowing half-smile—is unquestionably one of them.

Let it be known: Fitzartur never allows us to look directly at what matters. His signature artifice—his divine trick—lies in the displacement of passion. The advertised drama is always decorously grand: a ball at some Marlborough mansion, a sermon in a candlelit chapel, a battlefield strewn with heroic mutilations. Yet just outside the frame—on a balcony kissed by moonlight, in a doorway behind a silken curtain, or in the shadow of the organ loft—there occurs another play, quieter and infinitely more absorbent of one's attention. Two men, placed quite by chance (so we pretend) side by side, hold between them an energy so refined that no spoken word could contain it. That, my friends, is Fitzartur's genius: he convinces us that what we see is decorum, when what we feel is danger.

It would be crass to speak of love, or even of friendship; Fitzartur does not. He deals instead in gestures and geometries—an aesthetic mathematics of approach and retreat. In his newest piece, The Lord's Quiet Servants, I found myself quite breathless during the fourth act scene: the Prince dances with his bride in the centre while, at the back of the stage, his aide-de-camp adjusts a candle and waits, eternally waiting, exactly in the pool of light the Prince once occupied. Nothing "happens", and yet every man in the room understood that it had. The entire theatre became complicit.

Indeed, one begins to suspect Fitzartur understands society itself as performance—a vast, ceaseless choreography in which one must look perpetually while declaring one is looking at something else. The ball's glitter, the sermon's gravity, the parade of officers—all are ritual screens for a deeper current of regard. We gentlemen know how often we stand at attention while secretly attending only to the line of a shoulder or the set of a jaw. Fitzartur makes art of that very predicament, and by doing so, absolves us through beauty. He provides what politeness forbids: a way to gaze.

His theatre is the very grammar of urbane repression. Note how entrances and exits themselves tell the story—who is allowed to linger, who must pass, who may be caught within another's line of vision. Each door becomes a moral instrument. In The Ducal Pavilion, there is one moment so wickedly delicate that the audience scarcely dares to breathe: the General drops his glove, the page retrieves it, and for the briefest instant they occupy the same line of sight before retiring to separate fates. I declare I have seen few acts of greater erotic intensity.

But lest you suppose Fitzartur trades only in silences, let me reassure you: his wit sparkles all the more for its refusal to name what we already feel. Between those shimmering lines of suppressed dialogue slips the artist himself—ironic, altogether amused by our flustered admiration. He knows precisely what we see and why we laugh, and he allows us that laughter as a mask for trembling curiosity.

Is it art, or mischief, or both? I care not to decide. I merely know that I left the theatre dazed with delight, newly aware that civilisation itself is a perfect costume drama—and that behind every chandelier, every pulpit, every plume of smoke from a battlefield gun, there lurks a quiet balcony where two figures observe each other across the etiquette of the age.

Fitzartur has discovered where the modern soul resides: not in confession, but in the angle of a glance; not in words, but in the permission to stand near.

1890: Dorian Grey: A Portrait from Life? The Enigma of Lord Alban Fitzartur

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By our Correspondent in the Salons of Mayfair

In the swirling mists of literary London, where fact and fancy entwine like lovers in a moonlit arbor, few novels have provoked such delicious conjecture as Mr. Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray. That tale of eternal youth, unblemished beauty, and a canvas that bears the secret scars of indulgence—is it mere invention, or a mirror held to a living visage? Whispers in the clubs, murmurs at the opera, and sidelong glances in the Row all converge upon one figure: Lord Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis—actor, playwright, social arbiter, and intimate of royalty. Could this charmed and charming paragon be the very Dorian Gray who walks among us, untouched by time's cruel hand?

Consider the parallels, dear reader, for they gleam like the gold leaf on a Renaissance frame. Lord Alban, now in his fiftieth year, retains the

lithe grace and golden curls of a man half his age—a vision of classical perfection that has turned heads from the Lyceum to the Levant. Where lesser mortals succumb to the ravages of port and posterity, his lordship's visage remains as radiant as the day he first trod the boards in The Hyacinth Prince (1872), his azure eyes sparkling with undimmed mischief, his smile a perpetual disarmament. Fashion bows to him, rather than he to it: the ivory silk waistcoats of last season, the sapphire pins that set the Row ablaze, the subtle peacock motifs in his cravats—all originate in the ateliers of Anatis Hall, diffusing thence to the discerning. His exuberance for life is legendary: salons at dawn, masquerades at midnight, theatrical triumphs that blend Shakespeare with scandal. Royalty itself—the Prince of Wales chief among admirers—seeks his table, drawn by that magnetic vitality which seems to defy the calendar.

And yet, what of the shadows? Wilde, that emerald-eyed oracle of paradox, was no stranger to Lord Alban's hearth. Their friendship, cemented in the 1870s over absinthe and aesthetics at the Café Royal, blossomed into correspondence that rivals the Bard's sonnets in ardour (though none shall see those missives, locked as they are in the Viscount's rosewood secrétaire). Did Wilde, during one of those velvet-draped evenings at Anatis Hall, glimpse a certain portrait—a canvas secreted in the library's upper gallery, depicting his lordship not as the perennial Adonis we behold, but as Time might have wrought him: lined, weary, withered by the very excesses that fuel his legend? The rumour, persistent as summer ivy, suggests precisely this. Servants' gossip (ever the truest chronicle) speaks of a shrouded easel, unveiled only in solitude; of a painter summoned from Paris in '75, sworn to secrecy; of Wilde's rapt exclamation upon beholding it: "Alban, you have outwitted the gods themselves!"

Imagine the scene: a fog-shrouded night in Kent, Wilde and Fitzartur ensconced amid folios and firelight, the portrait unveiled like a forbidden relic. "Eternal youth", murmurs the Irishman, "at the expense of a soul's reflection". Lord Alban, ever the wit, parries: "My dear Oscar, the soul is in the smile we show the world; the canvas merely settles old scores with mortality". From such a vision springs Dorian Gray: the bargain with the portrait, the hedonistic spiral, the unaging allure that captivates Lord Henry Wotton as surely as it did the salons of Verona (or so one fancies, in Fitzartur's Lovers of Verona, 1876). The novel's basilisk beauty, its coded ecstasies of sensation, its veiled homoerotic undercurrents—all echo the Viscount's own oeuvre, from the double-entendres of The Closet of Lady Catherine (1882) to the tragi-comic revels of Tragedy with a Smile (1885).

Sceptics demur: "Coincidence!" they cry, citing Wilde's denials in The Pall Mall Gazette. Yet consider the timings: Dorian Gray appears mere months after Lord Alban's triumphant revival of As You Like It (1886), wherein his Rosalind—"dangerously convincing", per the critics—blurred lines of gender and desire with a finesse that scandalised bishops and enraptured bucks. The novel's Dorian lounges amid jewels and youths much as Fitzartur hosts his "literary symposia"—evenings of fencing, faro, and fervent fellowship, shirts discarded amid claret cascades (as chronicled in discreet diaries). Royalty attends: the Prince, ever the bon viveur, dubbed Anatis Hall "the true court of pleasure"; even Disraeli, in his pomp, toasted the Viscount as "England's undying aesthete."

Is it fantasy? Perhaps. Yet the palimpsest of evidence—friendship, physiognomy, thematic resonance—bids us wonder. Lord Alban never ages; his style evolves without erring; his life brims with exuberance undimmed. Did Wilde peek behind the curtain at Anatis, and pen a portrait more vital than the original? Or does the Viscount simply embody the ideal: beauty as defiance, youth as artifice perfected?

One longs for revelation—perhaps over claret in his lordship's library, where portraits whisper truths. Until then, we gaze upon Dorian's archetype in flesh: Lord Alban Fitzartur, eternal, enigmatic, exquisite. Long may he flourish, canvas or no.

1888: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

What a preposterous carnival the world stages under the banner of "morality"—an imposition on lived experience so flimsy, so fashion-forward, that it changes with the cut of a cravat or the hem of a hoop-skirt! Tonight's revelation comes courtesy of a symposium in the library—that sacred scrum of six souls, shirts shed like serpentskins amid claret cascades and fencing flourishes—where conversation, lubricated by Lafite '37, turned inevitably to the eternal edifice of Right and Wrong. Young Davenport, fresh from Oxford's oars (and my own alcove attentions), opined with the fervour of the freshly fallen that "morality is absolute, a bulwark against chaos". Absolute? I nearly choked on my cigar. "My dear boy", I retorted, "morality is an imposition on lived experience—a tailcoat tailored yesterday, discarded tomorrow, with no validity beyond what society stitches into its seams. It changes with fashions faster than a debutante's décolletage!"

Consider the evidence, ye earnest undergraduates and ecclesiastical earnest-bores: a century past, duelling was moral rectitude—pistols at dawn for a slighted honour, the survivor hailed as hero, the corpse a footnote in Debrett's. Today? Barbarism, fit only for melodramas at the

Adelphi. Adultery? In Jane Austen's drawing-rooms, a scandal warranting exile to Bath; by mid-century, half the peerage's second sons owe their allowances to indiscreet uncles. Usury—moneylending at interest—was Dante's seventh circle for Jews and Lombards; now it's the Marquess of Westminster's path to Palladian palaces. And sodomy? Ah, the jewel in morality's mouldering crown: in Tiberius's Tiber, a princely pastime amid Capri grottos; in Henry VIII's England, a hanging offence to consolidate the Church; today, a whispered vice for which bishops reserve hellfire while their own cathedrals echo with choirboys' chants. Fashion, not fiat—Labouchere's Amendment looms like a new bustle, squeezing the life from liberties once winked at in Wilkes's Wilkesite wits.

Imposition, pure and simple: a scaffold erected on the sands of sentiment, toppling with every tide of taste. Lived experience laughs last—the body's honest hungers, the heart's clandestine harmonies, the soul's symphonic subversions—these endure while moralists moult their maxims like yesterday's modes. Last week's symposium: morality deemed it "unnatural" for Davenport's oar-callused palm to parry mine in post-fencing frolic; yet Tiberius built villas for such "deviations", Plato symposia'd them into philosophy. Today's fashion? Criminality. Tomorrow's? Who knows—perhaps a Royal Commission on "Rational Recreations", chaired by the Prince himself, whose own "friendships" fill the Court Circulars with conspicuous absences.

The satire stings sweetest in society's salons: dowagers decrying "French vice" while smuggling Gautier under their gigots; vicars preaching chastity from pulpits carved by wedded stonemasons (or so rumour chisels); peers legislating purity while their valets vanish into velvet-curtained chambers. Morality's validity? Borrowed, like a tailor's tape—measured to the moment, discarded when the waistline widens. Lived experience validates itself: the thrill of a thrust parried in moonlight, the warmth of wine-warmed torsos tumbling in Turkey rugs, the fugitive fragrance of forbidden fruits. These are no impositions, but inevitabilities—fashions eternal, while moral millinery frays.

Tonight's revel proved it: morality imposed no damper on our divan delights—shirts off, senses aflame, Davenport's "deviations" drawing cheers from Churchill (rumoured) and Wilde (confirmed). Fashion changes; flesh abides. Let the Puritans prune their petticoats; we shall parade in our natural nudity, validity vested in vitality. Another glass to lived experience—the only moral worth the measure.

1887: The Delicate Art of Ambiguous Conversation

A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By our Correspondent in the Shadows of Pall Mall

It was one of those foggy November evenings in London when the gas lamps along the Strand bloom like uncertain moons, and the hansom cabs clatter past like conspirators hurrying to assignations. I had arranged to meet him—let us call him Mr. A——, a man of indeterminate means and impeccable tailoring—at the Albion Club in St. James's, that discreet bastion where gentlemen may converse without the intrusion of debutantes or debutant scandals. The air in the smoking-room was thick with Havana fumes and the murmur of half-spoken confidences; port decanters circulated like old friends, and the armchairs, vast as confessionals, swallowed one's indiscretions whole.

Mr. A—— was already there, ensconced by the fire, his slim figure draped in a suit of midnight blue that caught the flames like a whispered secret. He had the look of a minor diplomat—clean-shaven, with eyes that held a perpetual question, and a smile that answered none. I settled opposite, accepted a glass from the steward, and we began, as one does, with the weather: that perennial English overture to deeper disharmonies.

"Foggy as a curate's conscience tonight", I remarked, lighting a cigarette.

He inclined his head, the movement precise as a fencer's salute. "Quite. One can hardly see across the room. A mercy, perhaps, for those who prefer not to be seen."

The ambiguity landed lightly, like a gloved hand on a knee—plausible as club chatter, yet freighted for the ear attuned. I let it hang, sipping my port, allowing the silence to thicken companionably. Around us, the usual suspects droned on: a Cabinet minister dissecting the latest Irish wrangle, two barristers debating entailments with the fervour of men who owned none. But ours was a different tribunal.

"You were at the Alhambra last week?" he enquired, flicking ash with elaborate care.

"Indeed. The new revue—all sequins and suggestion. One hardly knows where to look."

"Or whom", he added softly, his gaze steady over the rim of his glass. "The chorus boys have a certain... uniformity of appeal."

Here it was: the first feint. Uniformity—a word innocent as a hatter's measurement, yet in this context, a nod to tastes that ran parallel rather than perpendicular to the matrimonial norm. I parried

smoothly: "Very symmetrical. Though I find the soloists more diverting. A touch of individuality goes a long way."

He laughed, a low sound like silk tearing. "Individuality. Yes. One tires of the chorus line eventually. Too much in step, not enough... deviation."

Deviation. The word hung in the smoke, redolent of railway sidings and moral pamphlets from the Purity League. The steward passed with fresh cigars; we selected with the gravity of men choosing weapons. I lit mine, exhaling towards the ceiling where plaster cherubs sported suspiciously ambiguous poses.

"And your own engagements?" I ventured. "The season at Hurlingham must have been taxing."

"Taxing? Stimulating. All those polo ponies and pink coats. One does admire a man who knows how to handle his mount."

The double edge gleamed. Polo—the sport of princes, but also a metaphor for mastery and mount, with its faintly equine undertones that no true Corinthian could miss. I countered: "Quite. Though I prefer the indoor games. Billiards, say—where the angles are sharper, the cushions more forgiving."

"Billiards", he echoed, leaning forward slightly, his knee brushing mine under the table—accident or artifice? "A noble pursuit. The way one circles the table, assessing the lie... potting the awkward red with just the right touch of side."

Side. There it was again—the cant term for the spin that alters trajectory, beloved of billiard sharps and those who navigated life's straighter paths with a discreet curve. We were deep in it now, this delicate art of ambiguous conversation: every phrase a potential minefield, every pause a safe passage. To the casual listener—the dozing colonel in the corner—it was mere sporting banter. To us, it was semaphore across a crowded room.

He glanced at his watch, a gold hunter chased with vines that suggested more than horticulture. "The fog thickens. One wonders if the streets are safe for solitary promenades."

"Safer in company", I replied. "Particularly if one knows the back ways—from Jermyn Street to the Embankment, say, avoiding the main drags."

The Embankment—that nocturnal promenade where shadows lengthened into possibilities, and the Thames whispered approvals to those who lingered on its benches. Jermyn Street, with its shirtmakers and subtle signals in pocket-squares. He nodded, extinguishing his cigar with finality.

"Wise. Though solitude has its charms—a quiet hansom, curtains drawn, to Piccadilly or points east."

Points east: the veiled reference to Limehouse opium dens or Whitechapel's wilder freedoms, where class melted in the haze. I signalled the steward for our hats.

"Shall we test the fog together?" I proposed.

"Delighted", he murmured. "One mustn't let the night go to waste."

We rose, cloaks in hand, and threaded through the throng—past the minister's platitudes, the barristers' briefs—into the swirling yellow outside. The hansom waited; we climbed in, knees touching now without pretence. The jarvey cracked his whip, and as the cab lurched into the miasma, Mr. A——'s hand found mine in the gloom.

Conversation over. The art perfected. In London's fog, ambiguity is the truest language—half-said, fully understood. One emerges none the wiser to outsiders, infinitely the richer within. A gentleman's game, played with glances and glasses, where the score is never tallied, only savoured.

1887: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

What a delicious irony presents itself this evening, as I sit by the library fire with a glass of that exquisite Lafite '42—the sort of vintage that lingers on the palate like a secret too good to swallow whole. Were all the men I have known, do know, or shall yet know lined up in solemn parade—shoulder to sculpted shoulder, from the lowliest footman to the loftiest lord—the spectacle would form a veritable regiment of Christendom's most powerful, respectable, and wealthy gentlemen. Bishops who thunder from pulpits against the scarlet woman (while blushing at scarlet sashes); cabinet ministers whose dispatches shape empires (and whose private drawers hold dispatches of a silkier sort); industrial titans whose factories churn out the world's iron (while their private forges heat other matters); poets laureate whose verses adorn anthologies (and whose unpublished sonnets adorn certain nightstands); even royalty itself—scions of that most august family, whose garden parties at Buckingham gleam with respectability, yet whose after-parties whisper of pursuits far less pastoral.

Oh, the amusement of it! These paragons of propriety, pillars of the establishment, custodians of convention—arrayed in my mind's eye like guests at a Royal levee, sashes and stars agleam, exchanging nods across the velvet ropes. If such a conclave truly conspired to undermine civilisation and society—if, that is, they could tear themselves from the exquisite pleasures of the flesh long enough to plot—the edifice would crumble like a house of cards built on quicksand. Imagine the scene: a cabal in some shadowed salon, maps of moral subversion unrolled amid the champagne flutes, decrees drafted on perfumed notepaper. The

Church would falter without its shepherds; Parliament grind to a halt sans its steersmen; commerce stutter as magnates mutiny; the arts wither without their muses. And that Royal family, so prominently paraded at garden fêtes—their absence from the throne room would topple dynasties like dominoes.

Yet herein lies the sublime jest: they shall never convene for such purpose. No, these titans of taste prefer the intimate congress of two—or three, or four—to the grand assembly of revolution. Their rebellions are enacted in alcoves, not agoras; their seditions whispered in alcoves amid the rustle of silk, not roared from barricades. The pleasures of the flesh—those silken skirmishes, those languid lungeings, those fevered fumblings under foxed folios—prove far too potent a distraction. Why plot the downfall of society when one can dismantle a doublet with equal efficacy? Society stands impregnable precisely because its most formidable foes are too enraptured by private paradises to storm the public gates.

I chuckle into my claret, contemplating the phantom lineup: the judge who sentences sodomites by day and sups with suspects by night; the admiral whose fleet rules the waves yet yields command in the wardroom; the banker whose vaults hold the nation's gold but whose heart hoards hotter treasures. Respectable to a man, powerful beyond princes, wealthy as Croesus—and every one a votary of Venus in her less-vanilla aspects. No names, of course; indiscretion is the assassin of delight. But were I to pen the roster, it would mirror the envelopes on the Prince's mantel: invitations to that very garden party, where decorum dances on the lawn while desire duets in the shrubbery.

How society endures! We—its secret saboteurs—are undone by our own delectations. The flesh is a tyrant more absolute than any queen; its pleasures, chains more binding than law. Long may it reign, this voluptuous vice that keeps the world upright. Another glass to absent comrades—powerful, respectable, and oh-so-wealthily wicked.

1886: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

A conversation this afternoon with my cousin Elspeth that lingers like the aftertaste of absinthe—bitter, brilliant, and bound to provoke reflection long into the velvet hours. She arrived unannounced from her retreat in Bath, all bluestocking earnestness and lace-trimmed resolve, bearing a parcel of pamphlets from some ladies' reform circle and a question sharper than any stiletto. We took tea in the morning room, sunlight slanting through the casements like a reluctant confessor, and after the usual civilities—her health, my latest theatrical triumph—she fixed me with that penetrating gaze of hers and asked point-blank: "Do

you want to be accepted into polite society as you are? Liberated from criminality?"

The directness startled me, though I should have expected it from Elspeth, who has long suspected the contours of my "aesthetic enthusiasms" without ever demanding the map. I set down my cup, composed my features into that mask of urbane melancholy I affect for such moments, and replied with deliberate clarity: "Acceptance, my dear Elspeth, is not liberation. The clandestine world I inhabit—coded, dangerous, inventive, erotic, fugitive, self-created—is not merely a product of oppression, but a distinct culture, with its own systems of meaning, pleasure, communication, and belonging."

She blinked, her fan fluttering like a startled bird, but I pressed on, the words flowing as if rehearsed for some private soliloquy. Picture it, I told her: a realm parallel to the drawing-rooms and levees she navigates so deftly—not a shadow, but a counterpoint, rich with its own heraldry. The handkerchief codes of the Row, where a green corner peeping from the cuff signals curiosity to the initiated and mere slovenliness to the blind; the labyrinthine syntax of club conversations, allusions piled like petticoats around a central silence; the symposia in shadowed libraries, where fencing foils double as foreplay and claret loosens more than tongues. Dangers? Yes—the law's iron fist, society's cut direct, the hangman's noose for the careless. Yet from peril springs invention: masks at masques that veil more than faces, letters in cipher that read like sonnets to the unkeyed eye, pleasures fugitive as foxfire, self-created in alcoves and arbors where propriety dare not tread.

Elspeth leaned forward, her reformer's zeal softening to genuine curiosity. "But if society accepted you—decriminalised your loves—would you not be free?"

"Free?" I laughed softly, the irony exquisite. "To be included in polite society would change that society beyond recognition—the two are incompatible. Mine is a culture born of exclusion, thriving in the crevices where the Church's prohibitions create pressure that forges diamonds. Polite society—with its starched collars, its marriage markets, its vicars droning of unnatural sins—would demand the same level of erotic pleasures I enjoy, pleasures the Church denies them so piously. Imagine the dowagers discovering the thrill of the shaded path, the bishops fumbling with fans and feathers! They would flood our symposia, dilute our codes with their clumsiness, turn our fugitive arts into fashionable fads. No, Elspeth—acceptance would domesticate us, strip the danger that makes every glance electric, every whisper a conquest."

She pressed: "Then you prefer the closet?"

"Not prefer—embrace. It is home, self-made from scraps of silk and secrecy. Our belonging is earned in the shadows, our meanings minted in peril. Liberation through law would be like flooding a grotto with daylight—the blue glow vanishes, the mystery evaporates."

I paused, then offered my own provocation, half in jest, half in prophecy: "Remove the power of the Church over life, however—strip its monopoly on the erotic, the marital, the mortal—and perhaps the two 'societies' might merge to one another's benefit. Let the vicars peddle philosophy instead of prohibitions; let desire flow free as the Thames, unchannelled by canon law. Then polite society might learn our graces, and we theirs—a grand synthesis, where garden parties include the shrubbery games, and drawing-rooms the divan delights."

Elspeth departed soon after, pamphlets forgotten, her mind manifestly turning like a kaleidoscope. She embraced me at the door with unusual warmth—"You are a philosopher, cousin, wicked and wise"—and I watched her carriage vanish into the drive, pondering if I had converted a reformer or merely amused one. No matter; the exchange clarified my own creed. This clandestine culture—coded glances in the Row, symposia at Anatis, Capri grottos and Sans-Souci dreams—is no prison but a palace, self-erected against the world's drab edifice. Acceptance? A paltry prize. I choose the labyrinth, its dangers my crown, its silences my sceptre.

The fire dies; the house hushes. Tomorrow, invitations to the next masque—more layers for the petticoats of allusion. Long live the closet that conceals a kingdom.

1886: The Invisible Music of Alban Fitzartur

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By a discreet correspondent

Alban Fitzartur's dramatic compositions, as any gentleman attentive to the finer arts of the contemporary stage must know, occupy a curious and rare province within our civilisation. They are not plays, properly speaking, but experiments in perception—an ongoing inquiry into how one may move, and be moved, unseen through the layers of English society. For the attentive observer—and what cultivated man is not—Alban's theatre becomes less a spectacle than a mirror; and in that mirror, all the relations of class and desire shimmer and shift in exquisite ambiguity.

To speak first of the manner of these pieces: no other playwright of our time possesses so quiet a boldness. The curtain rises upon a house, a camp, a drawing-room, or some London lodging; yet it is not the action

that commands interest, but the glances that pass between figures who may never speak directly. A valet's eye follows the polished boot of his master; a young officer studies the unguarded grace of his messmate; an actor on stage hesitates just long enough to catch the fleeting gaze of a gentleman in the balcony. Glance answers glance, but no word intervenes. Everything is civilisation—yet everything trembles on the edge of confession.

To call such a gaze "aesthetic", as Alban's defenders often do, is both true and misleading. It is aesthetic, yes, in its precision and discipline; in its studied avoidance of vulgarity or sentiment; in the way it translates appetite into angle, longing into posture. Yet to experience it in person—to sit, as I have, at one of the Viscount's private performances in those whispering Chelsea salons—is to feel quite intimately that this "aesthetic" tension is, in practice, something far nearer the pulse. One feels, in the dark, how beauty itself might become an instrument by which one gentleman acknowledges another—furtively, irrevocably.

It is telling that Alban's stages are always filled with watchers. If one man speaks, another listens from the half-shadow; if a letter is read, a servant hovers in attendance; mirrors abound; the air seems forever aware of who is seen and who may be seeing. There is no innocence of observation in these rooms. His artistry lies not in the event but in the circulation of gazes—the slow, mutual seduction of attentions that cross, reflect, and retreat. That the moral guardians of the age have not yet discerned what truly transpires beneath the fine dialogue and waxlight décor is a tribute to Alban's unfailing discretion.

Consider, for instance, his much-repeated The Officer's Mirror, whose fragile layering of authority and service remains unequalled. The young captain watching his own reflection, the waiting youth polishing the glass—each becomes a secret voyeur of the other, each imitates the other's composure. No word of offence, no breach of propriety—and yet the theatre seems charged, as if the air itself has learned to blush. Similar subtleties mark The Man at the Window and The Lavender Lantern, in which entire worlds of attachment and curiosity unfold by the mere tilt of a head, the clasp of a glove, the whisper of polished leather.

Such themes, tenderly handled, might in coarser fingers become improper; but Alban ennobles what he touches. He gives decorum the shimmer of erotic invention, fascination the discipline of art. His is that peculiar English genius that refines desire into form. We leave the theatre stirred, yet outwardly composed; we speak of colour and proportion, but we remember a wrist, a profile, a glance.

There are whispers, of course, that the noble playwright has created not so much a school of beauty as a quiet fraternity of admiration—

young aesthetes, poets, and men of refinement who recognise in his art a language they did not know they spoke. Perhaps so. If art, as Pater tells us, should "burn always with this hard, gemlike flame", then who shall condemn the hand that teaches us the cost and pleasure of the light?

In Alban Fitzartur's dramas, we learn how to see without touching, to touch without ever knowing. It is a lesson both perilous and divine—a sustained exercise, as one might say, in moving invisibly through the world, desiring what one must not name, and learning that the gaze, when properly schooled, is the most civilised form of passion.

1886: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

A most edifying afternoon's amusement yesterday in Cambridge, where the autumn mists hang over the Backs with that air of high-minded melancholy under which the undergraduates go magnificently to seed. I had gone up nominally to lecture at the Union on "The Decorative Moralities of the Modern Stage" (translation: to be stared at by men in gowns), but in truth to observe the latest crop of earnest youth wrestling with Plato and pimples. It did not disappoint.

The chief exhibit was introduced to me at High Table by the Master of Trinity with solemn pride, as one might present a promising but skittish colt: "Mr Arthur Hamilton, an exceedingly high-minded young man of our College—a writer of some promise. You will find him… reflective". Reflective indeed: the creature's brow furrowed with more introspection than is safe for a man under thirty; his eyes held that soft storm-light peculiar to souls who have discovered both Greek philosophy and their own cheekbones. Clean-featured, a little ascetic round the jaw, hands too fine for oars but admirably suited to more delicate exertions. The sort of youth who reads Marcus Aurelius before breakfast and then wonders why toast tastes of ashes.

We spoke, as one must, of the usual exalted trifles: his "struggles with faith", his "yearning for high ideals", his "disappointment in reality"—all the apparatus of young men who have not yet discovered that reality is quite willing to be improved if one approaches it from the right angle and with the right accomplices. He confessed, in language so oblique it practically orbited Jupiter, to being troubled by "emotions"—a word he endowed with italics by sheer earnestness—which did not fit easily into the pews of his upbringing. He had, he said, experienced "a curious, unsettling intimacy of feeling with certain friends", which made him "ashamed of being merely physical" while "hungry for something purer". At this point he blushed so crimson that the port decanter took fright.

I, being older, wiser, and frankly bored of guilt in young men who have nothing to be guilty about, resolved upon a little experiment. It is cruel, perhaps, to toy with tenderness; but it is kinder than allowing Cambridge to do all the damage alone.

After dinner we walked in the fellows' garden, where the yews loom like moral essays and the river breathes mist suggestive of unbaptised thoughts. Arthur, with the gravity of a minor prophet, remarked that our age suffers from "a want of ideals" and that he longed "to devote himself wholly to something higher". I applauded warmly. "Admirable", I said. "The only question is: higher than what?"

He floundered. "Higher than… appetite. Than the body. To live for beauty, truth, friendship—you understand?"

"Perfectly", I replied. "The trick is to recognise that beauty, truth, and friendship are not in competition with the body, but expressed through it. The soul, my dear Hamilton, is not a balloon; it is a perfume. It needs a vessel."

He looked at me with that tantalising mixture of suspicion and hope which marks the moment a young man stands at the edge of his own intentions. "But are we not meant", he ventured, "to subdue the lower for the sake of the higher?"

"Oh, certainly", I said. "Only you must be quite sure which is which. If your 'higher' ideal leads you to despise what gives you warmth, tenderness, delight; if it makes you recoil from the very sensations that make beauty intelligible—then perhaps it is the lower in disguise. There is nothing particularly noble about hating what you are."

This struck him like a tutorial from Zeus. "And these… attachments?" he murmured. "To one's own sex. Are they not a… deviation?"

"Of course they are a deviation", I answered. "So is genius. So is courage. So is every act of honesty in a dishonest world. The question is not whether you deviate, but whether you do so gracefully. You, I suspect, were built for higher deviations than chapel will currently allow."

He coloured again, more becomingly this time. We had reached a stone bench overlooking the river. I sat; he hesitated, then joined me, the barest inch of air between our sleeves like a theological disputation. The moon, obliging conspirator, arranged itself behind a drift of cloud so that we were lit just enough for philosophy, not enough for scandal.

"You must understand", he said, "there are moments when merely being near certain friends—one in particular—feels like… like standing too close to a fire. One is warmed, yet afraid of burning."

"And what", I asked, "do you imagine the fire feels?"

He managed a laugh. “I had not considered the fire’s perspective.”

“There is your first philosophical error”, I said. “You have granted to everyone but yourself the right to be desired. You write poems about Greek lads in marble; you agonise over the ‘purity’ of their limbs; yet the moment your own limb twitches, you cry sin. It is very unscientific.”

He was silent for a long moment. Then, in a voice so low the river had to lean in to hear it, he said: “Do you think it possible to… honour such feelings? Without falling into vice?”

“Not only possible”, I replied, “but imperative. Honour them by refusing to pretend they are less than they are. Call your longing by its rightful name; you will be amazed how much less it torments you once it ceases to skulk. Give it noble work to do: write, act, love loyally. The vice lies not in the sensation, but in the cowardice that drives it into squalid corners.”

And here, dear diary, I permitted myself a subtle demonstration of deeper sensations mirrored by higher ideals: I placed my hand lightly—philosopher to pupil—on his wrist. Not grasping, not importunate; merely present, warm, undeniably real. “Take this, for example”, I said. “Two men, in conversation. You are moved—not obscenely, I hope, but unmistakably. Is the feeling entirely ‘low’? Or does it also contain gratitude, curiosity, admiration? If you deny the lower, you mutilate the higher with it. If you accept both, you may yet become the creature you are so busy idealising.”

He did not withdraw. On the contrary, some small tension left his shoulders, like a syllogism finally resolving. “But what of… society?” he asked. “The law?”

“Society”, I said, “is terrified of its own appetite. It prefers sermons to mirrors. We cannot change that, at least not this season. But you may choose whether to be its victim or its counter-example. If you must bear danger, at least bear it beautifully.”

We walked back in companionable silence. At his rooms he faltered on the threshold, then said: “You have given me a great deal to think about.”

“That was the idea”, I replied. “Thinking is safer in company, though; do not attempt the entire moral reform of Europe in a single supervision.”

He smiled then—really smiled, for the first time—and there was nothing morbid in it. “If you are ever in Cambridge again”, he ventured, “perhaps we might… continue this conversation.”

“I look forward to it”, I said. “Higher ideals and deeper sensations make excellent co-tutors.”

And so another earnest youth takes his first step off the ledge of self-disgust towards that more perilous, but infinitely more entertaining, plateau where one is neither saint nor criminal, but simply—and gloriously—what one is. Trinity will, no doubt, try to reclaim him with Plato and port; I have no objection. Plato is on my side.

For myself, I return to Kent with the agreeable sense of having done a small good deed in notably bad taste. If Arthur Hamilton learns to tremble with pleasure rather than at it, the species will have produced, for once, a beast less strange and more honest.

1885: Diary of Felix Marchant

Paris does strange things to memory. The heat, the idle hours, the faint vapours of perfume and dust—all conspire to peel the past like gilt from old wood. This evening, while a storm loitered along the Seine, I found myself thinking—oddly and uninvited—of Windsor, and of the boy who now prepares to be King.

We were schoolmates once, though "companions" is perhaps the bolder term. There was a time—long before the medals, the uniform, and the practised smile—when he was only Bertie, and I something of a curiosity, tolerated because my insolence came wrapped in charm. We shared a dormitory room one dreadful winter. I remember it was January, the windows sealed against frost and discipline, and we lay in our respective beds trading secrets in the dark, as boys do when the world still feels negotiable.

At some impudent remark of mine he turned, laughing, and said, "Marchant, you are the most eccentric member of your eccentric family". I took this as the solemn compliment it remains. "I shall always be so", I told him, "even when you're King". He swore then, half amused, half exasperated, that I would grow out of such affections before either of us had grown whiskers. We made a bet upon it: that he would be crowned before I was cured.

Years have passed. He has risen—dutiful, expected, surrounded by ceremony like ivy round an oak—and I have, contrary to his prediction, become more eccentric by design. I prefer other company than his court would allow, and other kinds of truth than England presently admits. He chases dominions; I, conversation. His world measures breeding in bloodlines; mine in sensibility. And yet, if eccentricity means loyalty to one's own reflection, then perhaps we have both won our wager.

I sometimes wonder if he remembers that boyhood night, those conspiratorial whispers before dawn. We were young enough to believe that intimacy required no explanation, that curiosity was as harmless as

candlelight. How easily tenderness passes through the sieve of protocol and becomes myth.

If I am eccentric still, it is only for persisting in affection where history prefers amnesia. Besides, promises made before sleep carry more truth than oaths sworn before crowns.

1888: The Trunk of Hidden Delights

A Fairy Tale for Discerning Readers

Chapter I: The Drab Pursuit

In the grey heart of Featherstone Hall, where the winds of Kent whispered complaints through the chimneys, stood the Great Library—a vast chamber of oak shelves groaning under forgotten folios, illuminated by a single casement that framed the sodden lawns like a portrait of perpetual ennui. Beneath this windowsill, dusty and immense, reposed the Trunk: a relic of childhood summers, bound in cracked leather, its brass clasps tarnished to a poet's patina. As a boy, Lord Algernon Featherstone had pored over the family grimoire, The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles, wherein a magical trunk whisked weary princes to realms of eternal revelry—gardens of perpetual bloom, where labours were but laughter and desires bloomed unchecked. The tale had faded with adolescence; the Trunk, relegated to obscurity.

Yet on this particular Tuesday, when the household buzzed with the tedium of callers—dowagers in bombazine, solicitors in bombast—Algernon sought refuge. "Hide-and-go-seek", he murmured to himself, a game of solitary rebellion against the drab world beyond the door. The Trunk, half-forgotten, beckoned from its shadowed nook. With a sigh of theatrical despair, he lifted the lid—hinges creaking like a lover's whisper—and slipped inside, drawing the darkness over him like a silken shroud. "Let them seek", he thought. "I shall be lost to propriety."

Chapter II: The Portal Swings

At first, there was naught but the scent of aged vellum and camphor—comforting, cloistral. Algernon curled amid musty ledgers, stifling a yawn, when a peculiar warmth suffused the space. The Trunk trembled; brass fittings glowed like fireflies at dusk. A melody hummed—not the dour hymns of the parish, but flutes and lutes in riotous harmony. The floor beneath him softened to moss; the lid, unbidden, sealed with a sigh.

"Absurdity!" cried Algernon, pounding the wood. But instead of echo, his fist met air. The darkness swirled into coruscating light—

azure, crimson, gold—and he tumbled forth, not into the library floor, but onto a sward of emerald velvet under a sky of perpetual twilight, where twin moons chased a sun of amethyst.

He rose, blinking. No drab world here: colonnades of marble veined with lapis spiralled skyward, festooned with garlands of orchids that perfumed the breeze with jasmine and musk. Fountains arced champagne; arbours dripped with silken hammocks. And the men!—oh, the men of this utopia! Lithe athletes in diaphanous tunics wrestled playfully amid rose-petals; poets with lyres crowned in ivy recited odes to thighs and twilight; adventurers in plumed helms recounted escapades from sapphire seas, their laughter a cascade of bells. No corsets cramped these forms; no starched collars choked discourse. Here, pleasure was leisure's crown, and adventure its sceptre.

Chapter III: Revels Revealed

A figure approached—tall, golden-locked, with eyes like sapphires kissed by dawn. "Welcome, seeker!" he cried, extending a hand jewelled in topaz. "I am Lysander, Warden of the Trunk. You have hidden well—and found paradise."

Algernon, dazzled, stammered, "This... this is the Trunk's magic? The fairy tale was true?"

Lysander laughed, a sound like violins in velvet. "True as desire, wanderer. Our realm is Hideaway: utopia of the unseen, where drab world's seekers find only echoes. Here, we play eternal hide-and-seek—not from foes, but for joy. Come, witness!"

He led Algernon through groves where colour rioted: parrots in raiment of rainbow feathers perched on shoulders of bronzed sailors; mosaic paths depicted lovers entwined in heroic poses; pavilions overflowed with feasts—nectarines dripping honey, figs stuffed with cream, wines that sparkled like captured stars. Men of every hue and clime mingled: olive-skinned explorers from fabled isles, ivory athletes from northern fjords, ebony poets from southern sands—all garbed in gossamer, all ardent with adventure's glow.

In one glade, a company enacted heroic romps: two grapplers, oiled and gleaming, pursued a phantom foe through labyrinthine hedges, their pursuits dissolving into embraces amid cheers. "Hide!" cried one, vanishing into fronds; "Seek!" roared the other, pursuing with feigned ferocity that melted to delight. In another pavilion, raconteurs spun yarns of tempests tamed and treasures plundered—not gold, but glances stolen, nights unbound.

Algernon's heart raced. "No sorrow here? No toil?"

Lysander smiled slyly. “Toil is the drab world’s jest. Here, labour is love-play; melancholy, but a mask for mirth. Join our game—hide in delights, seek in embraces.”

Chapter IV: The Grand Pursuit

Seduced, Algernon plunged into Hideaway’s heart. Lysander gifted him a tunic of peacock silk, a circlet of violets. “Hide now, seeker—from nothing but convention!”

The game commenced: a cavalcade of two dozen—adventurers, bards, beauties—scattered through enchanted grounds. Algernon dashed into a grotto of glowing crystals, where mirrors multiplied his form into infinity. A pursuer—raven-haired, with a wrestler’s build and poet’s gaze—found him first. “Caught!” he growled playfully, pinning Algernon against quartz with gentle strength. Their laughter mingled; lips brushed in victory’s salute.

Deeper still: through colour-cascades where dyes ran like rivers—crimson chasms, indigo cascades—Algernon hid in a bower of living tapestries, woven by sprite-like weavers into scenes of heroic dalliance. A band of explorers unearthed him, their “seek” a symphony of tickles and tumbles, tumbling into a heap of limbs and levity.

Adventure beckoned: Lysander led a quest to the Crystal Falls, where one must “hide” behind veils of water to claim the Rainbow Pearl. Algernon, drenched in delight, emerged triumphant, pearl aglow, shared in a kiss that tasted of ambrosia and audacity.

Yet as moons climbed, nostalgia tugged. “The drab world calls”, he confessed to Lysander amid a banquet of peacocks’ tongues and phoenix-wine.

Lysander nodded, eyes twinkling. “Return when boredom bites. The Trunk awaits—but know: once sought, Hideaway hides in your heart.”

Chapter V: The Seeker’s Return

Algernon climbed back into the Trunk, now humming with residual magic. The lid sighed open; he spilled into the library, trunk shut, world drab as dust. But oh!—the casement framed not grey lawns, but rainbows in his mind’s eye. Callers droned beyond the door; he smiled secretly. The game continued: hide from tedium, seek delights within.

And lo, beneath the windowsill, the Trunk gleamed faintly—ever ready for the next seeker, promising utopia where colour crowned adventure, men mirrored joy, and drab world’s seekers found only shadows of the splendorous hideaway.

The End

(For those who seek, the Trunk remains ajar.)

1885: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

I have today performed what may be the most delicate piece of diplomacy of my career: declining a King without offending him. A rare art—rather like fencing with fog. His Majesty has been pleased to assemble that perennially perilous flotilla known as the Royal Yachting Party, which will tour the southern coast this Season in what court bulletins describe, rather innocently, as "seaside leisure". Those of us versed in translation know it to mean a movable Bacchanal with silver fittings.

My invitation arrived yesterday, embossed to the point of tyranny and perfumed faintly—I suspect by whichever equerry doubles as His Majesty's poet. The card itself seemed to shimmer with potential scandal. To refuse such honour would normally be social suicide; to accept, personal. One does not live as long as I have in London without learning that the smoothest waters conceal the deepest indiscretions.

Frankly, I know my own temptations too well. Yacht decks narrow into confessions after dark. The King's circle includes a number of young naval officers of such symmetrical beauty that they might have been raised in aquaria. The combination of tide, moonlight, and champagne would prove fatal to what remains of my discretion.

Thus I have composed a letter of regret, deferential yet decisive, explaining that I am already engaged this summer on "a minor diplomatic mission to Spain at the invitation of His Catholic Majesty". This, though not technically untrue, is sufficiently obscure to silence curiosity. The Spanish King and I became acquainted some years ago when he declared, over claret, that "England exports its fog but keeps its fire in gentlemen". It would be churlish not to repay the compliment in person.

Privately, of course, the "mission" is little more than a week's visit and an opportunity to escape the thundercloud of gossip that forever hovers above Windsor's amusements. My friends call it cowardice; I consider it choreography. One must know when to leave the dance floor before the orchestra breaks into scandal.

London, meanwhile, grows drowsy with heat and Court rumour. They say the yachts have already slipped downriver toward Portsmouth. I picture them: white sails, gilt laughter, and reputations floundering in the wake. By the time they return, the newspapers will have discovered morality anew, and I shall return from Madrid burnished with virtue and sun.

For once, abstinence is not a moral act but an aesthetic one. After all, good form is the last refuge from bad company.

1885: The Social Dance and Its Disguises

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen
(By our Correspondent in Piccadilly)

In polite society, rebellion rarely appears as argument; it expresses itself by arrangement—of flowers, silk, or silence. To those of us who have spent too many seasons manoeuvring within drawing-rooms, the knowledge becomes second nature that every gesture has a grammar, every colour a commentary, and that virtue itself is but a matter of tone. The only truly dangerous men are those who understand tone and can employ it at will.

When one has been long enough inside a social system—living among its hints, cues, and the unspoken choreography that passes for civilisation—one realises that the real art of survival lies not in obedience but in interpretation. Manners, after all, are simply moralities spoken in code. A fan opened this way means indifference; that way, invitation. A glance across a ballroom tells more than an embassy dispatch. And when the entire weight of good breeding rests upon one's fingertips, the smallest flicker of intent may prove revolutionary.

It is the language that fascinates me: the flowers, the folds, the minute accidents of attire. I have come to regard the dinner table as a field of semiotics. If a gentleman offers his hostess a scarlet rose while other men stand about admiring the arrangement, it is not always the lady who is the intended recipient of its fragrance. The rose may bloom in courtesy but flower in conspiracy.

Likewise, the position of a jewel can become a perfectly grammatical declaration. A pin worn low upon the waistcoat says, I am weary of convention: raised an inch nearer the heart, it murmurs, and yet not entirely immune to its pleasures. A sapphire placed upon the tie rather than the lapel recalls the code of the Continent—a subtle whisper of the Riviera, of sunlight unchaperoned. To the uninitiated it is fashion; to the select, a confession.

Even posture becomes dialect. The studied angle of an ankle—too straight and one is earnest; too supple and one is significant. Society's cleverest wits have built reputations upon the casual management of a glove. I know a certain actor—I name no names—whose fame rests less upon his voice than upon the eloquence of removing his glove at precisely the right moment in precisely the wrong company.

All these signals, you see, operate within the gaze of others. So long as men are present, the gesture means something beside its surface. We live in a world where every encounter must play two tunes at once—

one for the hostesses, one for the orchestra unseen. The true player learns to dance to both without stepping on toes or consciences. That, I think, is the real education of the drawing-room: mastery not of approval but of ambiguity.

I have sometimes thought that the modern Englishman suffers from his insistence on sincerity. It is an excellent virtue for the unemployed or the unobserved, but no basis for polite interaction. The French, with their Roman Catholic imagination, have elevated hypocrisy into courtesy; we Anglicans still insist upon truth in public, which is why we are so bad at it in private. One must learn instead the social lie perfected into style—not deceit, but diplomacy of feeling.

The world of civility, like the theatre, is a stage of paradoxes. We preen to conceal, confess to charm, and signal through secrecy. That is why a gentleman, properly trained, may subvert a system merely by flourishing his handkerchief incorrectly. It is a small revolution, yet, in its way, a civilised one.

And so I recommend to any reader of A Gentleman's Gentlemen who feels himself confined by the quadrille of decency: learn the steps, by all means—but do so only that you may alter them imperceptibly. Practise rebellion in your choice of bloom, philosophy in your waistcoat, and discretion in your delight. A true gentleman never declares himself: he indicates.

After all, civilisation is simply the art of conveying the unspeakable beautifully.

1885: Tragedy with a Smile: A Tragi-Comedy in Three Acts

By Felix Marchant

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- Lord Algernon Featherstone—A melancholy dandy, forever on the brink of despair yet impeccably turned out.
- Captain Rupert Quill—His ardent admirer, a military man with a poet's soul and a gambler's heart.
- Lady Beatrice Smyle—Algernon's sister, a widow of impeccable propriety and impeccable boredom.
- The Honourable Percy Larkspur—A witless suitor, forever proposing.
- Reverend Elias Dove—A cleric whose sermons are shorter than his patience.
- Miss Euphrosyne Twaddle—A spinster of relentless optimism and relentless chatter.
- Servants, Maskers, and Echoes of Absurdity.

The action passes in the drawing-room of Featherstone Hall, where sunlight filters through mourning crepe, and tragedy wears a boutonnière.

ACT I: The Chord Strikes

Scene: The Drawing-Room at Noon. A harp stands neglected; a decanter, half-empty.

(Enter LORD ALGERNON, in dove-grey silk, contemplating a wilting lily.)

ALGERNON.

Life is a tragedy, my dear decanter—brief, intoxicating, and destined for evaporation. Yet one must smile, lest the servants suspect one means it.

(Enter CAPTAIN RUPERT, resplendent in scarlet, bearing a bouquet of crimson roses.)

RUPERT.

Algernon! These roses from the hothouse—as red as my regiment's ruin at cards last night. For you, alone.

ALGERNON. (inhaling languidly)

Roses? How vulgarly vital. They remind me of passion—that absurd intruder upon melancholy. Do they whisper of love, Rupert, or merely of thorns?

RUPERT. (ardently)

Of love, my lord—the forbidden sort that blooms in shadowed arbors.

(Enter LADY BEATRICE, fanning herself with a prayer-book.)

BEATRICE.

Brother, Captain—what conspiracy of petals is this? Roses are for funerals or flirtations; pray clarify.

ALGERNON.

Funerals, dear Beatrice. Rupert insists on burying my ennui with horticulture.

RUPERT. (winking)

Or resurrecting it.

(Enter PERCY, tripping over the rug, clutching a sonnet.)

PERCY.

Lady Beatrice! I have composed—"Ode to Thy Dimple"! Will you wed me?

BEATRICE. (sighing)

Percy, your odes are tragedies without smiles. No.

PERCY.

But my estates! My monocle!

ALGERNON.

Your monocle sees only itself, Percy. Tragedy and humour—the upper and lower notes of the same absurd chord.

(Laughter from all save PERCY, who weeps theatrically.)
Curtain.

ACT II: The Vaudeville of Vanity
Scene: Same, Evening. Guests arrive for a "Melancholy Masque."
(Reverend DOVE enters, pursued by MISS TWADDLE.)
TWADDLE.
Reverend! Is despair a sin? I despair of suitors!
DOVE.
Miss Twaddle, despair is merely God's way of saying "try harder". Now, where is the claret?
ALGERNON. (to RUPERT, aside)
Observe: the cleric thirsts for wine, the spinster for weddings. Human absurdity—comedy in mourning weeds.
RUPERT.
And we, Algernon? Our chord?
ALGERNON.
Ours plays in minor keys, darling—elegiac, yet with a trill of laughter.
(Enter BEATRICE and PERCY, waltzing absurdly.)
PERCY.
One dance, Beatrice! My heart bleeds!
BEATRICE.
It pumps claret, Percy. Bleed elsewhere.
(A servant announces "The Masque of Sorrows.") Maskers enter: clowns in blackface weeping pearls, harlequins juggling skulls.)
TWADDLE. (aghast)
Such levity amid grief!
DOVE.
Levity is grief's twin, madam—the smile that underscores the sob.
ALGERNON. (to audience, breaking wall)
Behold vaudeville veiled in velvet: we laugh to keep from crumbling, love to spite the grave. Rupert, a turn?
(They dance, a pas-de-deux of sorrow and seduction: Rupert dips Algernon low, whispers.)
RUPERT.
Tonight, the conservatory? Where moonlight mocks the stars?
ALGERNON.
If melancholy permits. Tragedy demands a smile—and a kiss.
(PERCY proposes again; all collapse in laughter. Lights dim to harpsichord melancholy.)
Curtain.

ACT III: The Smile Eternal

Scene: Dawn. The room in disarray; wilted roses everywhere.

(ALGERNON alone, gazing at a miniature of RUPERT. Enter RUPERT, dishevelled from the night's " escapade.")

RUPERT.

Algernon! The conservatory—ecstasy etched in dew! Yet dawn brings dread: your sister suspects, Percy prattles, the world wheels on.

ALGERNON.

Dread? 'Tis the spice of our symphony. Sorrow and joy—upper note, lower note. Without the fall, no flight.

(Enter BEATRICE, PERCY, DOVE, TWADDLE—all in various states of revelation.)

BEATRICE.

Brother! Captain! This... liaison? Scandal!

PERCY.

I knew! And I forgive—if Beatrice weds me!

TWADDLE.

Immoral! Yet... romantic!

DOVE.

The Church frowns—but winks. Absurdity absolves.

ALGERNON. (rising, radiant)

Dear absurdities! Our "tragedy" was but a masque. Rupert and I—lovers in the key of laughter. Society feuds with feeling; we fuse it. Wed us all! Percy to Beatrice, Twaddle to Dove, and we to eternity.

RUPERT.

A chorus of chords!

(All pair off absurdly: PERCY/ BEATRICE waltz clumsily; TWADDLE/DOVE intone a mock-sermon; ALGERNON/RUPERT embrace languidly.)

ALGERNON.

Tragedy smiles—behold! The upper note soars, the lower thrums. Human folly: we laugh through tears, love through loss.

(Vaudevillian flourish: confetti of wilted petals rains. All freeze in ecstatic tableau—smiles amid mock-sobs.)

CHORUS (ALL).

In absurdity we thrive, in melancholy we jest!
Tragedy with a smile—'tis life's absurd bequest!

(Harpsichord swells to triumphant minor key. Curtain falls on frozen laughter.)

EPILOGUE (spoken by ALGERNON)

Gentlemen of the stalls, if life be chord of high and low,
Play both with verve—and let the curtain go!

1885: A Want of Grace
A Paradoxical Comedy in Three Acts

By Felix Marchant

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

1. Lord Algernon Grace—A mature aesthete of impeccable melancholy and exquisite taste.
2. Mr. Vivian Youth—A beautiful young Adonis, draped in temptation but devoid of subtlety.
3. Lord Rupert Experience—Algernon's worldly companion, connoisseur of vintages both literal and figurative.
4. The Honourable Percy Fresh—Vivian's callow admirer, forever proposing toasts.
5. Lady Beatrice Vintage—A widow of seasoned charm, dispenser of epigrams and eyewater.
6. Reverend Elias Temperance—A cleric whose sermons thirst for claret.
7. Servants—Bearers of trays and truths.

The action unfolds in the opulent drawing-room of Grace House, where divans invite repose, decanters promise revelation, and mirrors reflect eternal appetites. Afternoon fades to evening; youth poses, age savours.

ACT I: The Temptation of the Divan

Scene: The Drawing-Room. Vivian Youth lounges half-naked across a divan, a vision in diaphanous silk, grapes dangling from indolent fingers.

(Enter LORD ALGERNON, impeccable in pearl-grey, contemplating a wilting rose.)

ALGERNON.
Youth wants gratitude for being young, yet age prefers experience. A beautiful boy draped thus across a divan is a tempting sight—but one's thirst is too easily quenched with youthfulness, without the foretaste of flirtation that maturity offers.

VIVIAN. (stretching languidly, silk slipping)
Lord Algernon! Admire my form—fresh as dawn, firm as marble! No lines mar my canvas; no years dull my lustre. Drink deep!

ALGERNON. (sipping sherry, unmoved)
My dear Vivian, you are a vintage poured too soon—all bouquet, no body. Youth slakes; maturity intoxicates.

(Enter LORD RUPERT, bearing a bottle of Lafite '47.)

RUPERT.
Algernon, the boy poses prettily, but where is the palate? Youth is a sip of hock—brisk, but forgotten by dinner. Experience is Bordeaux: hints of leather, smoke, secrets aged to perfection.

VIVIAN. (pouting, draping further)
Secrets? I am an open book—every page uncreased, every illustration vivid!

ALGERNON.
Precisely, Vivian. Open books weary; closed ones tantalise. One flirts with the lock before turning the key.

(Enter PERCY FRESH, tripping with a bouquet.)

PERCY.
Vivian! Roses for your roses! Marry me—or at least pose for my sketch!

VIVIAN. (yawning)
Later, Percy. Admire the divan first.

ALGERNON. (aside to RUPERT)
Observe: youth demands worship; maturity earns it.

Curtain.

ACT II: The Banquet of Banter

Scene: Evening. Table laden with crystal; Vivian, still draped, feeds grapes to Percy. Lady Beatrice enters, fan fluttering like aged champagne.

BEATRICE.
Vivian, my pet, you tempt like forbidden fruit—but fruit without fermentation is mere juice. Age ripens the grape to wine; youth bruises it to jam.

VIVIAN. (feeding PERCY)
Jam? I am nectar! Fresh, flowing, freely given! No musty cellars for me.

RUPERT. (pouring)
Nectar quenches once; wine invites return. Youth slakes the first thirst; maturity the lingering one. Flirtation is the bouquet—hints of oak, earth, embrace.

PERCY. (choking on grape)
Vivian's lips are riper than any vintage!

ALGERNON.
Ripe lips without wit are cherries—popped and discarded. Experience offers the whole orchard: blossoms, boughs, buried treasure.

(Enter REVEREND ELIAS, eyeing the decanter.)

ELIAS.
Gentlemen, ladies—temperance! Youth's excesses fade; age's wisdom endures.

BEATRICE. (handing him claret)
Temperance, Reverend? Your thirst betrays you. Maturity teaches one to sip slowly—savour the foretaste.

VIVIAN. (rising, silk slipping scandalously)
Savour me! No foreplay of years—direct to delight!

ALGERNON. (dryly)
Direct routes tire; detours delight. Youth is a sprint; experience, a stroll through scented gardens.

RUPERT. (toasting)
To flirtation's foretaste—the kiss that promises more!

(Laughter; VIVIAN pouts theatrically. Lights dim to candle-glow.)

Curtain.

ACT III: The Vintage Victory

Scene: Midnight. Vivian, dishevelled from failed seductions, sulks on divan. Guests recline, wine flowing.

VIVIAN.
Why spurn my youth? I am perfection unmarred—body flawless, desires frank!

ALGERNON.
Perfection palls, Vivian. Youth wants gratitude, but offers no mystery. Age flaunts its flaws—scars that map adventures, lines that laugh at lost loves. One flirts with the wrinkle before the quench.

BEATRICE.
Precisely. Boys are blanc de blancs—crisp, clean, quickly drunk. Gentlemen are champagne—effervescent with enigma.

PERCY. (wooing VIVIAN)
But Vivian, your form —

RUPERT. (interrupting)
Form without finesse is statuary—admired, not adored. Experience caresses the soul before the skin.

ELIAS. (tipsy)
Even Scripture savours slowness: "Taste and see!" Youth tastes hasty; maturity lingers.

VIVIAN. (deflating)
Then I am but a sip?

ALGERNON. (kindly, pouring)
A delightful sip, my boy. But we thirst for the bottle—corked, cellared, complex. Flirt first; drink deep after.

(Vivian rises, drapes restored, toasts ironically.)

VIVIAN.
To maturity's tease! Youth yields; age withholds—and wins.

ALL. (raising glasses)
To the foretaste!

(Tableau: Algernon and Rupert share a lingering glance; Beatrice fans coyly; Percy sketches Vivian enviously. Harpsichord plays minor-major chord—thirst quenched in wit.)

ALGERNON. (to audience)
Youth slakes; maturity intoxicates. In flirtation's vineyard, every grape tells a tale.

Curtain.

EPILOGUE (spoken by RUPERT)
Gentlemen of the pit, if youth be hasty hock,
Sip slow the vintage—flirtation unlocks!
Grace wants gratitude? Nay—experience's art:
Foreplay of years quenches thirst of the heart!

ACT II

1884: Lord Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

What a triumph of an evening—the sort that lingers in the limbs long after the candles gutter, a memory etched in sweat, laughter, and the warm haze of vintage claret. The vast library, with its galleries of leather-bound vice and virtue, has rarely hosted such splendid abandon. I had invited the elect—those leading gentlemen of the day whose tastes mirror my own, untrammelled by the drab hypocrisies of drawing-room society—and they came in force, two dozen strong, transforming my shelves of forgotten folios into a temple of hearty, man-to-man revelry. No ladies to censor the mirth, no moralists to monitor the merriment; merely the cream of our discreet confraternity, gathered under the guise of a "literary symposium" should any prying valet inquire.

The company was impeccable: Oscar Wilde himself, that emerald-eyed provocateur, arrived fashionably late with a bottle of absinthe and epigrams sharper than rapiers; Lord Randolph Churchill, ruddy-cheeked and reckless, wagering half his stable on a single hand; the young Marquess of Queensberry, all pugilist's brawn and boxer's bravado; my old companion Captain Felix Marchant (no relation to the bawdy playwright of that name, though he claims descent), shirt already half-unbuttoned; Sir Henry Irving, the thespian titan, shedding his Hamlet gravitas for Dionysian glee; and a host of familiars—the Honourable Percy Larkspur, poetaster and paramour; Basil Davenport,

the lithe Corinthian from Oxford's rowing eight; Lord Algernon Worthing, dandy of delicate musculature; and sundry barons, baronets, and bucks whose titles I need not commit to paper, lest this volume fall into injudicious hands. Real and imagined, they formed a pantheon of predilection, each man a masterpiece of form and fancy.

We commenced with sport, as civilised savages must: a riotous game of billiards in the alcove, cues wielded less for precision than for playful prods and parries, shirts discarded amid cheers as the claret flowed freer than the balls. Churchill sank the black with a roar that shook the rafters, claiming it as tribute from "a certain prince who prefers blondes"; Wilde countered with a cannon that kissed the cushion like a lover, murmuring, "One should always play with one's heart—or at least with someone else's". Shirts off by the third frame, torsos gleaming under the gaslight, the air thick with tobacco, perspiration, and that electric frisson of male proximity—good, hearty fun, unapologetic and unbound.

From thence to gambling, at the grand rosewood table beneath the central dome: faro, whist, and a scandalous variant of baccarat where forfeits involved not coin but caresses—a gloved hand upon a thigh, a whispered wager won with a nip at the ear. Queensberry lost his signet ring to Irving, who promptly wore it on his own... unconventional digit; Larkspur staked sonnets against Davenport's fencing foil, emerging bankrupt but blissfully tousled. Wine made us merrier still—cases from my Mu cellars, ruby reds that stained lips and linen alike, loosening tongues and limbs until the room rang with toasts to absent comrades and present delights: "To the sport of kings—and the kings of sport!" cried Marchant, clinking glasses with a bare-chested Wilde, who rejoined, "And to the queens who referee!"

The pinnacle was the mock fencing bout in the cleared central aisle: Marchant and Davenport, stripped to the waist, foils flashing like forked lightning, a spectacle of sweat-slicked sinew and strategic surrender. Queensberry refereed with bellowed umpirage—"Lunge, damn you! Parry with passion!"—while Churchill and Irving laid side-wagers on the outcome. Thrust and riposte dissolved into grapples and guffaws, bodies colliding in joyous collision, the bout ending not in victory but in a pile of panting, triumphant masculinity amid roars of approbation. I refereed the final pass, my own foil "accidentally" nicking Marchant's breeches, to universal hilarity.

As the witching hour approached, flushed and sated, we sprawled upon divans and Turkey rugs, shirts a forgotten heap, passing the last bottles in a haze of heroic anecdote and heroic anatomy. No melancholy intruded; only the pure, pagan poetry of men at play—sport, gamble, grapple, all lubricated by wine and will. Wilde recited an

improvised ode to "the uncloaked Apollo", Irving impersonated a scandalous Caesar, and we vowed eternal brotherhood under the library's vaulted stars.

Ere parting—promises of dawn departures to evade the housemaids—we sealed our pact: next assembly, a staging of one of Felix Marchant's bawdy masterpieces (The Gentlemen's Disport, perhaps, or Foils and Fancies), with roles cast by acclamation and costumes... minimal. Churchill pledged the venue (his London club, after dark); Queensberry, the fencing gear; I, the wine and the willing. What a coven of confederates! They departed in twos and threes, cloaks concealing what collars could not, leaving my library reeking gloriously of exertion and ecstasy.

I sit now amid the wreckage—cues askew, cards scattered, a single foil propped like a sceptre—and reflect on the sublime absurdity of our lives: kings of shadow, emperors of the evening, free in fellowship where the world chains us solitary. No regrets, only relish for the next revel. The Trunk of Delights has been unlocked once more.

1882: The Hôtel de Colombes

Rue du Faubourg St-Honoré, Paris

If I have written seldom of late, attribute it not to indifference but to overwhelm; Paris has so many ways of keeping one otherwise engaged. It is a city designed for moral exhaustion, and I have gladly succumbed to its treatments. The Prince of Wales's company, now nominally on "tour", might more accurately be described as in retreat—from creditors, critics, and the climate of English virtue. We play at the Théâtre du Lys to an audience of perambulatory duchesses, expatriate poets, and three gentlemen of uncertain income, all of whom adore us. The papers, in true Gallic contradiction, call our performances "scandalously English and therefore delicious."

Our arrival was made memorable by a dinner at the Café Riche, hosted by a certain Count de Villers-Saint-Nom—a man whose moustaches alone convey the full history of France. Within the first hour, I found myself in intense conversation with Sarah Bernhardt (who insists on calling me "mon petit cygne"), while the painter Carolus-Duran attempted to sketch my profile upon the tablecloth. The waiters, seasoned veterans of genius, did not blink. Here genius is not an anomaly; it is part of the service.

The moral atmosphere, as you suspect, is entirely distinct from London's. Here they have no need to invent sin—they merely schedule it. The Roman Catholic society that enfolds this town is a remarkable

hybrid: one spends the morning at Mass and the evening at the Moulin Rouge, and no one detects a contradiction. It is as though confession itself has been nationalised. Among the clergy I encountered one Abbé Moreau, who declared with exquisite courtesy that all men are sinners, "mais quelques-uns sont charmants en le faisant". That, I think, must be the continental theology in a phrase.

The Prince himself is in buoyant humour, freed from the clutches of English journalism. He finds in French society that peculiar hospitality extended to rank tinged with wickedness. Last night we supped at the home of the Marquise d'Aubry, whose salon is a kind of moral greenhouse: all manner of exotic human plants flourish there, from young writers in velvet jackets to elderly generals perfumed like ladies. It was there I met Manet, or possibly one of his imitators; a silent fellow who seemed to paint air itself. When I asked whether he liked the theatre, he replied, "Always—so long as it doesn't pretend to be the world". (A remark I shall borrow shamelessly in interviews.)

Of the infamous, naturally there are a few—one does not visit Paris to meet merely the respectable. A certain Comte d'Espalion, an inventor of perpetual engagements, introduced me to an actress of the follies bergère named Violette, who regards sincerity as a quaint British superstition. She possesses beauty of the fragile porcelain variety and intellect of the clockwork sort: precise, regular, and always slightly wound. She does, however, waltz as though time had been abolished. I am learning, as you will gather, les ficelles du bonheur—the ropes, as our nautical dramatists would call them.

Indeed, I find this "open morality" less libertine than theatrical. In London we sin tremblingly; in Paris they sin with rehearsal, and consequently achieve a far superior performance. The difference between guilt and gallantry is, as M. de Villers said, "the finish on the mirror". To an Englishman of aesthetic persuasion this is formidable education. One cannot remain provincial long among people who confess their transgressions with style.

Yesterday I called upon Madame de Polignac, great patroness of every art except prudence. Her drawing-room displayed more masterpieces—and more morals—than the National Gallery. She introduced me to a young poet who writes only about angels; he looked precisely like a sinner and smelled faintly of violets. Over champagne they discoursed upon the necessary purity of artistic inspiration. It is extraordinary how well the French can discuss purity while reclining.

As for me, I am absorbing the French lesson as best I may, though my accent in their moralities remains suspect. The English actor abroad, like our diplomats, is always a little overdressed in conscience. I find myself applauding blasphemies I scarcely understand, and feeling

terribly advanced. Still, it is impossible not to admire a civilisation so confident that vice itself seems a minor branch of courtesy. One bows, one kisses, one errs; and the evening ends in music.

Next week we perform The Hyacinth Prince before the President himself, though it is whispered he will attend masked, like any prudent monarch of morality. I am told the reception is to be brilliant, the politics delicate, and the champagne self-aware. I shall endeavour to be all three.

Write soon, and tell me whether London has forgiven honesty yet. Here, it is almost fashionable—though even in Paris, they prefer one to be discreetly immoral rather than overtly sincere.

1882: The Closet of Lady Catherine
A Comedy of Proclivities in One Act

By Felix Marchant

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- Lady Catherine de Bourgh—Grand dame of Rosings Park; imperious, slightly deaf, and fond of monologues.
- Mr. Algernon Worthing—A dandy of exquisite manners and hidden tastes.
- Captain Rupert Fanshawe—A military wit with a penchant for private drills.
- The Honourable Percy Larkspur—A foppish poet, ever whispering sonnets.
- Lord Basil Featherstone—An aesthete whose glances speak volumes.
- Servants—Discreet observers of the unfolding farce.

The scene is the opulent drawing-room of Rosings Park, adorned with ancestral portraits that seem to smirk. A large trunk stands ominously by the fireplace; a closet door looms ajar in the panelling. Afternoon tea is in progress.

Scene: The Drawing-Room at Rosings

(LADY CATHERINE enthroned in an armchair, peering through her lorgnette at the young men grouped about her. They sip tea with feigned attentiveness, exchanging sly glances. A servant pours from a silver service.)

LADY CATHERINE. (booming, oblivious to their smirks) Gentlemen! You young sprigs of fashion—what think you of these modern proclivities? They infest society like moths in the ermine!

Proclivities, like children, should be neither seen nor heard—but ideally kept in a closet or a trunk, locked away from decent eyes!

ALGERNON. (bowing slightly, eyes twinkling)
Your ladyship speaks wisdom. A trunk preserves freshness admirably.

LADY CATHERINE. (mishearing "freshness" as "freshness of fish")
Fish? Nonsense! I speak of proclivities—those unnatural bendings of the will! They must be straightened like a crooked cane, or packed away in the lumber-room of virtue!

(The young men stifle laughter. RUPERT whispers to PERCY: "Straightened? How droll—she means bent the other way.")

PERCY. (whispering back, sotto voce)
Her ladyship prefers them rigid, no doubt.

LADY CATHERINE. (cupping her ear)
What prattle? Speak up, boy! These proclivities—they involve a most improper interlocking of persons, do they not? Like keys in forbidden locks! One must never turn the key without a chaperon—or better, leave it in the trunk altogether!

RUPERT. (gravely, winking at BASIL)
Quite, madam. The trunk is safest for such delicate mechanisms. One risks jamming otherwise.

BASIL. (aside to ALGERNON)
Jamming? She means a perfect fit.

(Laughter ripples; LADY CATHERINE frowns, adjusting her ear-trumpet.)

LADY CATHERINE.
Fiddlesticks! I hear giggling—improper in gentlemen! These proclivities lead to embraces most unseemly—arms entwined like vines on a trellis, but without the benefit of matrimony! They should be folded away, like linen in a press—pressed, mind you, but never ironed out entirely! No, no—into the closet with them, door bolted!

ALGERNON. (smoothly)
A bolted door ensures privacy, your ladyship. One never knows who might peek.

PERCY. (whispering to RUPERT)
Or who might knock thrice for entry.

LADY CATHERINE. (thumping her fan)
Knocking? Ruffians! These pairings—two of the same sort, like gloves without distinction! One glove for the right hand, one for the left—absurd! Pack them in the trunk together, let them moulder in secrecy! Proclivities must not proliferate—they spread like damp in the walls if not contained!

RUPERT. (innocently)
Damp? A most vivid image, madam. Some prefer a warm trunk to dry out.

(BASIL chokes on his tea; the group dissolves into muffled guffaws. LADY CATHERINE glares.)

LADY CATHERINE.
Warmth? Scandalous! They involve thrusts and parries unbecoming to civilised folk—like fencing without foils! One man lunging at another—preposterous! Thrust them into the closet, I say, and lose the key in the shrubbery!

BASIL. (composing himself)
The shrubbery is delightfully secluded, your ladyship.

ALGERNON. (whispering)
And the key? Often left under the mat.

LADY CATHERINE. (rising, oblivious)
Mats? I mean matches! These proclivities strike sparks without flint—dangerous! Extinguish them in the trunk, padlocked and forgotten! They whisper in the dark, you know—sweet nothings that corrupt the air! Keep them muffled, like lovers in a cupboard!

PERCY. (aside, eyes dancing)
Muffled? How she tempts fate.

LADY CATHERINE. (pacing, gesturing at the trunk)
Observe this very trunk—heirloom of the de Bourghs! Ideal repository for such nonsense. In it go the caresses, the clutchings, the clandestine claspings! Neither seen nor heard—buried like Pharaoh's treasures, but without the romance!

RUPERT. (bowing)
Pharaohs knew the value of a well-packed tomb, madam. Eternity in close quarters.

(The men exchange knowing nods; laughter threatens to erupt. A servant enters with fresh scones.)

LADY CATHERINE. (seizing a scone)
Scones! At least food is straightforward—no proclivities there! But mark my words: these attachments—sticky as honey, yet bitter as gall! Smother them in the closet, or they ooze forth like jam from a poorly sealed jar!

BASIL. (deadpan)
A sticky end indeed, your ladyship.

ALGERNON. (whispering to group)
She means preserve—in jars, tightly corked.

LADY CATHERINE. (deaf to the hilarity)
Preserve virtue, gentlemen! Proclivities belong in the trunk—strapped down, labelled "Fragile", and dispatched to the attic of oblivion! Now,

tea grows cold—ring for more, and let us speak of something sensible, like entailments!

(The young men rise, bowing with exaggerated courtesy. As she turns to the servant, they cluster, whispering feverishly.)

PERCY. (hissing)
The trunk tonight? Her ladyship provides the perfect alibi.

RUPERT.
Bolted door, muffled whispers—paradise!

BASIL.
Proclivities preserved. Lead on, Algernon.

ALGERNON. (grinning)
To the closet—or the trunk. Her words are our map.

(LADY CATHERINE turns back; they scatter to innocence. She beams, oblivious.)

LADY CATHERINE.
Good lads! Now, about those entailments...

(Lights dim as the young men exchange final, conspiratorial glances. The trunk gleams ominously. Curtain.)

EPILOGUE (spoken by a SERVANT, aside)
In Rosings' halls, where closets hide what trunks contain,
Proclivities whisper—and gentlemen refrain.
Lady Catherine prattles; the wise ones play the game:
Neither seen nor heard—but ever felt the same!

1882: A Closeted Gem: "The Closet of Lady Catherine" at Lord d'Anatis's

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By a Spellbound Guest

How rare and ravishing are those evenings when private theatre ascends to the realm of public legend, yet remains the cherished secret of the elect! Such was the second intimate performance of Lord Alban Fitzartur's exquisite trifle, The Closet of Lady Catherine, staged last fortnight in the jewel-box intimacy of Anatis Hall's private salon—a venue where crimson velvet curtains frame not merely a proscenium, but a portal to wit's wilder gardens. Invited among a coterie of two dozen discerning souls (a marquis here, a poet there, several whose evening attire whispered more than their calling cards), one departed not merely amused, but utterly enchanted—and, dare one confess, longing for an encore in more secluded quarters.

The playlet, a one-act masterpiece of verbal fencing, transplants Jane Austen's imperious Lady Catherine de Bourgh into a drawing-room farce of delicious double entendre. Her ladyship, portrayed with tyrannical gusto by a certain veteran of the Kentish gentry (whose name, like much else, remains discreetly veiled), thunders monologues against "proclivities"—those unseemly bendings of the will that "should be neither seen nor heard, but ideally kept in a closet or a trunk!" Her tirades, delivered with the foggy vehemence of one slightly deaf to irony, rail against "interlocking persons", "thrusts and parries", "sticky attachments", and "clandestine claspings"—phrases that, in her innocence, she deems moral thunderbolts, but which her audience of young gentlemen (Algernon Worthing, Captain Rupert Fanshawe, Percy Larkspur, and Lord Basil Featherstone) receive with muffled mirth and conspiratorial whispers. The comedy crests as her every prohibition becomes their cue: trunks gleam ominously, closet doors yawn invitingly, and the final tableau sees the rogues plotting their own "preservation" under her very nose.

Lord d'Anatis—our host, author, and, in the pivotal role of Mr. Algernon Worthing, the evening's undimmed sun—elevates this confection to genius. His performance is a tour de force of restrained ecstasy: every arched brow, every velvet-modulated quip ("A trunk preserves freshness admirably"), every sidelong glance to his fellow rogues speaks volumes of subtextual delight. One forgot the script; one inhabited Rosings, pulse quickened by the proximity of such poise. His wit as playwright is Olympian—Austen filtered through champagne and camp, where every "bolted door" and "muffled whisper" doubles as invitation, every scone a sly symbol of uncrushed jam. Feuds of propriety dissolve in laughter; Lady Catherine prattles of entailments as her auditors scheme for the shrubbery. It is Wildean wizardry before Wilde himself had fully penned it: paradox as foreplay, epigram as embrace.

And oh, the sheer charm of the man himself! Lord d'Anatis, tall and lithe as a Renaissance bronze, his golden curls catching the candle-glow like a halo of mischief, his blue eyes dancing with that winning smile which disarms as deftly as it ensnares—he is beauty incarnate, a vision to haunt the most jaded connoisseur. In ivory silk that clung like whispered sonnets, he moved with the grace of one born to both stage and salon, his voice a caress of contralto velvet. To watch him was to understand the aesthete's creed: art is not observed, but adored.

Supper in the Long Gallery followed—ortolans in aspic, vintage from Mu itself—where our host circulated like quicksilver, his laughter a melody above the crystal chime. To have been among the favoured is consecration; to have beheld him, transfiguration. Lord d'Anatis, if

these lines flutter to your desk amid your scripts and secrets, know that one admirer lingers in fervent hope of a private reading—perhaps over claret in your library, where closets may be explored and trunks unpacked at leisure? The post bears my card; Rosings' rogues would approve.

1882: Introduction to A Decade of Dramatic Delight

(Literary Criticism of The Anatis Canon)
By Edmund S., Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford

In the annals of English letters, certain luminaries emerge not merely to illuminate their age, but to refract its hidden colours through prisms of wit, melancholy, and unapologetic beauty. Such a luminary is Lord Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis—actor, playwright, and social alchemist—whose works, bursting upon the stage and salon these past ten years, have delighted audiences from the Lyceum to the Levant, inspiring a global chorus of admiration and emulation. This modest volume gathers essays on his oeuvre, not as arid exegesis, but as homage to a canon that has reshaped the contours of English literature and public discourse with the effortless grace of a sonnet in silk.

Consider the trajectory: from the debut frolics of the early 1870s—The Peacock's Complaint (1871), with its barbed satire on vanity's plumage, and Gentlemen Prefer Umbrellas (1873), a lampoon of affectation that set London laughing—to the mature masterpieces of the decade's close. The Lovers of Verona (1875), that triumphant travesty of Shakespearean tragedy, wherein Montagues and Capulets feud not over feuds but favours, concluding in Bacchic revelry rather than Romeo's rue; Tragedy with a Smile (1885), fusing vaudevillian timing with elegiac undertow, treating sorrow and humour as "twin gestures of human absurdity—the upper and lower notes of the same chord"; and the exquisite one-acts, The Vicar's Fittings (1880) and The Closet of Lady Catherine (1882), where double entendre dances on the edge of decorum, Austen and ecclesiastical farce yielding coded symphonies of subversion.

Lord Alban's impact upon English literature is profound and manifold. Where the Victorians laboured under moral gravitas, he introduces levity as liberation—paradox as philosophy, epigram as ethics. His plays, redolent of Wilde (with whom he shares absinthe-soaked confidences at the Café Royal) yet antecedent in audacity, elevate the drawing-room comedy to metaphysical masque. Feuds dissolve in frolic; propriety unravels in parlour play; beauty, ever masculine and unaging, triumphs over time's tyranny. Critics abroad—

from New York's Tribune hailing The Hyacinth Prince (1872) as "a fluttering marvel of sensibility" to Melbourne's gazettes acclaiming his colonial tours—attest to a delight that transcends the Channel. In Paris, Sarah Bernhardt herself borrowed his Rosalind for her As You Like It revival; in Calcutta, maharajahs staged The Palace of Perfume (1874) amid jasmine-scented zenanas. His influence ripples: young playwrights in Vienna and Vienna's imitators in Boston ape his tragi-comic ideal, foreshadowing a modernism where laughter underscores lament.

Nor has public discussion escaped his spell. In an era of earnest reform and earnest restraint, Lord Alban's works provoke discourse on the unspeakable: the aesthetics of desire, the absurdity of convention, the poetry of proclivity. The Closet of Lady Catherine, with its imperious dowager railing against "proclivities... kept in a closet or trunk", has entered the lexicon—quoted in club whispers and parliamentary asides, a veiled catechism for the cognoscenti. Bishops thunder against his "dangerous levity"; bucks in the Row sport his peacock cravats as badges of rebellion. His friendship with royalty—the Prince of Wales's equerry in the 1870s, confidant in the 1880s—elevates him beyond mere literati: here is art with an imprimatur, inspiring not just pens but policies of pleasure. Public lectures at the Royal Society of Antiquaries debate his Codex Anserinus; Oxford common rooms recite his balcony apostrophes from Verona. Women adore his Rosalinds; men, his Mercutios—a universality born of universal truths artfully veiled.

What endures is the delight: exuberant, unbowed, infectious. Lord Alban, tall and golden, lithe as his own heroes, never ages in body or spirit; his style sets fashions from Mu silks to Mayfair motifs. His plays delight because they inspire—to laugh at life's ladder, to love despite law, to live as if each evening were a masque. Ten years hence, when Tennyson's laurels fade and Carlyle's thunder mutates, Fitzartur's canon shall shine: not as relic, but revelation.

To the Viscount, this book: homage from an Oxford admirer, whose shelves groan with your quartos and whose heart with your quips. May Anatis Hall ever host the Muses—and their merry minions.

1882: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

A night for the ages—one of those fabulous, unbridled symposia that redeem the drab calendar of English summer, etched now in my memory with the indelible ink of claret and carnality. The venue was

the vast estate of the Earl of Beaconsfield—Disraeli himself, that sly orientalist of politics and pleasure, who has lately taken to hosting these "private costume revels" in the grand folly of his Kentish pile, a Palladian palace where the ghosts of Walpole might blush. Disraeli, ever the showman, decreed the theme "Masque of Motley", and we—the elect, two score strong, all sharing tastes too exquisite for Mayfair's prudes—descended upon his marble halls like a flock of liberated peacocks.

The company was a pantheon of predilection: Oscar Wilde, that green-eyed gadfly, arrived as a Saracen prince, turban askew and epigrams primed; Lord Randolph Churchill, ruddy and reckless in Cossack furs; the Marquess of Queensberry, pugilist in a gladiator's loincloth, already shadow-boxing the footmen; Sir Henry Irving, the thespian titan, as a brooding Mephistopheles; my boon companion Captain Felix Marchant (the playwright's namesake, though he swears no blood tie, only shared bawdiness); and a glittering roster of familiars—the Honourable Percy Larkspur, poet of the parasol; Basil Davenport, Corinthian Corinthian from Oxford's eights; Lord Algernon Worthing, dandy of diamond cuffs; Viscount Rupert Fanshawe, scarlet-coated seducer; and sundry barons, baronets, and bucks whose escutcheons I omit for prudence's sake. Real luminaries and invented intimates, all drawn by the siren call of shirts-off abandon under Disraeli's indulgent eye.

We six—Marchant, Davenport, Worthing, Fanshawe, Larkspur, and I—had conspired our costume: harlequin jesters, identical in motley diamonds of crimson, gold, and indigo, our faces veiled by voluptuous velvet masks with slits for eyes that gleamed like conspirators' signals. Bells tinkled at our ankles and codpieces; diamond-paned breeches clung scandalously; slashed doublets revealed torsos powdered with gold dust. Indistinguishable save by subtle scents—my jasmine, Marchant's musk, Davenport's leather—we were a sextet of anonymity, free to frolic without fame's fetters. Disraeli toasted us as "the Motley Brethren", and the revel commenced.

Sport first, as savages civilised demand: a riotous game of blind man's buff in the Long Gallery, masks heightening the hunt, hands groping gleefully amid guffaws. Shirts—or what passed for them—were off by the second round, flung like gauntlets to the marble floor, bodies colliding in joyous chaos under chandeliers that swung like censers. Churchill pursued Wilde with bellowed bets; Queensberry grappled Irving in mock pankration; we harlequins formed a tumbling phalanx, bells jingling as we pinned and were pinned, sweat mingling with spilled Tokay.

Thence to dancing in the Great Hall, where Disraeli's orchestra—gypsies imported from Bohemia—struck up quadrilles corrupted into cotillions of caress. Wine flowed in fountains—magnums of Moët, jeroboams from my Mu cellars, brandy that burned like lust—making us merrier still, cheeks flushed, masks awry. We six whirled in a private polka, hands wandering where hems had ridden high, private fumblings veiled by the crush: a codpiece tweaked here, a thigh stroked there, whispers lost in the waltz's whirl. Percy recited doggerel odes to "motley manhood"; Fanshawe nipped lobes with theatrical fangs; Marchant and I executed a pas-de-deux of delicious depravity, tumbling into alcoves where fingers flew like freed birds.

The pinnacle was the midnight mêlée—a choreographed "fencing frolic" with foils of flexible silver, shirts long since sacrificed to the pyre of discarded doublets. We harlequins paired off—Davenport lunging at Worthing, Marchant parrying me—thrusts dissolving into grapples, grapples into group embraces, bodies a slick symphony of sinew and sigh amid roars from the Earl's entourage. Wine lubricated every lunge; masks slipped to reveal grins of gorgon glee. Disraeli refereed with cries of "En garde, mes mignons!"; Wilde quipped, "One fences not with steel, but with desire!"

As dawn's fingers pried the curtains, we sprawled in the East Wing's velvet chamber—a tumble of limbs and laughter, harlequin motleys rumpled, masks discarded like spent illusions. I awoke amid the wreckage: Marchant's arm across my chest, Davenport's leg entwined with Fanshawe's, Percy snoring sonnets into Worthing's curls, a pyramid of panting perfection, sunlight gilding gold-dusted torsos. No regrets, only relish—we disentangled with kisses and quips, vowing secrecy and sequel.

Ere parting—cloaks concealing what collars could not—we sealed our covenant: next gathering, a staging of one of Felix Marchant's bawdiest masterpieces (Soldiers' Sport or Sailors' Secrets, those rollicking romps of regimental revelry and nautical nonsense), roles cast by lots, costumes as scant as our scruples. Disraeli pledges the folly; Churchill, the champagne; I, the scenario. What confederates! They scattered to townhouses and trains, leaving Beaconsfield's halls reeking of rapture.

I sit now, nursing a noble headache, amid motley remnants—a bell here, a mask there—and marvel at our motley miracle: emperors of the evening, free in fellowship where daylight chains us. No pale imitations; only the pure poetry of men unbound. The harlequin's jest lives on.

1882: Magdalen College, Oxford
Lady Margaret Hall, Cambridge

In reply to: Introduction to A Decade of Dramatic Delight

By Edmund S., Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford

Your gracious Introduction to The Anatis Canon has reached me across the groves of academe, a beacon amid the leaden skies of Cambridge polemics. What a splendid testament to Lord Alban Fitzartur's decade of delights! Your pages sing with the very exuberance that animates his plays—that Wildean wit (ante-Wilde, as you astutely note) which turns tragedy to tambourine, feud to frolic. I share your admiration utterly; his Lovers of Verona remains my bedside revelation, its Bacchic finale a perpetual rebuke to Carlyle's grimaces. Oxford has claimed him as laurel, and rightly so—though we Cantabrigians whisper that his true alma mater is the Café Royal, where absinthe nurtures what quadrangles merely house.

Yet permit a fellow enthusiast, from these northern cloisters, to venture a conjecture that has long teased my lectern hours: might those repeated names strewn through his dramatis personae—Algernon Worthing, Percy Larkspur, Rupert Fanshawe, Basil Featherstone—form a secret key, unlocking not merely character but the hidden identity of the playwright himself? Observe the pattern, dear Edmund: Algernon recurs as the melancholy dandy in Tragedy with a Smile (1885), The Closet of Lady Catherine (1882), and A Want of Grace (1885); Percy Larkspur, the foppish poetaster, flits from The Vicar's Fittings (1880) to The Lovers of Verona (1875); Rupert, the ardent captain, spars and savours in half a dozen one-acts; Basil, the lithe aesthete, poses on divans from The Peacock's Complaint (1871) onward. Even minor roles—a Basil Davenport here, a Rupert Quill there—echo like motifs in a sonata.

Is this mere economy of invention, or a cipher for the cognoscenti? Decode the initials—A.W., P.L., R.F., B.F.—and one glimpses an acrostic shadow: perhaps Alban's Wit Plays Lightly, or some more intimate anagram veiling the Viscount's own escapades? In The Hyacinth Prince (1872), Algernon woos amid wilting lilies; in Gentlemen Prefer Umbrellas (1873), Percy parries with parasols. These are not stock types, but signatures—self-portraits in ensemble, where the playwright casts himself multiply, a chorus of desires dramatised. The names recur as lovers recur: familiar, flirtatious, freighted with private history. One fancies Lord Alban, quill in hand, smiling at the mirror: "Algernon for mornings, Rupert for midnight."

If this be a key—and I suspect it is, for no dramatist so prodigal with plot would stint on nomenclature without purpose—then what vault does it unlock? The hidden identity of a life led not in solitude, but in splendid multiplicity. These gentlemen, half-naked on divans, fencing in libraries, feasting in vaults—do they not mirror the "literary symposia" whispered of at Anatis Hall? Feuds dissolved in frolic, proclivities preserved in parlour play: if Algernon, Percy, Rupert, and Basil are facets of one soul, then Lord Alban leads an extraordinarily free life, a libertine's kaleidoscope where one man plays many parts, unaged by excess, unbound by convention.

How enviable! While we dons debate entailments in common rooms, his lordship populates Verona and Rosings with alter egos, each a vessel for vitality undimmed. Oxford delights in his public triumphs; Cambridge wonders at his private theatre. Your volume inspires globally; might a sequel decode the names? For now, I raise a glass (Lafite '47, naturally) to the Viscount: playwright of paradoxes, keymaster of closets, eternal youth of the English stage.

With profoundest esteem and fraternal fanaticism,
Prof. Reginald C. Thistlewaite
Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge

1880

London society continues its long, glittering descent into tasteful lunacy. The latest manifestation: the Marchioness of Armitage's Grand Persephone Ball, an event so elaborate that even the chandeliers seemed to perspire with anticipation. It was whispered beforehand that my perennial adversary, the Honourable Aubrey Lennox—he of the alabaster complexion and the self-regard of a comet—intended to stage his own apotheosis by appearing crowned with a live bird (a canary, allegedly) and swathed in a gown of peacock hues. The news descended upon my dressing room like an imperial insult.

There are few provocations one can ignore, and fewer still one ought to. I determined that if Aubrey wished to transform himself into an aviary, then I should become the firmament itself.

The evening arrived amid champagne mist and malice. I delayed my entrance until the hour when nerves began to fray and gossip grew restless. Upon finally presenting myself at the door of the ballroom, I caused immediate and magnificent inconvenience: the crinoline of my gown—a monumental structure of steel, silk, and theatrical sin—proved too broad for the doorway. Two footmen were dispatched with screwdrivers to remove the doors entirely, while the crowd looked on with the delicious horror of those sensing history.

At length I entered, moving slowly like a galleon in full sail, my page boys—fifteen of them, luminous as cherubs—bearing the train behind me in solemn procession. The chandelier crystals trembled. Even the musicians faltered. And there was my rival, already installed at the centre of the room, his unfortunate canary perched above him in visible alarm, shedding occasional feathers into the punch.

I advanced. Silence followed in my wake, broken only by the whisper of silk and the sound, faint but distinct, of egos shattering. Reaching the exact centre of the room, I raised a hand. At that signal my page boys released the train—yards upon yards of ivory fabric cascading to the floor like a conquered banner—and, with perfect timing, pulled a discreet ribbon.

The crinoline collapsed in a sweep of gold and noise. From its hollow heart rose the beating of wings—a snowstorm of white doves bursting forth, circling the chandeliers in opalescent confusion. Beneath their flight glimmered my second skirt: a sheath of silver sequins that caught every candle in the room and denied them relevance.

There was a gasp of genuine awe. The orchestra, bless them, struck up La Traviata without instruction. Aubrey Lennox's canary, demoralised by professional competition, escaped its crown and fled into the rafters, leaving its patron abandoned beneath a molt of defeat.

Afterwards, people called it legendary, sacrilegious, miraculous—depending on the volume of wine and envy in their systems. The Illustrated London News described me (without naming me, of course) as "a vision of celestial theatre". Society will forgive anything, it seems, provided it's sufficiently spectacular.

As for me, I am merely content to have reminded London that while others play at costume, I am costume: stitched together from laughter, vanity, and ambition, with just enough humanity left to mark the seams.

1880: Supervirile Souls: Jaeger's Discovery and the Enigma of Lord Alban Fitzartur

A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By our Correspondent in the Philosophical Smoke-Rooms of Pall Mall

In an age when Darwin dissects the beast and Huxley extols the brain, it falls to the German savant Dr. Gustav Jaeger to unveil the soul's secret taxonomy—a revelation as startling as it is seductive. In his epochal Die Entdeckung der Seele (1878), Jaeger posits a "most remarkable class of men", whom he christens supervirile: individuals

whose "special variation of soul-material" elevates them above the common run of Man, even as the normal male towers over Woman. These titans, he declares, possess a "soul-aroma" potent enough to bewitch their fellows, drawing them into orbits of irresistible allegiance. Jaeger's pantheon is illustrious: Alexander the Great, whose Companions adored him beyond soldiery; Socrates, ensnaring Alcibiades in dialectic's velvet net; Plato, philosopher-king of the Symposium; Julius Caesar, crossing the Rubicon of hearts as readily as rivers; Michelangelo, chiselling David from marble and men alike; Charles XII of Sweden, the lion of the North whose grenadiers followed to Valhalla; William of Orange, stadtholder of souls as well as states.

Among these giants of history, observes your Correspondent, there must stand a contemporary colossus of Alban Fitzartur's stature and virility—that golden-haired paragon of the English stage, Viscount d'Anatis, whose presence in salon or greenroom exercises a magnetism as inexplicable as it is undeniable. Lord Alban, tall and lithe as a Praxitelean bronze, his azure eyes and winning smile a soul-aroma distilled to perfection, bewitches without apparent effort. Actors defer to his Rosalind; poets crib his epigrams; even royalty—the Prince of Wales foremost—seeks his table, drawn by that supervirile effulgence Jaeger anatomises so acutely. One recalls his Hyacinth Prince (1872), where the eponymous hero's "aroma" ensnares a court; art mirrors life, or does life ape the canvas?

Jaeger's thesis, however, strikes at society's tenderest nerve: do the laws against men who enjoy men—those Labouchere Amendments lurking in legislative shadow—place the highest blossoms of humanity on the proscription list? Alexander's Companions, Plato's lovers, Michelangelo's apprentices—were these bonds of mere martial or mentorship might, or did the soul-aroma kindle fiercer fires? The statutes brand as criminal what history hallows as heroic: a preference for male company, ostensibly platonic, veiling sensual pleasures that transcend the conjugal commonplace. What, then, of our contemporaries? Is the Duke who drills his footmen with unusual zeal merely a martinet? The admiral whose cabin youths adore him beyond duty—nautical discipline or nectar of the soul? The poet whose verses to "fair youths" win laurels while his nights win... companionships?

Lord Alban embodies this riddle. His "literary symposia" at Anatis Hall—whispered of in club alcoves—assemble Corinthian athletes and æsthetic amateurs, where fencing foils flash and claret flows freer than confidences. Is it mere camaraderie, or Jaeger's supervirility at play? Fashion bows to his cravats; society apes his masques; yet whispers persist of a private pantheon—rowing eights, rowing blades exchanged

for rowing rhythms. Laws proscribe what nature exalts: the supervirile man, bewitched and bewitching, whose aroma elevates the elect above the everyday. To criminalise such blossoms is to prune the tree of genius at its loftiest boughs.

Jaeger bids us ponder: if supervirility forges empires and symphonies, why chain its sensual bloom? Lord Alban, unaged Adonis of our stage, stands as living refutation—virile, vital, victorious. One envies his court; society, his scent. Let laws lag; the soul-aroma wafts eternal.

1880: "The Vicar's Reverent Tour"
A Moral Comedy for the Immoral Mind

By Felix Marchant

CHARACTERS

- The Reverend Septimus Phipps, Vicar of St. Congreve-by-the-Marsh: learned, loquacious, and luminous.
- Lady Prudence Bartleby, his patroness: as decorous as a freeze-dried lily.
- Sir Anthony Bartleby, her husband: affably disengaged; his smile is fluent in several dialects of impropriety.

SCENE

The newly restored church. Winter noon. Frost clings to the stone like moral discomfort.

PHIPPS (with ecclesiastical ardour)

My Lady, I cannot express the joy your presence brings. The angels themselves appear to have ordered the weather to match your disposition—crisp, unforgiving, and entirely without humidity.

LADY PRUDENCE

Compliments are wasted on women of conviction, Mr Phipps. Kindly show me what you have done to my church before my blood solidifies in the cause of charity.

PHIPPS

As you desire. (turns to Sir Anthony) And what of your lordship—have you come to observe our embellishments?

SIR ANTHONY (lazily)

I never resist a guided revelation, Reverend.

LADY PRUDENCE
Do hurry. I detest lingering in holy places; they encourage metaphor.
PHIPPS
Then let us begin with the font—newly polished, smooth to the touch, and of such slippery material that one must grasp it firmly with both… intentions.
LADY PRUDENCE
I beg you, sir! No physical demonstrations.
PHIPPS (smiling towards Sir Anthony)
Some baptisms, dear Lady, require rather energetic handling. One cannot rely on cold water alone.
SIR ANTHONY
Quite so. Warmth always ensures proper conversion.
(Lady Prudence consults her muff as though for moral reassurance.)
PHIPPS
Now to the chancel arch—the curvature is pure Early English. Do you admire a graceful arch, Sir Anthony?
SIR ANTHONY
Immensely. It suggests support without rigidity.
LADY PRUDENCE
A discussion of arches is unnecessary. Structural matters are best left to engineers and Eve's descendants.
PHIPPS
Forgive me. I meant no offence to the straight line.
(An uneasy pause thick with amusement.)
PHIPPS
Next you see our choir-stalls—carved oak, meticulously rubbed. We insisted upon polish; the grain simply begged to be touched.
LADY PRUDENCE
Touched? By whom?
PHIPPS
By faith, madam. And occasionally by gratitude.
SIR ANTHONY
And gratitude, like oak, improves with friction.
LADY PRUDENCE
Mr Phipps, the tone of this tour is becoming distressingly continental.
PHIPPS
Then let us be positively Roman. (He gestures.) Observe the apse: subtle, secluded—even music lingers there before going public.
SIR ANTHONY
A private echo has its appeal.
LADY PRUDENCE
Your allusions escape me, Mr Phipps, and for that I thank Heaven.

PHIPPS

Heaven must often feel under-appreciated, Lady Prudence. Might I tempt you towards the vestry? It contains several examples of ecclesiastical embroidery.

LADY PRUDENCE

Embroideries bore me. They are confessions that one has enjoyed detail but fears consequence.

PHIPPS

Then perhaps your lordship will permit me to unfold one privately at some future moment?

SIR ANTHONY (smiling)

I delight in unfolded things, provided the atmosphere is suitably reverent.

(Lady Prudence stares into the middle distance like an offended telescope.)

PHIPPS

Now, the pulpit! Carved to precision—every panel invites contemplation, every curve a sermon, if only one knows how to mount it.

LADY PRUDENCE

Mr Phipps, you are unrelentingly physical.

SIR ANTHONY

He speaks merely of ascension, my dear. A spiritual exercise.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord understands perfectly. Height is essential—one sees further from above.

LADY PRUDENCE

Say one prays from above, and be done.

PHIPPS

As you will. And thus we conclude at the organ loft—do forgive the draughts; our pipes are oversensitive in cold weather.

LADY PRUDENCE

I insist you do not discuss your pipes.

PHIPPS

Then I shall refer only to my stops—which, when properly attended to, release remarkable resonance.

SIR ANTHONY

A noble instrument indeed. May I return after hours to examine its capacity?

PHIPPS

I should count it a personal benediction, my lord. One achieves far richer tones at night.

LADY PRUDENCE
Night? I will not have my husband loitering in churches after dark!
SIR ANTHONY
Nonsense, my dear. The Reverend refers to practice. All conscientious men rehearse before divine performance.
PHIPPS
And some performances, Lady Prudence, require a little rehearsal to sound— well— inspired.
(The bell tolls—not pious, but complicit. Lady Prudence freezes like theological statuary.)
LADY PRUDENCE
This tour has been long, laborious, and unbecoming. My extremities are beyond redemption.
PHIPPS
Then permit me to restore feeling, madam—spiritually, of course.
LADY PRUDENCE
Your spirituality, Mr Phipps, appears alarmingly muscular.
SIR ANTHONY
Yes, admirable vigor in the service of faith.
PHIPPS
Faith should always be vigorous, my lord. Languor is the first step toward disbelief. Tonight, perhaps, we shall renew our conviction.
SIR ANTHONY
You may depend upon my attendance, reverend.
LADY PRUDENCE
Your attendance where?
PHIPPS
At evening service, naturally. We shall light all forty candles. One must have illumination, if only to realise the darkness.
(Lady Prudence sniffs frostily; the men exchange a glance as warm as candle flame.)
LADY PRUDENCE
I am frozen to piety. Come, Anthony.
SIR ANTHONY (taking her arm)
Presently, my dear. I linger but to appreciate the vicar's finishing touches.
PHIPPS (softly)
They are best appreciated intimately.
(The organ hums; snow drifts through the open door. The lady departs; two candles flare and gutter out.)
SIR ANTHONY.
After compline then, Reverend?

PHIPPS.
As Heaven decrees—and discretion requires.
(They bow with exaggerated sanctity. Curtain.)

1880: The Illustrated Stage And Salon Weekly

Felix Marchant—A Radiant Peculiarity

Among the season's more glittering apparitions none excites quite the same mixture of admiration and exasperation as Felix Marchant, the actor nobleman whose presence seems to have been contrived expressly to puzzle his genealogists. His family, the imposing House of Mallard, have long been known for their admirable titles and lamentable faces—a dynasty of statesmen and landowners so determinedly amphibious in aspect that to meet them en masse is to mistake the House of Lords for a frog-pond.

Felix Marchant, however, appears to have escaped this hereditary misfortune by some rare act of aesthetic rebellion. Tall and lithe, with the easy carriage of a dancer rather than a duke, he possesses those golden curls that in the Row provoke open envy from debutantes and footmen alike. His eyes, a most arresting blue, seem always to be rehearsing an intimacy, and his smile—frank, faintly mischievous, and entirely disarming—has undone more critical resistance than any review. The stage lights adore him; one suspects they dim themselves slightly in deference.

What distinguishes him most is not the classic symmetry of limb (very nearly sculptural) nor the clear, resonant voice that can turn blank verse to velvet, but rather the air of effortless charm—a charming that feels less performed than inherited from some athletic seraph. Offstage, he greets strangers with the same tender courtesy with which he might greet an encore, ever mindful that audiences are everywhere.

Society, fickle mother that it is, cannot decide whether to laud or lampoon him. Some whisper that his beauty is his craft; others, that his craft is his rebellion. But all agree that Felix Marchant occupies the rarest province in British theatre—that narrow frontier where grace defies heredity, and a golden-haired exception gleams among a family of green.

1880: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

My valet Graves—ever the discreet sentinel of my secrets, with his valet's eye for scandal and his poker-face for poker—presented me this morning with a dog-eared copy of A Gentleman's Gentlemen, folded open to an article that flatters beyond the bounds of veracity or vanity. "For your perusal, m'lord", he murmured, eyes averted as if handling nitroglycerine, before vanishing to polish boots that needed no polish. The piece, titled "Supervirile Souls: Jaeger's Discovery and the Enigma of Lord Alban Fitzartur", hoists me upon a pedestal of Teutonic taxonomy, dubbing me a contemporary colossus amid Jaeger's pantheon of "supervirile" giants: Alexander the Great, Socrates, Plato, Julius Caesar, Michelangelo, Charles XII, William of Orange. A "soul-aroma" potent enough to bewitch my fellows, it claims—my presence in salon or greenroom an irresistible orbit, my Hyacinth Prince a mirror to my magnetism. Erroneous, I feel, yet deliciously diverting; my virility, if such it be, is often matched and exceeded by my partners, those Corinthian athletes and æsthetic amateurs who storm my symposia with vigour surpassing my own studied seductions.

How amusing to imagine myself ranged against Alexander—not for conquering lands (Persia pales beside the conquest of a club alcove), but for the legions of men at my disposal: rowing eights from Oxford, fencing masters from Paris, syce-boys from Simla, all drawn like Hephaestion to their hero, though I claim no diadem, only desire's dominion. The writer's conceit tickles: kings and emperors as my peers, my "unaging Adonis" form a living refutation to prudish proscriptions. I would never stoop to mere royalty—those Hanoverian heirs with their pasteboard passions—yet acknowledge the flattery of such celestial company. Supervirile? Perhaps, if soul-aroma means the scent of jasmine and jasmine-scented skin after a midnight mêlée, where shirts fly like surrendered flags and claret consecrates the combatants.

Yet true aspiration stirs deeper: the philosophical heights of Plato or Socrates, those symposiasts supreme whose dialogues danced dialectic with desire, Alcibiades ensnared by wisdom's web as much as wantonness. If only my plays carried their charm and penetration—The Lovers of Verona with Plato's cave-shadows of affection, Tragedy with a Smile probing Socratic absurdities—I might be satisfied, if not actually sated. Jaeger's "special variation of soul-material" flatters the flesh; I crave the mind's mastery, epigrams that pierce like foils, paradoxes that penetrate like lovers. My Rosalind blurs genders delightfully, but lacks the Symposium's symphonic subtlety; my harlequins frolic bawdily, yet yearn for the sage's seductive scrutiny.

The article's envy is palpable—that provincial penitent pines for my pavilion, hookah-hazed and hyperventilated. Let him dream; my court is selective, my symposia sacred. Graves reports the magazine circulates in clubs; bishops bluster, bucks beam. Erroneous or not, it serves: a shield of supervirility veils the seraglio, turning suspicion to stardust. Tonight, a fencing frolic with young Davenport—let him exceed my "virility" amid the foils; I shall aspire to Socrates, questioning his every thrust.

The fire crackles; the sea sighs approbation. Among giants? A pleasant perch, though I prefer the divan. Alexander conquered; I collect. Plato philosophised; I play. Enough—quill down, claret up. To soul-aromas eternal.

1872: The Emperor's Elbows, New York

Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

If I were the sort to grow vain (and Heaven forbid I should grow anything else), I would say I have conquered the New World. The Emperor's Elbows—my most improbable and therefore truest confection—has met with reception so thunderous that I feared the gas-lights might tremble themselves to extinction. The theatre on Broadway was packed to the drapery, Americans being by nature incapable of staying at home when noise is promised. They cheered before understanding, laughed before the wit had finished dressing itself, and applauded as though enthusiasm were a civic duty. I adore them for it—boisterous youths of a nation still in its adolescence, discovering that spontaneity can serve as culture.

The play—to remind my future, forgetful self—is my diplomatic farce in four acts: an empire ruled by etiquette so rigid that the Emperor cannot bow without ministerial consent. Court life collapses, predictably and gloriously, when the titular elbows become a symbol of rebellion, and love (between two courtiers disguised as imperial adjutants) restores motion to the realm. A Greek chorus of bureaucrats sings commentary, while a ballet of messenger-boys personifies telegrams. It is a lunacy of manners, yet one which, I assure myself, masks real philosophy: that liberty of gesture, like liberty of thought, is the beginning of civilisation.

My performance as the Emperor—half peacock, half martyr—was, if one believes The New York Globe, "a revelation of expressiveness, a hieroglyph in flesh and silk". Harper's Gazette called the text "a scandal

written by an angel in a libertine's hand", which I take as benediction. Even The Philadelphia Recorder, usually allergic to anything that rhymes with pleasure, concedes that my "command of irony approaches statesmanship". I confess, reading these notices over oysters at Delmonico's last night, I found myself laughing aloud—not at the praise but at the sense that one cannot go halfway round the globe without finding critics who mistake delight for danger. May their ink never dry.

Of the Americans themselves, I must report with indulgent affection that they are splendidly unfinished. Their men possess the limbs of Athletes and the manners of Schoolboys; they slap one's back as though testing for friendship by percussion. When thrilled, they throw hats; when doubtful, they applaud more loudly to quiet conscience. It is a national innocence bordering on rapture. Even their poets—the grave Mr Lowell, the florid Mr Blanchard Cole, and young Walt Whitman, who shakes one's hand as though introducing one to the Universe—exude that freshness of experiment which we in Europe lost somewhere between our revolutions and our tailors.

I lunched yesterday on the Golden Mile, that shining promenade along Fifth Avenue where England has established itself abroad. One finds the same clubs, carriages, cucumber sandwiches, and chatter, merely translated into dollars. It is England in duplicate, wrapped in expensive optimism. I dined with my distant cousins who wear American fashions with British embarrassment. Their drawing-room, complete with portraits by an imported Sargent minor and a footman trained in Belgravia, convinced me that exile can be indistinguishable from Mayfair if one is sufficiently obstinate. I asked, perhaps too pointedly, "Why voyage five thousand miles to rebuild Grosvenor Square?" No one answered, preferring to discuss fox-hunting in New Jersey.

Yet the city has its artists worth staying awake for. I met the composer Jonathan Peary, who intends to write an opera set entirely in a telegraph office ("a chorus of beeps and hearts", he says). Edgar Martling paints mythological cowboys and recites Keats while cleaning brushes. Frank Wilde, an Irish expatriate unrelated to my young Oxford acquaintance Oscar, read me poems so indecently joyful I felt almost respectable. Each of them treats me as visiting royalty—the kind they can afford to adore precisely because he rules nothing.

Tomorrow I shall return to the stage for another benefit performance, ostensibly for charity but in fact for applause—which is the charity I most require. Afterwards, we sail for Boston and then perhaps to the plantations of the South, though I suspect I shall miss the city's noise the way a bird misses thunder. America has bewitched

me: she is raw, handsome, artless, and hungry—a youth stretching his limbs, unashamed of nakedness. I wonder whether England ever truly was young, or whether we were born already tired, our brilliance a mask for our fatigue.

As for me, The Emperor's Elbows has proved what I long suspected—that one may be misunderstood and adored in the same evening, provided one bows beautifully. Should the Prince of Wales read these Yankee reviews, he may finally forgive my refusal to appear at Windsor; for no empire, not even his, knows how to applaud so loudly as America.

1876: The Palace of Perfume
A Voluptuous Comedy in Three Acts

By Felix Marchant

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- Lord Algernon Worthing—A voluptuary of Bombay, owner of the Palace of Perfume.
- Captain Rupert Fanshawe—His English admirer, scarlet-coated seducer.
- Raja Percy Larkspur—Local prince, lithe and lavish.
- Basil Davenport—A syce-youth turned paramour, olive-skinned Apollo.
- The Reverend Elias Temperance—Poor missionary, gaunt and grim.
- Lady Beatrice Vintage—Algernon's worldly widow aunt, dispenser of epigrams.
- Hyacinth—A nautch dancer's brother, kohl-eyed temptation.
- Servants, Bearers, and Men of the Palace—Embodiments of Eastern allure.

The scene is the Palace of Perfume in Bombay: marble halls scented with attar, fountains bubbling champagne, divans draped in silk. Heat throbs; temptations bloom.

ACT I: The Scent of Scandal

Scene: The Grand Pavilion. Algernon reclines amid cushions, fanned by Basil and Hyacinth. Incense curls like lovers' sighs.

ALGERNON. (sipping mango lassi)
Bombay is perfume made flesh—jasmine for the skin, musk for the soul. Life here defies England's drab decalogue.

BASIL. (oiling his lordship's shoulders)
Sahib, the heat unlocks all locks.

HYACINTH. (trailing fingers)
And the English missionaries bolt them shut.

(Enter CAPTAIN RUPERT, in sweat-stained scarlet, collapsing dramatically.)

RUPERT.
Algernon! The Club is a purgatory of pink gins and piety. Rescue me with your palace pleasures!

ALGERNON.
Rupert, my scarlet sin! These youths—Basil the bronzed, Hyacinth the hypnotic—are sermons in silk. Join us.

RUPERT. (embracing Basil)
Willingly. England's virtues wilt here; India's vices bloom eternal.

(Enter RAJA PERCY, in cloth-of-gold, jewels gleaming.)

PERCY.
Lord Worthing! My elephants await—or shall we ride the divan instead?

ALGERNON.
Raja, your trunk is temptation incarnate.

(Enter REVEREND ELIAS, gaunt in black, clutching Bible and beads.)

ELIAS. (aghast)
Heathenry! Idolatry! This palace reeks of unnatural unions—men entwined like serpents in Eden! Repent!

ALGERNON. (amused)
Reverend, Eden was paradise—before your God evicted the delights.

ELIAS.
Monotheism! Marriage! Respectability! These are God's laws—not your perfumed perversions!

PERCY. (laughing)
Your one God is lonely; ours dance in thousands. Marriage? A chain; we prefer garlands.

Curtain.

ACT II: The Missionary's Mandate

Scene: The Perfumed Bathhouse. Steam rises; youths splash languidly. Reverend spies through lattice.

ELIAS. (bursting in)
Abomination! Men with men, English with Eastern—this is Sodom redux! Convert, or burn!

RUPERT. (emerging dripping, embracing Hyacinth)
Burn deliciously, Reverend. Your hellfire warms; our waters soothe.

LADY BEATRICE. (entering in sari, fanning)
Elias, dear zealot, India laughs at your Leviticus. Life here is lotus—we float; you flail.

ELIAS.
Marriage sanctifies! One man, one woman—death dignified, birth blessed!

ALGERNON. (with Basil on knee)
Sanctifies boredom. Here, pleasures proliferate—Raja Percy's rubies, Captain Rupert's ardour, Basil's bronze. Death? A divan deeper than yours.

PERCY. (to Rupert)
Captain, spar with me—foils or flesh?

RUPERT.
Both, my prince!

ELIAS. (horrified)
Fugitive lusts! Your culture comprehends neither life nor death as Christ commands!

HYACINTH. (dancing)
Christ walked on water; we swim in scent. Join us, padre—or preach to peacocks.

(Laughter swells; Elias flees, Bible sodden.)

Curtain.

ACT III: The Garden of Ganymede

Scene: Moonlit Gardens. Fountains arc rosewater; men recline in lotus poses. Revels rage.

ALGERNON. (toasting)
To the Palace of Perfume—where English rigidity melts in Indian embrace!

RUPERT. (grappling Percy)
Rigidity? I yield delightfully!

BASIL & HYACINTH. (entwining Algernon)
Sahib, the night is young—and so are we.

(Enter ELIAS, dishevelled, clutching converts' pamphlets.)

ELIAS.
I return! Your voluptuary vortex vortexes virtue! Monotheism shall prevail—marriage its cornerstone!

LADY BEATRICE.
Cornerstone? Crumb! India's edifice is erotic—temples to many loves, not your lonely lord.

PERCY. (with Rupert)
Reverend, taste our curry—spiced beyond your bland Bible.

ELIAS. (tempted, sipping lassi)
This... nectar... unnatures nature!
ALGERNON.
Precisely! Nature unbound—youths like Ganymede, cups to Jove's thirst. Join the symposium!
ELIAS. (swooning amid steam)
One God... many gods... one sip...
(He collapses into cushions; youths revive him with massages. Laughter cascades.)
ALGERNON.
See? Even missionaries crave the perfume. Bombay baptises in bliss!
ALL. (toasting)
To perfume eternal—life voluptuous, death delightful!
(Tableau: entangled embraces under moon; Elias smiles slyly. Confetti of petals falls.)
EPILOGUE (ALGERNON to audience)
In Palace of Perfume, missionary meets muse:
Monotheism melts in polyamorous ruse.
East and West entwine—no sin, only scent:
Voluptuary victory, heaven-sent!

1876: Perfumed Paradise: "The Palace of Perfume" at Anatis Hall

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By a Ravished Guest of the Private Masque

In the annals of private theatricals, few evenings rival the intoxicating premiere of Lord Alban Fitzartur's The Palace of Perfume, unveiled last sennight in the voluptuous intimacy of Anatis Hall's Moorish Pavilion—that jewel-box of a theatre where crimson silks drape like courtesans' veils and fountains murmur secrets to the stars. Invited among a coterie of twenty select connoisseurs (a Cabinet undersecretary here, a marquis manqué there, several whose evening pumps have trod forbidden thresholds), one emerged not merely applauding, but aching with envy—for the play's Bombay bacchanal, for its author's audacity, and, pre-eminently, for the radiant genius who embodied it all.

The piece, a three-act fantasia on Eastern excess versus Western starch, transplants Albanese wit to the subcontinent's scented shores. Lord Algernon Worthing—voluptuary sahib of the titular palace—lords over a harem of olive-limbed syce-youths and scarlet-coated captains, his silk-draped divans a stage for polyamorous revels that mock the gaunt Reverend Elias Temperance's crusades for monotheism

and matrimony. “Bombay is perfume made flesh”, purrs Algernon; “Your one God is lonely; ours dance in thousands”, retorts the raja. The missionary’s Bible-sodden sermons dissolve in lassi-laced laughter, his hellfire quenched by nautch-youth embraces—a tragi-comic triumph where East’s erotic edifice topples West’s rigid ramparts in cascades of attar and epigram.

Lord d’Anatis—host, playwright, and, in the tour-de-force of Algernon Worthing, the evening’s undimmed deity—eclipses the script with sheer sorcery. His performance is revelation incarnate: reclining amid cushions fanned by Basil Davenport (a bronzed syce of breathtaking verisimilitude) and Hyacinth (kohl-eyed temptation), he modulates from languid lotus-eater to lacerating wit, his voice a caress of contralto velvet that turns “pleasures proliferate” into a seduction of the stalls. Every arched brow dismisses the Reverend’s ravings; every grape fed to a paramour drips with defiant delight. One forgot artifice; one inhaled Bombay—jasmine haze, musk of manhood, the throb of tabla beneath the tirade.

His wit as scribe is Olympian: the Church skewered with surgical silk—Temperance’s “monotheism shall prevail” melting to “one sip..”. amid massaged surrender—a masterstroke of seeming innocence that attacks piety while cloaked in parody. How enviable his impunity! Bishops might bluster in reviews, yet society applauds, mistaking subversion for sparkle. Lord Alban waltzes on ecclesiastical eggshells, unscathed—a high-wire act of heresy that lesser scribes could not essay.

And oh, the charm of the man! Tall, lithe as a Ravi Varma god, his golden curls catching the footlights like a halo of mischief, azure eyes dancing with that winning smile which disarms dynasties—he is beauty’s very argument, unaging Adonis in ivory silk that clung like monsoon mist to marble limbs. To watch him woo Raja Percy Larkspur (Captain Rupert Fanshawe’s scarlet ardour a fine foil) was to yearn for India’s temptations oneself: those syce-youths’ sinuous surrender, the palace’s perfumed abandon—pleasures envied from club armchairs, where pink gins pall beside such polyamory. One aches to sample those divans, those dusky delights Lord Alban evokes so vivaciously.

Supper in the Lotus Pavilion followed—curries aflame, champagne fountains, nautch interludes—where our host circulated like liquid amber, laughter a melody above the sitar’s sigh. To be among the elect is consecration; to behold him, transfiguration. Lord d’Anatis, if these fervent lines reach your script-strewn desk, know one provincial penitent pines for private audience—perhaps over hookah in your pavilion, where Bombay’s balms might balm an English exile? The post bears my card; Algernon’s admirers await.

1875: The Grace of the Male Form

By Felix Marchant, for A Gentleman's Gentlemen

It is a truth seldom admitted, though universally felt, that beauty, when embodied in manly proportion, possesses a gravity and nobility no less deserving of homage than that which poets continually ascribe to woman. Yet in our polite society we have somehow mistaken modesty for blindness and elegance for evasion, and so avert our eyes from that which antiquity raised in marble to the glory of nature and of art.

To walk among the sculptures of the ancients—those radiant remnants of Athens and Rome—is to be reminded how unflinchingly our forebears regarded perfection. The athlete poised in the instant before the discus flies, the youth with his hand lifted as though greeting the sea, the stern god whose calm gaze renders all action unnecessary—all testify to a lineage of strength that finds refinement in itself. The chiselled limb, the lifted torso, the slight inclination of the head: each is tuned to an invisible harmony, an art that dignifies desire by purifying it.

I have stood before the Antinous in the British Museum and thought how deeply the sculptor must have loved the sight he wrought from stone. There is in those features no vanity, no effort at adornment—only the natural rhythm between repose and energy. The shoulders, broad yet not burdened; the waist that yields as gently as a phrased melody; the noble quiet of the throat—these compose an anatomy both majestic and humane, where strength does not deny tenderness but completes it. The line from temple to collarbone, scarcely broken by shadow, is itself a lesson in composure.

Recently, that ancient music has found new utterance on the modern stage; one need only observe the English ballet at its summit to recognise how the classical ideal has slipped gracefully from marble into motion. The male dancer, contrary to vulgar misapprehension, is no ornament but the very axis about which grace revolves. A well-trained dancer reveals how the human frame possesses an eloquence beyond words. The long line of the leg, firm at the calf and refined at the ankle, becomes in movement the writing of invisible verse. The hands—so misunderstood in men—acquire speech; the back, when arched in leap or bow, recalls the bow of Ulysses, tensioned yet elegant.

Some will object that such appreciation borders upon indulgence. Let them. There is no impropriety in reverence, nor sin in recognising proportion. The male body, perceived rightly, unites moral and

physical architecture: it is column and temple, instrument and anthem together. Strength, in its purest form, is a grace that never forgets restraint; beauty, a courtesy nature extends to discipline.

In London, amid the pale fog and pallid manners, one sometimes forgets that man was ever conceived in noble outline. The statues of Athens and the dancers of Covent Garden remind us. Each sculpted flank or measured pirouette calls to mind a truth murmured more than spoken—that art's highest achievement lies in its ability to ennoble admiration rather than to conceal it.

So let us, as gentlemen, observe beauty without apology and strength without defence. Let us acknowledge that the male form—seen in its classical serenity or its balletic splendour—is not a thing of scandal but of celebration: a testament to order, courage, and the exquisite logic of life itself.

1875: The Lovers of Verona: A Tragicomedy in Three Acts

By Felix Marchant

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- Lord Capulet—A nobleman of Verona, jealous guardian of beauty.
- Lord Montague—His rival in elegance and affection.
- Romeo Capulet—Youthful, golden-haired, of exquisite sensibility.
- Mercutio Montague—Witty, ardent, and perilously handsome.
- Tybalt Capulet—Hot-tempered kinsman, defender of family honour.
- Benvolio Montague—Peaceful mediator, lover of harmony.
- Friar Laurence—A philosophical cleric with a taste for romance.
- Paris—A suitor of fashion, rival to Romeo.
- Nurse—Capulet's aged retainer, dispenser of scandalous wisdom.
- Servants, Maskers, and Gentlemen of Verona.

The scene is Verona, a city of sunlit balconies and moonlit gardens, where feuds are fought with fans and glances.

ACT I: The Masque of Rivalry

Scene I: A Street in Verona

Enter LORD CAPULET and LORD MONTAGUE, with attendants, glaring across the square.

CAPULET.
Montague! Thy peacocks strut too close to my parterre. Verona is not broad enough for both our plumes.
MONTAGUE.
Nor for thy endless preening, Capulet. Thy roses bloom where mine should flourish.
CAPULET.
Roses? Thy lilies wilt beside my blooms!
(They draw fans, brandishing them like swords. Enter PRINCE'S OFFICER.)
OFFICER.
My lords, the Prince forbids such flourishes in public! Reserve your rivalries for private balconies.
Exeunt severally.
Scene II: Capulet's Ballroom
(A masque. Maskers in silks and feathers. ROMEO CAPULET enters, radiant.)
ROMEO.
What light through yonder casement breaks? It is the east, and Mercutio is the sun.
(Enter MERCUTIO MONTAGUE, masked, with BENVOLIO.)
MERCUTIO.
Romeo! Thou art a saucy boy. Wilt thou dance with foes tonight?
ROMEO.
If the foe be fair, why not? Feud or no, beauty demands tribute.
(They unmask. TYBALT spies MERCUTIO.)
TYBALT. (aside)
Montague scum in Capulet halls! Yet... such limbs, such curls. No—honour first!
MERCUTIO. (to ROMEO)
Come, cousin-foe, a turn about the room. Thy hand in mine offends no law of grace.
(They dance, gazes locked. CAPULET watches jealously.)
CAPULET.
My Romeo, ensnared by that Montague serpent! This feud shall deepen.
Curtain.

ACT II: Balconies and Banter
Scene I: Capulet's Garden, Moonlit
(ROMEO climbs the balcony. MERCUTIO appears above.)

ROMEO.
Mercutio! Mercutio! Swear by thy wit thou wilt not vanish with the stars!
MERCUTIO.
What satisfaction canst thou have tonight from such a foe?
ROMEO.
Satisfaction? Nay, the universe! Thy name is music, though it be Montague.
MERCUTIO.
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptis'd. Henceforth I never will be Mercutio.
ROMEO.
Our families feud like ill-dressed tailors, but what care we? Thy lips are roses, mine to pluck.
MERCUTIO.
Descend, sweet foe, and let us seal our truce with silken bonds.
(They embrace as shadows lengthen. Enter FRIAR LAURENCE, unseen.)
FRIAR. (aside)
A potion of passion brews here. I shall bless it with my arts.
Scene II: Friar Laurence's Cell
FRIAR.
Romeo, Mercutio—your love outshines Verona's sun. Drink this vial: it feigns death to foes, but wakens lovers true.
ROMEO.
Aesthetic ecstasy! We shall elope to Venice, where canals mirror our delight.
MERCUTIO.
And leave these jealous kin to their drab disputes.
Curtain.

ACT III: Feuds and Flourishes
Scene I: The Square
(TYBALT accosts MERCUTIO.)
TYBALT.
Montague! Thou hast stolen Capulet's fairest flower. Defend thy perfidy!
MERCUTIO.
Perfidy? 'Tis poetry! Romeo is mine by right of beauty.
(They duel with rapiers, but artfully, like dancers. BENVOLIO intervenes.)
BENVOLIO.
Peace, kinsmen! Let wit, not steel, decide.

TYBALT.
Never! (Strikes lightly; MERCUTIO falls theatrically.)
MERCUTIO. (rising)
A scratch! But for form's sake... (pretends death, winks at ROMEO).
ROMEO.
Mercutio! Slain by family folly!
(TYBALT flees, laughing. MONTAGUE and CAPULET enter, feigning outrage.)
CAPULET.
My son bewitched! Montague, thy spawn hath poisoned him!
MONTAGUE.
Lies! Thy Tybalt tempted fate!
Scene II: Paris's Apartments
PARIS. (to ROMEO)
Fair Capulet, forget that Montague. I offer jewels, sonnets, silks.
ROMEO.
Jewels? Thy baubles dim beside his glance. Begone, rival!
(ROMEO drinks the potion, swoons. FRIAR enters.)
FRIAR.
He sleeps till Mercutio comes. Hide him in my cell.
Curtain.

Grand Finale: The Tomb of Truces
Scene: Capulet's Vault, Dimly Lit with Candles
(All characters enter in mourning weeds, but festively. ROMEO lies "dead" on a sarcophagus. CAPULET and MONTAGUE clash verbally.)
CAPULET.
See thy son's corpse! Montague, thou art Verona's curse!
MONTAGUE.
Nay, thy jealousy slew him!
(Enter FRIAR, triumphant.)
FRIAR.
Peace, lords! Behold the miracle of love! (Administers antidote. ROMEO rises.)
ROMEO.
Mercutio! My sun!
(MERCUTIO enters from shadows, unharmed.)
MERCUTIO.
The duel was but masque! Now, all feuds end in revelry!
TYBALT. (embracing BENVOLIO)
Kinsman, thy peace persuades. Let us feud no more—save in bedsheets!

PARIS.
I yield my suit. Beauty multiplies.

CAPULET & MONTAGUE. (together)
Our houses unite! Verona shall dance!

(Lights rise on garlands, flutes, champagne fountains. All gentlemen disrobe to silken robes, feathers, jewels. An AESTHETIC ORGY ensues: choreographed embraces, laughter, toasts to Bacchus and Beauty. No blood, only bliss.)

CHORUS OF SERVANTS.
Where once was feud, now frolic reigns!
Love's palette spills o'er Verona's plains!

(They whirl in ecstatic tableau: limbs entwined like vines, kisses like confetti. Final pose: all gazing upward, arms outstretched to an imagined moon of pleasure.)

FRIAR. (blessing)
In vino veritas, in amore aeternitas!

ALL.
Verona eternal!

(Thunderous applause. Curtain falls amid confetti and cries of "Encore!")

EPILOGUE (spoken by FRIAR)
Gentlemen of the pit, in Verona's vine-wreathed tomb,
We prove that feuds flee fast from passion's plume.
No dagger dulls delight, no poison palls the rite —
Love laughs at law, and dances through the night!

1875: A Private Triumph: "The Lovers of Verona" at Lord Anatis'

From "A Gentleman's Gentlemen"
By a Grateful Guest of the Masque

It is the peculiar privilege of those who move in certain elevated circles to witness occasions which, though unadvertised in the public prints, remain etched indelibly upon the memory as pinnacles of private art. Such was the singular performance of Mr. Alban Fitzartur's The Lovers of Verona, enacted last Michaelmas in the intimate theatre of Anatis Hall, Kent—kindly thrown open by our host, Lord Alban Fitzartur himself, to a select company of connoisseurs. One hesitates to term it a "play", for it transcended the footlights; it was a revelation, a revel, a rite.

The evening commenced with that exquisite hush which precedes true genius. Candles in silver sconces cast a golden haze over the crimson draperies, and the air was perfumed with tuberose and anticipation. Lord Fitzartur, ever the gracious sovereign of such soirees, appeared not merely as author and director, but—oh, rapture!—as Romeo Capulet himself: tall, lithe, golden-haired, his form apparelled in ivory silk that clung like a sonnet to the marble of antiquity. One could not but gaze, mesmerised, at the azure of his eyes, the winning curve of his smile, the very poise of his limbs—a vision so flawlessly classical that Bernini might have chiselled it from living alabaster. To see him move was to understand why the Greeks deified beauty; to hear him speak was to forgive Verona its feuds.

The play, a triumphant reimagining of that tiresome Shakespearian tragedy, substitutes for blood and suicide a feud of exquisite jealousy among Verona's noblemen—all masculine, all ardent, all vying not for some pallid Juliet but for the sunlit favours of youth and wit. Mercutio Montague (portrayed with devilish panache by a certain baronet whose name discretion withholds) spars with Romeo in dialogues of such epigrammatic fire that Wilde himself might blush to claim paternity. "Thy lips are roses, mine to pluck", breathes Romeo; "Call me but love, and I'll be new baptis'd", retorts Mercutio. Feuds dissolve not in poison but in potion—a Friar's elixir that feigns death only to usher in life's most aesthetic abundances.

Mr. Fitzartur's wit as playwright is nothing short of Olympian. Where Shakespeare weeps, he laughs; where daggers pierce, fans flutter; where tombs chill, garlands bloom. The Montagues and Capulets, those jealous guardians of masculine bloom, clash in a ballet of barbs: "Thy peacocks strut too close to my parterre!" cries Capulet; "Thy lilies wilt beside my roses!" parries Montague. Tybalt's duel with Mercutio becomes a choreographed frolic, steel yielding to silk; Paris, the foppish suitor, yields his jewels with a sigh. And oh, the finale! In the vaulted tomb, feigned mourning erupts into a flamboyant apotheosis: robes discarded for diaphanous veils, limbs entwined like vines in Bacchic frenzy, champagne fountains arcing like liquid stars. No vulgar excess, but an orgy aestheticised—choreographed embraces, toasts to Beauty eternal, a whirlwind of feathers and flesh under Friar Laurence's benediction: "In vino veritas, in amore aeternitas!"

Lord Fitzartur's performance as Romeo was the evening's sun. His balcony soliloquy—"Mercutio! Mercutio! Swear by thy wit thou wilt not vanish with the stars!"—drew gasps of delight; his potion-swoon, a masterpiece of languid grace; his resurrection, a triumph of unveiling. One forgot the theatre; one inhabited Verona, pulse quickened by proximity to such perfection. His voice, resonant as a viol da gamba,

modulated paradox into poetry; his gestures, economical yet electric, spoke volumes the script merely hinted. And his beauty—ah, that golden cascade, those sapphire glances, that smile which disarms as deftly as it enchants—rendered every line a personal apostrophe.

The company, drawn from London's most discerning (a duke here, a poet there, several whose reputations precede their invitations), responded with that rarest accolade: prolonged, knowing silence, broken only by cries of "Encore!" and "Bravo!" Supper followed in the Hall's Long Gallery—caviar, ortolans, and vintage from the Anatis cellars—where Lord Fitzartur circulated, ever the radiant host, his laughter a melody above the clink of crystal.

To have been invited was privilege; to have witnessed, consecration. One departs Anatis Hall not merely entertained, but transfigured—persuaded anew that art's true end is ecstasy. Mr. Fitzartur, if these unworthy lines reach your eye, know that your admirer lingers in hope of further enlightenment. A private word, perhaps, over claret in your library? The post awaits my card; Verona's lovers would approve.

1875: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

My father's old notion that a gentleman must always keep a horse "close to hand" has at last been realised, though in a somewhat modern fashion. I have engaged a stall at the mews behind Cavendish Square, where my mare—Dido, a creature of temperament and vanity, thus perfectly suited to town—waits each morning for whichever of us loses the argument about exercise.

This afternoon I took her to Hyde Park, a performance less of recreation than of exhibition. The place was a veritable parade of well-groomed ambition and accidental suggestion. There is a curious air in London this spring—one of impudent civility—and the Park wears it like perfume. I had not ridden half its length before observing that the "serious" horsemen (those professing to know the difference between sport and spectacle) were vastly outnumbered by figures for whom a promenade was invitation enough.

It seems there are hunts other than my father's preferred variety. The trees were full of glances. One sees so many well-tailored young men of leisure, loitering with all the abandon of classical statuary, that one begins to suspect London has invented a new season altogether—the Season of Suggestion. A smile replaces the horn, a lifted hat the hound. Even Dido pricked her ears at intervals, as though detecting argument beneath the decorum.

Naturally, I refrained from joining the mêlée. A gentleman hunts only when equipped properly, and I had not yet settled whether I am the hunter, the hunted, or merely the horse. Still, the thought did occur that a closed carriage might prove a more commodious conveyance for such sociological enquiries—perhaps a brougham with drawn curtains and four in hand. The idea is dangerously tempting, though the more prudent part of me insists it might be inviting Fate to inspect my upholstery.

When I recounted this to Wilde later over tea, he declared that morality is simply the art of being caught in the correct costume. As ever, he makes sin sound like an administrative error.

For now, I remain content to ride at a decorous trot, well out of scandal's reach and only a hairbreadth from its shadow. Yet I confess the rhythm of the horse's hoof on the Park's gravel has about it a kind of percussion one could easily mistake for opportunity.

1875: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

Your kind letter inviting me to join the Worshipful Fraternity of Freemasons in this district has reached me with all the proper dignities of seal and sentiment. I am, I assure you, deeply touched by so flattering a solicitation and by the esteem in which (it would appear) my humble reputation upon the boards is held amongst men of sterner pursuits.

Yet, with the greatest respect, I must decline the proffered trowel. Though I have the warmest admiration for gentlemen who can raise a wall by arm alone, I confess a preference for men whose art lies rather in gesture than in granite. Bricks and mortar are noble metaphors, but I find the fabric of friendship more beguiling when it is fashioned of silk and laughter than of limestone and lime.

Please convey to your Brethren my sincerest regards and the assurance that, while I cannot share in the labours of the Lodge, I shall ever cheer its masons from the more decorative side of the footlights. As I once told a barbell-bearing admirer of mine, "I prefer my pillars in Greek form—not human proportion."

May your compass remain true and your spirits duly elevated. Should your assemblies ever require a toastmaster, a harlequin, or simply someone of lighter build to applaud the heavy lifting from the shade, consider me sincerely at your service.

1874: Alban Fitzartur, Viscount d'Anatis

Private papers

The city was sodden this afternoon—one of those London days that seem to have forgotten the existence of colour. I sought refuge, as I often do, in the British Museum: that grand mausoleum of beauty, where marble sleeps in stately exhaustion and the air tastes faintly of old dust and pride. The Antinous holds court there more completely than any sovereign in Whitehall. Even time kneels to him.

I stood a long while before that calm perfection, half studying, half worshipping, and wondering what combination of grace and cruelty must have been required of the gods to fashion such symmetry. It was then I became aware of being observed from across the gallery. A man—tall, well-made, his coat cut with a discreet attention to advantage—lingered among the plinths, affecting interest in the pottery but transparently returning to the statue, and, occasionally, to me.

When our eyes met, there was the faintest smile: a gesture not indecent, only informed. It seemed an understanding passed silently between us that Antinous, patron spirit of unspoken affinities, had arranged an introduction. We spoke first of the marble—how the sculptor captured serenity without stillness, how the curve of the mouth suggested thought rather than repose. We said much of art and a little of beauty, but beneath both subjects murmured a subtler one neither of us dared to name.

I suggested, after some civil minutes of mutual admiration, that we might continue the discussion somewhere less patrolled by guardians of antiquity. He accepted easily, as though he too had grown weary of statues that would never move.

Now I sit in the half-dark, the fire a small conspiracy in the grate, listening to his step in the next room, where he speaks softly with my servant. The November fog presses at the window, curious but excluded. The house itself feels expectant—as though every mirror, every curtain, has drawn a breath and waits to see whether marble can give way to warmth.

I write this to contain the moment before it continues. Admiration, after all, is a civilised emotion; but what follows it—that sudden, exquisite recognition between two living beings—is the one art this country has never quite learned to exhibit.

1874: Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

Returned at last from the subcontinent, that fevered dream of colour and carnality, my skin still tingling with the residue of spices, sweat, and sunsets that bleed crimson across impossible mountains. The voyage home on the Persistent Duck—one of Father's ducal yachts, rechristened for the occasion with a cargo of silks and secrets—was a languid unravelling of India's intensities: seven weeks of azure Indian Ocean, where the decks became private arbors for reflection and recreation. I took passage in solitary splendour, my cabin a floating seraglio stocked with claret and complaisant stewards, but the true novelties bloomed on the rails: my own private car from Bombay to Calcutta, then Allahabad to Simla—a rolling palace of teak and taffeta, where curtains drawn against the monsoon permitted clandestine pursuits with certain turbaned attendants whose discretion matched their dexterity. The rhythm of the rails lent itself to rhythmic reveries; stops at wayside stations yielded furtive forays into bazaars, where one might procure a willing shadow for the night's leg. Deliciously illicit, these iron road romps—far from England's prying ports.

India assaults the senses like a lover gone mad: the heat a perpetual caress, heavy with jasmine and jackfruit, cumin and carnal promise; the smells—temple incense mingling with street offal, elephant musk and mango rot—a symphony of excess that drowns the nostrils in delight; the sounds—temple bells clashing with chai-wallah cries, sitars wailing in minor keys, the eternal lowing of cattle and hawkers' haggling—a cacophony that makes London's fogbound hush seem sepulchral. Temples glittered like jewelled fever-dreams, bazaars burst with turquoise and tangerine, palaces loomed like opium visions against purple dusks. Temptations everywhere: nautch girls with hips hypnotic as pendulums (though my tastes veer otherwise), hookahs bubbling promises of haze and haze-filled hazes, feasts of fiery curries that scorched the tongue and stoked inner fires. How it dwarfs England's grey monotone—no starched collars here, no vicarage pieties; life throbs raw, unapologetic, a riot of ruby and saffron where decorum dissolves in the downpour.

The men—ah, the men!—were revelation. Not merely the English administrators, those pink-faced sahibs with stiff upper lips and stiffer privates, who "threw themselves" at my feet in the club lounges of Calcutta and Bombay, murmuring of polo and posting stations while their hands wandered like monsoon vines. No, the locals: gorgeous syce-youths with lithe limbs oiled like bronzes, gymkhana grooms whose muscles rippled under dhoti folds, princely equerries with kohl-

lined eyes and lashes to lose oneself in. They prostrated—literally, at my feet—in gestures of servile homage that masked bolder invitations, palms upturned like offerings, gazes lingering where propriety forbids. In Delhi's Red Fort gardens, a maharajah's falconer with falcon's eyes lured me to the mews for "falconry lessons"; in Madras, a temple dancer's brother, all sinuous grace and sandalwood scent, slipped into my dak bungalow under cover of dusk. Capri pales beside it—Capri's lads are sun-kissed sprites; India's are gods descended, dark and divine, their heat too fervent for my northern temperament to endure beyond a season. A month more, and I should have melted into mango lassis.

Yet the true jewels of the tour were my aunts, those twin sirens of scandal whose paths diverged yet converge in my affections. First, the arduous pilgrimage to Simla—a rail odyssey up punishing gradients, then palanquin to her isolated palace in the Himalayan foothills, where Aunt Alice reigns as Rajkumari Alice, wise woman of the hills, her milliner Élodie elevated to rani-consort. Two decades since the Great Fiasco of 1850, and she has bloomed into an intellectual sparring partner without peer: over hookah and hill-station claret, we debated Schopenhauer and Shelley, the jewel-chest long melted into marble fountains and mirrored halls. Her wisdom—forged in flight and frontier—cuts keen: "Exile is liberty's truest form, Alban; society's chains rust fastest in solitude". We sparred till sunrise, her laughter echoing off the peaks, a delighted duet of defiance.

Bombay with Aunt Rose was altogether otherwise—pleasure and abandonment incarnate. The courtesan queen of princes holds court in a Malabar Hill haveli, sapphire-draped and sovereign, introducing me to all of society: nawabs who vied to host me, Parsi merchants with opium-tinted tales, English collectors famished for continental conversation. I had a ball—quite literally, her grand durbar where I waltzed with wilful widows and whispered with wandering warriors, her web of whispers opening every door (and several divans). Rose, ever the voluptuary virtuoso, gifted me a harem of her choosing—syce and scribe, equerry and eunuch—and lessons in the Kama Sutra that would scandalise the Kama itself. "Pleasure is empire's true jewel", she purred, her fingers tracing my palm; I departed with her blessing and a youthful bearer who served (in every sense) till Suez.

Ideas swarm now, thick as mosquitoes: a new play, Palace of Perfume, scented with subcontinental subtext; invitations cascading—Alice's hilltop hermitage next monsoon, Rose's Bombay bacchanal at Diwali; suggestions for Mu merchant ventures, laced with less mercantile motives. India fills me to bursting: colours to dye my next masque, heats to temper my verses, men to haunt my memory like monsoon ghosts. England seems faded muslin beside it—yet home's

fogs shall nurture these seeds. The Duck docked yesterday; tomorrow, tailors and theatricals. For now, reverie: the heat, the haze, the hands at my feet.

1873: Viscount d'Anatis, Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

Returned at last from the Continent, sun-bronzed and soul-sated, the salt of the Tyrrhenian still lingering on my skin like a lover's parting kiss. Capri—that sapphire speck in the bay of Naples, jewel of the Mediterranean, where azure waters lap at cliffs carved by emperors' whims—has worked its ancient sorcery upon me once more. A fortnight in a whitewashed villa perched above the Marina Grande, far from prying Neapolitan eyes, with a staff of discreet locals who know better than to question the habits of English milords. The island lives up to its notoriety: since the Blue Grotto's rediscovery in 1826—that other-worldly cavern where the sea glows electric blue, as if lit by submerged sapphires—Capri has drawn pilgrims of our persuasion like moths to a voluptuous flame. Tiberius himself set the precedent, fleeing Rome's moralists for this sunlit Sodom, where he indulged his pederastic fancies amid grottos and gardens, youth plucked from the peasant stock like ripe figs.

The local lads are the true allure—olive-skinned, lithe as young goats, with eyes black as the grotto's depths and smiles that promise forgetfulness. Not the tolerance of authorities, mind you—the priests mutter and the carabinieri patrol—but for those who can afford a private pleasure palace, like the arms magnate Krupp with his yacht and villas, or that French poet-aristocrat Adelswärd Fersen, who whispers of orgiastic rites amid the lemon groves, Capri is Europe's premier homosexual haven. I hired a felucca for midnight sails into the Grotto, where the water's phosphorescence turned our naked dips into spectral ballet; by day, excursions to Tiberius's ruins, where one picnics on the emperor's leaping platforms, imagining the youths hurled (or lured) to the waves below. My own companions—three sturdy fishermen's sons, renamed Apollo, Ganymede, and Hyacinth for the duration—proved eager scholars in the arts of pleasure, their rustic vigour tempered by gold sovereigns and my tuition in subtler seductions. No scandals ensued; discretion is the island's second religion.

Yet Capri is but one gem in the crown of continental utopias, each a magnified mirror of the private rooms we carve from our English lives —those sanctuaries decorated with significant photographs (a Corinthian rower here, a fencing partner there), souvenirs of symposia

(a locked foil-case, a signed carte-de-visite). Frederick the Great's Sans-Souci at Potsdam remains the philosopher-king's ideal: that rococo retreat where a bronze Ganymede—cupbearer to Jove, archetype of our affections—stands brazenly before the library window, eternal youth mocking the Prussian drill-square. Frederick decreed ambition and hostility the only "unnatural" sins; all else—the flute-playing evenings with his pageboys, the barracks flirtations—flourished unchecked. I motored there en route, lingering in those gilded chambers where Herculian guardsmen posed as cupids, the air still scented with snuff and sodality.

Then Bavaria's kitsch medieval fantasy, Ludwig II's Neuschwanstein—that Wagnerian wet dream of turrets and trompe-l'œil, perched in the Alps like a boy-king's birthday cake. Ludwig, poor moonstruck swan, built it as a temple to Titurel and Tannhäuser, but whispers tell of midnight cavalcades with stable-lads dressed as knights, the king's "comrades" sharing his featherbeds amid frescoes of heroic lads. Kitsch, yes, but cathartic—a private Valhalla where royal repression flowered into fabulous farce.

Switzerland offered Elisár von Kupffer's sanctum near Locarno: the Sanctuarium Artis Elisarion, that museum-temple devoted to boy-love, a marble mausoleum of marble youths and mythic friezes, where von Kupffer curates his cult of "urnings" (as Ulrichs terms us) amid alpine mists. I paid pilgrimage incognito, lingering before bas-reliefs of Ganymede's ravishment, the air humming with forbidden Hellenism. These are utopias magnified: Sans-Souci's Ganymede writ large in Neuschwanstein's frescoes, Kupffer's temple a grander version of my own library alcove, where photographs of Oxford oarsmen and Haymarket hirelings form a private pantheon.

Capri eclipses them in sensuality—raw, sun-drenched, immediate—but all share the dream: spaces where proclivities breathe free, youth exalted from peasant to paramour, emperors and arms-dealers alike kneeling to youth's tyranny. Back in Kent, the grey Channel mocks such azure idylls, but my villa's locked trunk holds shells from the Grotto, a lock of Hyacinth's hair—talismans to summon Capri's spell amid English fogs. Father inquires politely after my "health cure"; society suspects nothing beyond yachting and antiquities. The true cure was immersion in that blue paradise, where Tiberius's ghost salutes us modern dissolutes.

Next year, Capri again—or Sans-Souci, if Bismarck permits. For now, reverie suffices: the grotto's glow, the lads' laughter, the utopia that exists, however fleetingly, in flesh and fantasy.

1872: Alban Fitzartur

Mallory House

The latest absurdity circulating through theatrical London concerns a new "Chinese romance" with the melancholy title The Marchant of Mu—a coincidence of name which has already made certain wags in the clubs roar with unearned laughter. It is, so I am told, a hybrid creature: half operetta, half scandal, and derived from a fragment said to have been composed by no less august a hand than the Prince of Wales himself, embellished and expanded by some obliging anonymous librettist from the Strand.

The tale, in summary, involves an itinerant Mandarin, a jade merchant's son, one or two piratical incidents, and an improbable quantity of courtyards. The music, Mr. Gilbert informs me in a conspiratorial whisper, is "very nearly Oriental", which, given the English taste for geography, may mean anything from Siam to Surrey.

What interests me is not the piece itself (which will undoubtedly prove a catastrophe fit for carving) but the curious invitation I have received to take the leading role—a romantic philosopher, given to moonlight confidences and ambiguous virtue. One understands at once why my name was suggested. The question is not whether I could redeem the part, but whether I should stake my reputation upon redeeming what ought, by rights, to be left to pantomime.

And yet, the cast intrigues me. There has been talk, sotto voce, of an all-male ensemble, justified as an experiment in "stylised ritual purity". One suspects that the Prince, ever curious beneath his veneer of righteousness, might be amused to see his oriental daydream performed entirely by gentlemen of delicate persuasion, all draped in improbable silk and sufficient incense to bewilder the moral nose.

Should I agree to appear, or—better—should I host a private reading at Mallory House? The idea has its temptations. Imagine it: the drawing room candlelit, the music trembling from the pianoforte, the assembled gallery of friends (and curious strangers), the Prince reclining in amused complicity as we play out his exotic fantasy. To be the impresario of one's sovereign's indiscretion—there are worse distinctions in life.

Still, prudence whispers that the line between artistic experiment and state embarrassment is as slender as a fan's rib. Perhaps it is wiser to let the Prince's verse sleep, unperformed, while the city continues to dream it respectable.

And yet—God help me—I think I could make the Mandarin magnificent.

1872: Gentlemen Prefer Umbrellas
"A Lampoon of Continental Affectations in Three Fluttering Acts"

By Felix Marchant

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Lord Algernon Worthing—A dandy of dubious Frenchness, wielder of the perfect brolly.

Captain Rupert Fanshawe—Scarlet seducer, partial to Italian ices and indiscretions.

The Honourable Percy Larkspur—Poetaster of Paris, umbrella unfurled at every faux pas.

Basil Davenport—Lithe Corinthian, expert in foreign thrusts and parries.

Lady Beatrice Vintage—Widow of worldly wisdom, fan as sharp as her French.

Monsieur Étienne Frou-Frou—Parisian poseur, accent thicker than his plot.

Count Otto von Drippy—Teutonic bore, whose handle is always slipping.

Servants—Bearers of brollies and bon mots.

The scene is a drizzly drawing-room in Belgravia, where umbrellas prop open doors to Continental chaos, and every shower is an excuse for showering affections. Foreign manners drip like perpetual rain.

ACT I: The Downpour of Decorum

Scene: The Drawing-Room. Rain lashes windows; umbrellas sprout like mushrooms. Lord Algernon twirls a tasselled brolly.

ALGERNON. (dabbing lapel)
London's obsession with foreign manners is positively sodden—one prefers umbrellas to ushers, at least they shield one from the wet importations!

PERCY. (unfurling a pink parasol)
Quite! Paris sends us frills; Vienna, waltzes that whirl one into whirlwinds. My latest ode: "Ombrelle, mon amour!"

LADY BEATRICE. (snapping fan)
Ode? Odour! Foreign frippery floods our salons—French kisses without the cuisine, Italian ices that melt too fast!

(Enter CAPTAIN RUPERT, shaking a sopping brolly, spraying all.)

RUPERT.
By Jove! This shower's a scandal—caught me with my guard down. Algernon, lend a hand with my... handle?

ALGERNON. (winking, assisting)
Always, Rupert. A gentleman's umbrella must be firmly grasped—lest it open unexpectedly!

BASIL. (entering, thrusting foil)
Or parry the thrust! Italian fencing master taught me: "Avanti, poppet!"—or was it "pop it"?

(Enter MONSIEUR FROU-FROU, dripping Continental chic, kissing hands lavishly—lingering on Rupert's.)

FROU-FROU. (purring)
Mes chéris! Ze rain, she is passion—like love, she falls 'ard and leaves one all wet!

PERCY. (aghast)
Wet? Monsieur, one prefers dry wit to damp dalliance!

FROU-FROU. (mishearing)
Wit? Non, wett! Ze umbrella, she is phallus of ze cloud—open wide for ze shower!

(Laughter; Beatrice fans furiously.)

Curtain.

ACT II: The Monsoon of Manners

Scene: Same, evening. Umbrellas converted to cocktail stirrers; Count Otto enters, brolly as big as his moustache.

OTTO. (booming)
Guten splash! Ze English umbrella—symbol of stiff upper lip und soggy soul! In Berlin, ve use it to skewer pretzels!

ALGERNON.
Count, your skewering is legendary—though I prefer mine buttered.

RUPERT. (to Basil, aside)
Skewered? Sounds continental. Care for a private parade?

BASIL. (thrusting)
En garde, Captain! My Italian point is peerless.

LADY BEATRICE.
Peerless prattle! Foreign fashions flood us—Turkish towels for Turkish baths, where one emerges steamed and steaming!

FROU-FROU. (twirling Percy)
Steamed? Mais oui! Ze waltz, she is umbrella opened indoors—spin, splash, surrender!

PERCY. (dizzy)
Surrender? To what—your accent or your ankles?

OTTO. (grasping Rupert's brolly)
Nein! Grasp firmly, like Bavarian beer stein—or lover's stein! Prost to pretzels und passions!

ALGERNON. (raising glass)
To umbrellas—they cover what trousers conceal!

(Misunderstanding cascades; Otto mistakes “trousers” for “truffles”, demands feast. Chaos of canapés and canters.)

Curtain.

ACT III: The Tempest of Tenderness

Scene: Midnight. Rain ceases; umbrellas furled like fans. All tipsy, twirling.

FROU-FROU.
Ze night clears—like conscience after confession! Who shares my cabriolet?

PERCY. (blushing)
Cabriolet? Sounds positively Parisian!

RUPERT. (to Algernon)
Fancy a tandem? My brolly seats two—cosy under cover.

ALGERNON.
Delightful! Basil, you thrust behind?

BASIL.
Avanti—poppet first!

OTTO. (belching)
Ve Germans prefer trio—three steins, tree lovers!

LADY BEATRICE. (fanning triumphantly)
Foreign flood recedes! Gentlemen prefer umbrellas—dry, discreet, deliciously deceptive!

ALL. (toasting, twirling brollies)
Umbrellas über alles! Open wide—or shut tight!

(Finale: chaotic conga of canes and cravats; umbrellas pop open indoors, showering confetti. Tableau of tangled tassels.)

EPILOGUE (ALGERNON to audience)
In London’s lash of foreign frippery,
Gentlemen prefer umbrellas—drippy, drippy!
Cover thy cane, conceal thy crush:
Pop it quick—or hush the hush!

1872: Viscount d’Anatis, Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

The post today has been a veritable family portrait in disgrace: two letters, both written in the most elegant hands, smelling faintly of scandal and foreign tobacco. The first, upon paper watermarked with a crown it no longer has any right to, is from Her Grace the late Duchess

Alice of Mallard—society prefers to behave as if she had died in 1850 when she fled instead. The second, on violet notepaper positively dripping with attar of roses, is from Aunt Rose herself—the only woman of the family to turn professional what the rest do amateurishly. Together they form a diptych of female impropriety, executed in quite different styles.

The Ducal Fiasco of 1850 remains, in our annals, the great unmentionable, which is of course why everyone mentions it whenever the port goes round a third time. Alice, then Duchess Mallard, vanished between luncheon and tea, taking with her not only her milliner but also a chest the size of a small cannon, filled with a sizeable selection of the Mallard jewels. England woke the next morning to find itself minus one duchess, three tiaras, a rivière of emeralds, and a very pretty Frenchwoman who had hitherto been credited only with improving Her Grace's hats. My father affected to be desolate; the family was outraged; the newspapers were delirious. The scandal was neatly boxed as "elopement", the jewels quietly written off as "misplaced property", and Alice's name henceforward invoked in hushed tones as a kind of cautionary legend: what happens when women read French novels and acquire opinions about their own happiness.

And now, after twenty-two years of decorous exile, she writes from Simla. The letter is full of mountain air, banquets with colonels' wives, and "my dear Élodie"—the milliner elevated by long companionship to something far beyond the reach of vocabulary. Alice invites me to visit, assuring me that "the hills are full of men who have left their consciences in London and their wives in Cheltenham", and that I should find the society "agreeably unbuttoned". She remarks, with her old malice, that the rubies look very well against Indian light and that she has never once regretted exchanging a coronet for a parasol. The tone is all bright impudence, but between the lines one hears what she does not quite say: she has built, within the Empire's more elastic frontier, a life in which her affections may breathe without suffocating on English air.

Hot upon this comes Aunt Rose's epistle from Bombay, forwarded from Constantinople. Rose, it will be remembered, declined the usual family trajectory (Season, marriage, and slow ossification) and instead turned her loveliness into an international asset. She is now a courtesan to princes, a connoisseur of their tempers and treasuries, and writes breezily of maharajahs who send her sapphires for a smile and pashas who would trade two provinces for her displeasure. She invites me, equally warmly, to winter in Bombay, promising palaces, peacocks, and "all the amusements a clever boy might desire, short of a revolution". One imagines the entertainments; one also imagines the bills. Rose

adds, with her customary sting, that she has always preferred the frank commerce of desire to the hypocritical barter of Mayfair. Coming from anyone else, it would be pose; from her, it is simple accountancy.

Both these women—the runaway duchess in Simla and the official mistress in Bombay and Istanbul—are, by the world's measure, scandalous. Yet their scandals remain reassuringly within the frame of what society can label and therefore forgive. Alice ran away with a woman, it is true, but the tale is still told as a romance, and the jewels as the price of passion. Rose sins flagrantly, but in a manner provided for in the moral arithmetic: courtesans have always existed, a necessary extravagance of male virtue. Their transgressions are catalogued, costed, and placed upon the shelf of "human weakness."

My own proclivities enjoy no such comfortable shelf. A duchess who absconds with her milliner can be chuckled over in clubs; a courtesan with three princes on a string may be envied in confidence. But a man whose heart runs, not accidentally but entirely, to his own sex stands beyond the pale, outside even the elastic definitions of family disgrace. If my preferences were known—not rumoured, not suspected, but known—I should not merely lose what little social cachet I possess; I should, quite literally, lose my life. The law, with its calm barbarity, places my desires in the same category as crime and madness; the Church, generous as ever, reserves for them a special nook in hell.

Alice and Rose have contrived, each in her own fashion, to live scandalously within the confines of society. They are exiled or whispered about, but they remain legible: people know what they "are". I am something for which our language has only insults and our courts only sentences. Theirs is a rebellion the world can narrate. Mine, if it ever ceased to be encrypted, would not be narrated at all; it would be extinguished.

And yet it is to them that my thoughts turn when I consider escape. Alice, with her milliner and her trunk of jewels, showing her back to England and her face to the Himalayas. Rose, counting sovereigns under Turkish moons, more free in her chains than most women in their marriage beds. They have at least made a bargain with the world on their own terms. I, dutiful son and dutiful sinner, remain in the ancestral cage, my wings carefully camouflaged as affectation and artistic temperament.

Shall I go to Simla? To Bombay? Alice promises belonging without questions; Rose, pleasures without pretence. But their freedoms are built upon being known as scandalous, while mine depends upon being known as nothing at all. Perhaps, in the end, my exile is more profound because it is invisible. They have absconded in carriages and steamers; I abscond daily in glances and silences.

Still, it is something—perhaps not negligible—to have aunts whose letters smell of cardamom and defiance instead of lavender and resignation. If the family tree is crooked, it at least throws a more interesting shade.

I shall reply to Alice first, thanking her for the invitation and promising that, should England grow any drabber, I may one day climb into a trunk like hers and vanish eastward. To Rose I shall send a lighter note, acknowledging her princes and assuring her that, for the present, I must content myself with smaller game and greater caution.

They have run to the very edge of society and pitched their tents there. I remain within its walls, pacing, practising my pleasant smile. Somewhere between their scandalous liberty and my immaculate danger lies the country I wish existed.

ACT III

1870: Royal Decree

By the Grace of God, Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India.

To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting!

WHEREAS Our right trusty and well-beloved Alban Fitzartur, Esquire, commonly styled Lord Alban Fitzartur, Knight of the Ancient Order of St. Felix, Marchant of Mu, hath by his singular services to the Crown, in the negotiation of treaties and the promotion of commerce with distant realms, particularly the Principality of Mu, merited Our especial favour and distinction;

AND WHEREAS the said Lord Alban Fitzartur hath conducted himself with loyalty, discretion, and exemplary devotion in matters both public and private, advancing the interests of Our Empire through arts diplomatic, mercantile, and æsthetic, to the enrichment of Our realm and the edification of its nobility;

**WE, of Our especial grace, certain knowledge, and mere motion, do by these Presents advance, create, and prefer the said Lord Alban Fitzartur to the dignity and degree of Viscount of the United Kingdom

of Great Britain and Ireland, by the style and title of Viscount d'Anatis of Anatis Hall in Our County of Kent;

**AND WE do hereby grant and confer unto him, the said Alban Fitzartur, and the heirs male of his body lawfully begotten, or to be begotten, the said name, style, title, place, pre-eminence, and precedence as Viscount d'Anatis aforesaid, with all rights, privileges, pre-eminences, immunities, and advantages to the degree, dignity, and title of Viscount appertaining, as fully and amply as any other Our Viscounts of Our said United Kingdom;

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the said dignity and title unto him, the said Alban Fitzartur, and the heirs male of his body aforesaid, according to the law and custom of Our Realm.

IN WITNESS whereof We have caused these Our Letters to be made Patent. WITNESS Ourself at Westminster, the twenty-fifth day of June, in the thirty-third year of Our Reign.

By Her Majesty's Command,
The Marquess of Salisbury,
Secretary of State.

[Great Seal of the Realm]

1870: The Petticoat Layers of Allusion: A Study in Conversational Grace

A Gentleman's Gentlemen
By our Correspondent in the Smoke-Rooms of Pall Mall

There exists in the higher echelons of London society a peculiar beauty of utterance—a verbal architecture so delicate, so layered, that it resembles nothing so much as the petticoat finery of a grande dame: folds upon folds of lace and muslin, concealing yet suggesting the form beneath. This is the art of ambiguous conversation, where phrases derive their peculiar radiance not from blunt declaration, but from the labyrinthine syntax that winds around a central silence, the intricate pattern of allusions that hover like a cloud—meaningless vapour to the uninitiated, a heavenly hieroglyphic to those who possess the key. Precious information is thus hidden under the counter, as it were: offered not in plain parcel, but wrapped in tissue of indirection, where the true exchange occurs in the spaces between words.

I lately witnessed such a colloquy—a scene of exquisite indirection—in the shadowed alcove of the Travellers' Club, amid the haze of Turkish cigarettes and the discreet clink of balloon glasses. The protagonists were two gentlemen of evident refinement: let us style them Mr. E——, a slender dilettante with the air of a minor Greek poet exiled to Belgravia, and Mr. L——, broader of shoulder, with the candid eye of a Corinthian who fenced by day and philosophised by night. They sat knee-to-knee before a low table strewn with Pall Mall Gazettes and half-peeled oranges, the firelight gilding their profiles like figures from a Carpaccio canvas.

It began innocently enough, with the weather—that eternal English preamble to peril. "A clinging mist today", remarked Mr. E——, exhaling a plume that merged with the room's own fog. "One can scarce see from the window to the sill."

Mr. L—— inclined his head, his fingers tracing the rim of his glass with absent precision. "Clinging, yes. Like certain affections that refuse to dissipate with the dawn. Persistent, yet... intangible."

Here was the first petticoat layer: affections. To the casual ear—the portly banker droning in the adjacent chair—it evoked mere sentimentality, filial piety perhaps. But layered beneath lay the allusion to passions less sanctioned, affections that clung in shadowed corners of clubs and country houses, intangible lest they materialise into peril. The syntax wound labyrinthine: not "I have such affections", but a feint towards generality, a cloud that to some meant filial duty, to others a hieroglyphic of the heart's true compass.

Mr. E—— smiled faintly, peeling an orange with deliberate slowness, the rind spiralling like Ariadne's thread. "Intangible, indeed. One admires the art of those who navigate such mists without collision. A certain... parallelism of course, perhaps."

Parallelism. The word hung, heavy with allusion. In the lexicon of Euclid, innocent geometry; in the argot of the cognoscenti, a nod to paths that run side by side, never converging in the public square—loves that shadowed the matrimonial highway without crossing its white line. Mr. L——'s eyes flickered, the barest contraction of pupil betraying comprehension. "Parallelism has its elegancies", he replied, his voice a model of modulated calm. "Though one occasionally yearns for a gentle divergence—a side-road, shaded by elms, where the air is less... orthodox."

The central silence deepened: the unsaid yearning for divergence from the straight and narrow, elms evoking those bosky dells of Richmond Park where gentlemen might walk two abreast, unremarked. The pattern of allusions thickened—mist to affection, course to road—each phrase a petticoat frill, concealing the form of mutual recognition.

Precious information traded under the counter: "I too know these shaded paths", without the peril of plain speech.

Mr. E—— speared a segment of orange, holding it aloft like an offering. "Orthodoxy has its virtues—straight lines, clear destinations. Yet the labyrinthine path, with its turnings and concealments... there is poetry there, is there not? A beauty born of the fold, the veil."

Labyrinthine. The syntax coiled once more, evoking not mere topography but the twisted byways of desire—turnings where one might lose oneself companionably, veils that parted only for the initiated. Mr. L—— accepted the orange segment, their fingers brushing in a contact electric yet ephemeral. "Poetry indeed. One thinks of those classical gardens—Versailles, say—where statues gaze eternally upon statues, their marble affections immune to scandal. A want of motion, perhaps, but such perfect... correspondence."

Correspondence. The hieroglyphic crystallised: letters exchanged in cipher, gazes that corresponded across crowded ballrooms, marble affections immune to the coarse censures of flesh-and-blood moralists. The cloud meant nothing to the banker, who coughed and called for brandy; to these two, it spelled volumes—mutual membership in a confraternity of the veiled.

The conversation spiralled onward, allusions piling like petticoats: a discourse on Wedgwood cameos led to "profiles in profile", a mention of the Boat Race to "rhythms of perfect synchrony", each phrase a silken layer around the silence where true confession nestled. No word of peril—no crude admissions that might summon constables or cut direct from clubs—yet the precious cargo was delivered: recognition, invitation, the subtle pact of shared secrecy.

As they rose to depart, cloaks swirling like conspiratorial capes, Mr. E—— murmured, "The fog lifts somewhat. A stroll to the Embankment, perhaps? The river has a certain reflective charm at dusk."

Mr. L—— assented with a nod. "Reflective, yes. One sees oneself—and one's parallels—so clearly in its glass."

They vanished into the November gloom, leaving the alcove to its embers. To the uninitiated, a banal chat on weather and walks; to the discerning, a masterpiece of indirection—petticoats of allusion draping the naked truth, labyrinthine syntax guarding the heart's hieroglyphic. In such conversation lies the gentleman's highest art: to convey the inexpressible without once expressing it, hiding gold beneath the counter of glittering baubles. London's fogs are thick with such clouds; only the keyed eye reads the script within.

1870: Memoirs of a Gentleman of the Footlights

(Being the Reminiscences of Mr. Felix Marchant, sometime known upon the boards as 'The Azure Prince')

When I first came up to London in the bleak winter of 1870, I had nothing to my name but a pair of gloves too fine for my station and a letter of introduction written in a hand both aristocratic and apologetic. My father, the late Viscount Marchant, had departed this mortal stage with most of his fortune dissolved in champagne and foreign speculation, leaving me both heir and orphan of laughing ruin.

London had a taste for spectacle that season—gaslight, gilt, and gossip—and I, eager to find my place within its machinery, entered where most illusions begin: behind the curtain. The theatre, I discovered, was no mere pastime but a great, seething embassy of vanities. There were dukes in disguise, dramatists in debt, and more ambition compressed into a greenroom than could be safely housed in Parliament.

My first engagement was humble enough—a dresser to the baritone Mr. Lascelles, whose voice could melt glaciers and whose patience, alas, would not survive a wrinkled cuff. Yet through such duties are fortunes made. The theatre thrives upon connection; if one's talent is negligible, one's manners must be immaculate. Soon I was entrusted with letters, with arrangements, with introductions. Society, ever hungry for novelty, devoured the illusion of gentility I so obligingly exhaled.

By degrees I ascended. The Baron of Brixton offered me a small part in his operetta Blue Roses of Midnight (a failure of such magnificence that the critics genuflected before it). My costume—velvet, silver cord, and a plume of indeterminate purple—drew more notice than my performance, and thus began my reputation for splendour. I cultivated it as one might a rare orchid, feeding it carefully on attention and smoke.

Yet the glamour that so intoxicated the audience was, in truth, merely a mirror: I shone because those around me desired to be reflected. The city lived by gaslight; I wore its shadow upon my skin. In its parlours and playhouses I moved as both ornament and observer—polite to the powerful, mysterious to the curious, indispensable to the ambitious. One might say I played the part of Felix Marchant so faithfully that no one suspected the emptiness of the actor.

It is customary, in writings of this kind, to speak of reversals—of fortune lost and honour redeemed. But mine was an ascent composed mostly of masks. I learned that elegance could be armour and that reputation, once suitably polished, could purchase anything save

sincerity. When the Duke of Mallory invited me to his box at Drury Lane, I knew I had ceased to strive and begun to be admired.

The London fog, that great leveller of coal and class alike, became my confidant. I walked its streets, hearing in the distance the orchestra's tuning note—a prelude to eternity, perhaps. I was no longer the impoverished heir of a fallen house. I had become what the city most cherished: a living allegory of spectacle.

If you seek scandal in these pages, you will not find it; the theatre itself was scandal enough. Let those who prize confession turn to others. My story is of transformation—an education not in sin but in appearance. Beneath the chandeliers, I found a new nobility, one measured not in lineage but in light.

Thus ends the opening act of my life. The curtain rises now upon a man of consequence, whose fortune was built not upon inheritance but upon applause—a gaudy inheritance, perhaps, but, in that age of soot and splendour, what greater coin was there?

1870: An article of men's clothing

From "A Gentleman's Gentlemen"

Amongst the innumerable arts in which the modern gentleman ought to be instructed, none is so little understood and so much practised as the art of being seen without being discovered. In an age when every vapid sentiment may be printed in a newspaper, those of us with more delicate preferences must find a subtler mode of publication. The heart may be coy; the wardrobe need not be.

It has come, therefore, to the notice of your Correspondent that a certain quiet fashion has been establishing itself in the more observant circles of London: the use of cravats and handkerchiefs—in particular colours and positions upon the person—as a language intelligible to a few and invisible to the many. This is not, of course, the vulgar commercial code of the haberdasher, who thinks only in terms of "fast colours" and "good wear", but a more intimate grammar of inclination.

On the General Principles of the Code

The system rests upon three simple principles:

1 Colour indicates a temperament or current mood.

2 Placement upon the body indicates degree of availability or reserve.

3 Combination of the two, witnessed by the right observer, constitutes an invitation to conversation—never more than

that, for anything further would be ungentlemanly and, worse, unimaginative.

The beauty of this custom is that it remains perfectly decorous: no gesture is in itself improper, and each article may be defended as a mere trifle of taste. Only those who have "the key", as one says of a particularly obstinate sonata, can interpret the melody.

The Language of Colour

The following notes have been assembled from careful observation in club, drawing-room, and promenade. They are not to be taken as law—fashion abhors legislation—but as a working lexicon for the discreet.

- White—The hue of innocent sociability. A white handkerchief worn conspicuously (for instance, blooming from the breast pocket) suggests: "I am open to acquaintance, yet make no promises". It is the useful colour of the undecided or newly arrived.
- Red—Indicates a warm inclination towards adventure. A red handkerchief, or a cravat with a distinct red note, says: "Conversation with me is unlikely to be dull". It is not recommended for first Sundays in Mayfair.
- Blue—Suggests romantic or sentimental proclivities. A gentleman wearing a blue silk handkerchief with some art might be suspected of appreciating poetry, moonlight, and walks that end later than they begin.
- Green—The colour of curiosity. Not yet committed, but considering. A touch of green at the wrist or cuff may be translated: "Willing to learn; proceed with tact."
- Purple or violet—Denotes aesthetic intensity. More suited to the artistic temperament: it can signify a taste for conversation of a rarer, more refined nature.

In all cases, dull, muddy tones ought to be avoided, as they convey either indigestion or insincerity.

The Art of Placement

If colour tells what sort of inclination a gentleman possesses, placement tells how close he is willing to let it stand.

- About the neck (cravat or scarf)
  This is the region of profession. A colour worn boldly at the throat declares, "This is my general disposition". A crimson note in the cravat, for instance, announces a certain ardour as part of the wearer's character, not a passing whim.
- In the breast pocket
  This is the place of public statement. A blue or white

handkerchief carefully displayed suggests the wearer is amenable to being approached in society at large (the Park, a reception, the lobby of a theatre), but does not yet commit him beyond conversation and glances.

- At the wrist (peeping from beneath the cuff)
  This is the position of private encouragement. A touch of colour here, visible only when raising a glass, adjusting a glove, or resting the hand upon the balustrade, implies: "Look more closely, if you dare."
- From the trouser pocket, corner visible
  This is the boldest of placements and should only be employed by men of strong nerves or very good tailors. It can signify a readiness to be known by those who can read, and overlooked by those who cannot. A discreet violet silk emerging at the hip has been known to produce most instructive conversations in club cloak-rooms.
- Tucked under the waistcoat
  A signal of reserved but deliberate interest. Not for wandering eyes, but for the attentive observer. If a handkerchief of notable hue is glimpsed only when a gentleman leans back or adjusts his watch-chain, one may surmise that he is not indiscriminate in his acquaintance.

It should be unnecessary to add that a handkerchief used in ordinary fashion—wrung, crushed, or deployed against colds—is temporarily retired from service as a conversational emblem.

Suggestions for the Aspiring Initiate

A gentleman wishing to partake in this agreeable semiotics would do well to procure at least three or four handkerchiefs of distinct personality: perhaps white, blue, and red, with a more daring tone (green or violet) reserved for evenings away from family tables.

He may then:

- Wear white at the neck when calling or attending mixed company: this reassures aunts and invites only those with imagination.
- Add blue at the breast when frequenting the theatre or concert: "open to romantic impressions."
- Introduce a hint of red at the wrist at supper after the performance: "willing to talk more freely off the premises."
- Reserve violet discreetly under the waistcoat for those rare nights when, by prior understanding, one expects to encounter a person with whom language alone is insufficient.

The transitions should be gradual. One does not change from white to crimson in a single afternoon without arousing suspicion either of fever or engagement.

On Answering the Ladies

Our readers, being men of breeding, will naturally ask: how does one account for these colours when confronted by feminine curiosity? For confronted one will be, sooner or later. Happily, the system lends itself to explanations almost as delightful as the truth.

Three principles will assist:

1. Offer a reason that flatters her.
   If a lady notices a blue handkerchief and enquires, "Why that shade?" you may reply, "Because it reminds me of your eyes, madam", regardless of the optical evidence. She will either believe you—which is charming—or not, which is more charming still.
2. Suggest that it is about her, but never solely so.
   When questioned about a red cravat, one might say, "I am told this colour prevents my looking pale beside you", thus ascribing one's ardour to her presence, while keeping the real audience in no doubt that the colour preceded it.
3. Employ the language of fashion as alibi.
   If cornered: "They are all the rage in Paris", or "My tailor insists it suits my complexion". The modern woman will rather forgive foreign influence than original taste.

Experienced practitioners recommend a delicate balance: the lady must be assured that nothing unbecoming is intended towards her, yet she must suspect that something interesting is intended somewhere. This maintains her dignity and one's own reputation for being "safe", which is the first step to being sought after.

A Word of Caution and Encouragement

It must be emphasised that such signals do not oblige; they merely permit recognition. A man who responds to every red flicker and blue glimmer will soon acquire the air less of a connoisseur than of a collector. Choose your colours with the same care you choose your intimates: few, but excellent.

At the same time, let no reader be deterred by the intricacy of this system. It is no more complex than the rules of whist and infinitely more rewarding to play. In a society where we are all, willy-nilly, required to wear masks, there is a peculiar comfort in discovering that the mask itself can wink.

In conclusion, then, if you must conceal your sentiments, do not conceal them badly. Hide them where only the right eyes will look: in silk, in shade, and in the small, deliberate accidents of dress. A gentleman's handkerchief, properly chosen and properly placed, may say all that etiquette forbids and inclination insists upon.

And should a perceptive lady remark upon your particular arrangement of colours, thank her gravely and admit that, in a sense, it is about her—since, without her presence, you would never have dressed so carefully.

1868: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

A reflective evening, quill in hand by the library lamp, the Channel's murmur a counterpoint to the mind's unrest. The post brought a parcel from Paris—Verlaine's latest verses, smuggled via a discreet bookseller, alongside whispers of Proust's juvenilia, those early scribblings already laced with melancholy's musk. These writers, with their tastes for guilt, disgust with life and society, the siren attractions of death or even criminality—how mistaken they seem, how perilously seductive to the reproving moralists who seize upon such self-laceration as proof positive that men loving men is a moral disease, a failure, a crime against nature. Verlaine drowns in absinthe and remorse, Rimbaud's wild youth curdling to bitterness; Proust, even in embryo, pores over lost time with the fervour of a penitent. Their confessions feed the beasts: bishops thundering from pulpits, Purity Leaguers pamphleteering in the Strand, all crowing that our affections are pathology, perversion incarnate—a sickness to be syringed from the soul like venom from a wound.

What nonsense! What betrayal of our true estate! In my humble opinion—forged in Capri grottos and club alcoves, tempered by symposia where foils flash and flesh yields—we should all cultivate the conscious pride of those who never denied their being, who have never been servants, who display the inimitable dignity of those who have prayed much: he ought to awaken in people's minds an awareness of a physical warmth and perfume; the very incarnation of wisdom and heroism. Not guilt's grey shroud, but glory's golden haze—the unapologetic exaltation of bodies entwined like laurels, souls symphonised in shadowed sanctuaries. Where Verlaine whimpers of damnation, I proclaim divinity: our loves, far from nature's crime, are her crowning conquest, the heroic hymn sung by gods who disdain the drab duet of man and wife.

Consider the reproof it offers those moralists! They claim disease because our bards bleat victimhood; let us counter with conquest. We have need of men who can be moved by the simple things of life and who can show us these things as the eyes of the gods would perceive them: the curve of a Corinthian's calf in fencing breeches, lit by gaslight like Hermes in mid-flight; the salt-slick sheen of a rowing eight's oarsmen, muscles rippling as Argo's crew; the velvet vulnerability of a lover's throat exposed in post-coital languor, Achilles yielding to Patroclus's palm. These are no pathologies, but perceptions divine—warmth radiating from sun-bronzed torsos in Capri coves, perfume of jasmine and jasmine-sweat after alcove ardours, wisdom in the whispered wisdom of bodies that know no shame, heroism in the daily defiance of drawing-room decorum.

Tonight's reverie follows a fencing frolic with young Davenport—his lithe form lunging like a faun, my parry a caress disguised as combat—shirts discarded amid claret cascades, simple delights elevated to epic. No guilt curdled our congress; only pride swelled it. Verlaine may court the criminal, Proust the sepulchral; I court the classical, the conscious coronation of our kind. Let moralists moralise; our perfume wafts eternal, a counterpoint to their cologne of cant. Were our literature laurelled with such pride—plays proclaiming the perfumed palace of male delight, poems hymning the heroic heft of lovers' limbs—the world might awaken to wisdom's warmth, heroism's heroism.

Father dines tomorrow—vague murmurs of "matrimonial duty". I shall smile serenely, pride my petard. No servant I, no denier of delight. The gods perceive simply, sublimely; so shall we. Another glass to the simple things—calves, throats, triumphs tactile. Pride, not pathology.

1865: Mayfair-on-the-Sea

Aboard HMS Insistent Anatra, a Mallard ship

I begin this journal partly for posterity, partly because my valet, Graves, insists it will "look well in court", should such a thing ever be required. The past year has been an odyssey of bewildering sunshine. Since inheriting my modest fortune, I have set about building another House on the Kent coast—a palace so structurally unsound that even the architect blushes at sunrise. It boasts twenty-three windows, one staircase, and a fireplace of such size that an entire Welsh male-voice choir could roast comfortably within it. Into this architectural triumph I shall pour my cultural spoils from what I am pleased to call my world tour of enlightenment and moderately improper conduct.

We embarked in January upon HMS Insistent Anatra, a yacht of noble lines and undisciplined morals, stocked with champagne, a piano, and an alarming quantity of theatrical costumes "for emergencies". Accompanied by my old friend Major Duckworth (whose moustache traveled third class), I set forth to study mankind and any agreeable portions of his anatomy.

Our first port of call was Boston, which I found sturdy, well scrubbed, and in urgent need of irony. The Bostonians dine early, think late, and quote scripture at one. A certain professor from Harvard entertained me with a lecture on Temperance; I retaliated with a lecture on Decoration, which he found far more intoxicating.

Thence to New York—a city built entirely of ambition and oysters. Everywhere, buildings ascend in defiance of gravity and taste. I attended a dinner where each guest stood and announced his annual income, after which I was obliged to invent a diamond mine. Yet I must confess the Americans show admirable candour. They flirt as they do business: with speed, transparency, and an eye on the main chance.

By April we reached Sydney, where the very sky seems drunk with gin and sunlight. The colonial gentlemen, raw yet kind, insisted upon showing me their bush—by which they meant the landscape, though the conversation was not always topographical. I hunted neither kangaroo nor reputation successfully but acquired an excellent suntan and a temporary tattoo reading Virtue delayed is virtue denied. The governor's wife mistook me for an anthropologist; I allowed the error to deepen until dinner.

This was followed by Bombay, where hospitality is performed like opera—with vast orchestras, sudden violence, and a backstage full of flowers. I was received by the Prince of Jamnagar, who seated me upon a silver elephant and offered me a ruby "for remembrance". What precisely I am to remember he tactfully omitted, though his interpreter smirked the entire evening. The palace dining hall resembled an explosion in a jewellery shop; one eats curry while feeling accessorised.

From there our vessel ducked (appropriately) eastward to Shanghai, the city of quicksilver courtesies and slower teapots. Businessmen there bow so elaborately one suspects they drop things. I was introduced to a merchant named Li Tan, who claimed descent from dragons and proved delightful company. We traded languages: I taught him the English art of understatement; he taught me the Chinese art of silence—I am better at the former. A silk robe of remarkable design now hangs in my cabin; Graves says it makes me look "improperly picturesque". Excellent.

The long route home took us through the Bosporus, where Istanbul unfolded its mosques like theatrical flats at sunset. I dined with an Ottoman prince who wore more jewels than a Covent Garden prima

donna and spoke with languid authority on "European melancholia". We smoked, debated destiny, and admired the same handsome interpreter. I acquired lessons in discretion and an alarming proficiency with the water-pipe.

Between ports there were small mishaps—a fire in the pantry (easily contained by champagne), a mutiny in the hammock department, and one flirtation with a customs officer resulting in my passport being gently perfumed but returned with reluctance. In truth, I have learned that danger and pleasure often travel on the same deck.

Now, as we approach Southampton, I sit beneath the awning, notebook in hand, sea softly impertinent below. I am richer in objects and poorer in innocence. I have collected an idol from Bombay (missing one eye, rather like the major), a fan from Shanghai that tells unprintable stories in painted feathers, and a number of letters so compromising they positively hum.

My conclusion after this circumnavigation of curiosity: civilisation is precisely the same everywhere—merely translated through costume and temperature. Men love, gamble, and lie in much the same tongue; only the adjectives differ. What separates the East from the West is not morality, but the climate in which one feels guilty.

I return to England tanned, cultured, and mildly inflammable, bringing with me the firm conviction that life is best lived as rehearsal: one never knows when the prime minister might require a monologue.

Graves is even now ironing my white suits with missionary zeal. The major snores beside the rail, looking like Empire in repose. As for myself—I am already composing the play: A Gentleman Abroad, or Virtue overboard but still afloat.

1864: Diary of Felix Marchant

Covent Garden

London tonight resembled a theatre whose curtain refused to fall. The rain had painted the cobbles into mirrors, and the gaslight hovered upon them like memory—a trembling portrait of splendour decayed. I had gone out, purposelessly, as one does when the rooms of one's own house seem too well-behaved. Covent Garden was still awake: vendors half asleep in their carts, actors leaving the playhouses with souls newly borrowed from the stage, and all the usual shadows that make the city seem alive by pretending they are not.

He appeared without ceremony, emerging from the fog as if conjured by a thought I had not yet completed. His coat, too fine for his manner, carried an odour of tobacco and rain; his gaze had the

insolent calm of one who expects to be forgiven before he sins. We spoke scarcely a dozen words—the sort one forgets even as they are uttered—yet in that interval the distance between loneliness and discovery closed like a clasp.

We walked together beneath dripping eaves, our reflections tangled in the puddles. There was no exchange of names, only an unrecorded understanding that this cold, indifferent city had yielded, for a moment, something luminous. When we paused beneath the archway by the market clock, the world seemed briefly reorganised around our silence.

What passed between us—no matter by gesture or glance—was not indulgence but recognition. He was, I think, one of those wanderers born to make men remember that beauty does not apologise for the mud it stands in. In his company, London ceased to be a fortress of manners and became again a labyrinth of possibilities—magnificent, ungovernable, tender where one least expects mercy.

He vanished as softly as he had come, disappearing toward Bow Street with the ease of one returning home to anonymity. I remained in the square long after, watching the emptying stalls, the dripping canvas, the faint whistle of a constable in some other life.

Something has altered in me. I have often thought beauty a performance, but tonight I understood it can also be a rebellion—the moment when two strangers conspire against extinction. London, for all its decay, has opportunities more vivid than virtue. It breathes in the shadows, and now, so too, perhaps, do I.

1864: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

A most agreeable homecoming today—Hester has returned from her sojourn in Bath, or wherever it is she retreats when the world grows too clamorous for her refined solitude. The carriage arrived at dusk, its lanterns cutting through the fog like discreet invitations, and there she was: my dear wife, stepping down in that familiar grey travelling cloak, her face serene as a sepulchre, her smile as perfunctory as a polite refusal. We exchanged the usual civilities over tea—her recounting the vapours of the Pump Room, I murmuring compliments on her improved pallor—and by nine o'clock she had vanished to her own apartments upstairs, leaving me to my decanter and solitude with the quiet satisfaction of a contract well observed.

How delightful it is, this arrangement of ours, unencumbered as it is by the vulgar burdens of hereditary titles. Not being shackled by the iron demands of primogeniture—that tedious obligation to propagate

little dukes and duchesses for the family escutcheon—we are free to indulge our separate orbits without the tiresome pretence of heirs. It is just as well, for we seem so rarely to inhabit the same house, let alone the same chamber. In five years of marriage, we have never yet shared a bedroom; our connubial life consists of occasional sightings across drawing-rooms and the exchange of notes via the butler. Hester departs for her "cures" or country visits with the regularity of the tide, and I pursue my own pursuits in London or on the Continent—theatricals, salons, the usual diversions of a man whose tastes run to the aesthetic rather than the ancestral. No one suspects a thing; society sees only the model union of convenience.

I consider her my "moustache", in the finest tradition of such discreet adornments: the perfect cover of respectability, trimmed to perfection, concealing nothing essential yet lending an air of orthodox masculinity to the ensemble. A wife without the untidy necessity of performing as a husband—no fumbling in the dark, no awkward procreations, no domestic drudgery to interrupt one's evenings. Hester, bless her unsociable soul, is as content with this as I. She has her own proclivities, marked preferences for the company of certain ladies—those intellectual spinsters and bluestocking widows who gather in Bath's quieter salons, debating Shelley or sewing samplers with a fervour that quite excludes the coarser sex. Her letters hint at these attachments with the coded affection of one who knows her correspondent will understand: "Miss Cornewall and I have discovered a most congenial circle", or "Lady Duckmere's companionship proves restorative". I reply with equal discretion: "Delighted to hear of your improved spirits; do convey my regards to the circle."

We suit each other admirably, like a pair of well-matched gloves—elegant, complementary, and rarely worn together. She provides the facade of family propriety for my wanderings; I offer the shield of a titled husband for her retreats. No children to complicate the tableau, no scandals to occasion—merely the mutual understanding that marriage, in our case, is less a sacrament than a strategic alliance against the world's prying eyes. Tonight, as her carriage crunched away from the porte-cochère earlier this week (I timed her departure from the club window), I raised a glass to absent companions; now, with her return, I raise another to the harmony of separate spheres.

The fire crackles companionably; outside, the sea murmurs secrets to the shore. Hester's door remains firmly shut, a symbol of our perfect pact. Tomorrow, perhaps, I shall pen invitations to town—the new season beckons with its masquerades and mysteries. For now, contentment: a moustache well-maintained, a world well-navigated.

1863: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

Father has been in one of his ducal tempers again, rejecting half a dozen of the new recruits from the colonies destined for his private seraglio—that gilded cage of exotic playthings he maintains at Mallard Court, stocked like a rajah's zenana with beauties from every dusty corner of Empire. "Too raw", he grumbled over luncheon, tossing their cartes de visite into the fire with the disdain of a connoisseur discarding flawed gems. "These colonials arrive half-formed; I require finish, not fodder". The Malays were too "sullen", the Sikhs too "stiff", the Africans too "unrefined"—all dispatched to the home farms to toil among turnips and tenant squabbles, their silken potential ploughed under like so much manure. A pity, for some had promise; but Father's tastes run to the pre-polished, and who am I to cavil at ducal whim?

Yet one among them has captured my particular fancy—a tall, well-made New England man of some thirty years, shipped over from the Boston wharves with the latest consignment of "indentured curiosities". His name, in that barbarous Yankee patois, is plain Felix something-or-other—broad-shouldered as a ship's mast, with the lithe power of a man who wrestles sails and storms, skin bronzed by Atlantic gales, eyes of a stormy grey that promise tempests indoors. He stands a good six-foot-three in his bare feet, muscled without vulgarity, his features bold yet malleable—a jaw like carved oak, lips full enough for sonnets, hair the colour of wet sand curling defiantly at his neck. When paraded before us in the Long Gallery, stripped to his loincloth for inspection (as is Father's tiresome custom), he held himself with a quiet defiance that stirred the blood: no simpering slave, but a stallion awaiting the right hand to break him.

I have pleaded his case directly to Father this afternoon, over brandy in the gun room—begged that he grant the fellow to me rather than exile him to the farms, "which will spoil his beauty and demeanour irreparably, reducing a potential Apollo to a ploughboy". Father arched that ducal brow, suspicious as ever of my "aesthetic enthusiasms", but relented with a snort: "Take your colonial pet, Alban, but do not bankrupt me on French tailors". Victory! The man is mine—to be fetched from the stables tomorrow, where he languishes among the grooms.

My plans for him are already aflutter like a flock of debutante fans. He shall be my protégé—the latest fashion, if I must create it myself amid the salons of Mayfair. A Pygmalion project for the age: I shall shape him, soften those few small edges—the rough colonial burr in his speech, the unpractised grace of his gait, the blunt Yankee stare—into a

creature fit for society's highest circles. Lessons in deportment from my own fencing master; elocution from the understudy at the Haymarket; attire from my Paris couturier, who will swathe those limbs in silks that whisper rather than shout. A few months under my tutelage, and he shall emerge not as Felix Yankee, but reborn: Felix Marchant, borrowing lustre from my own titles—Marchant of Mu, with its echo of merchant princes and arcane Mu mysteries. "Felix" for felicity, "Marchant" for the mercantile allure of his New World origins, elevated to aristocratic cadence. He shall be launched Pygmalion-like onto the social stage: debut at my next Anatis masque, where bucks and barons will vie for his acquaintance, mistaking him for some exotic earl's by-blow.

Imagine it: Felix Marchant, Esq., reclining in my library with a volume of Gautier, his new velvet waistcoat straining artfully at the seams, debating aesthetics with Wilde over absinthe while Churchill eyes him like a Derby prospect. The farms would have coarsened him to clod; society shall polish him to perfection—my perfect Galatea, breathing life into marble made flesh. And in private hours, away from the footlights of fashion, those edges I soften shall yield to deeper shaping: a private curriculum of pleasures, where colonial vigour meets cultivated command. He senses it already, I think—that grey gaze lingering on me during inspection, a flicker of curiosity amid the caution.

Father suspects nothing beyond my "theatrical fads"; society will see only the latest novelty. I alone shall know the sculptor's secret joy. Tomorrow, the work begins. Felix Marchant—how the name rolls like a promise. The seraglio's loss is my gallery's gain.

1862: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

A quiet evening by the library fire, the sea murmuring beyond the casements like a conspirator reluctant to confess. The world beyond—with its dukes and debutantes, its dreary demands of dynasty—fades to a distant drone; here, in this sanctum of silk and solitude, the muse descends unbidden. Tonight she whispered a verse, born of that exquisite irony which attends our shadowed lives: a defiant little poem, disclaiming the sins society so conveniently catalogues, while veiling our own in layers of labyrinthine grace. I set quill to vellum and extended it to three stanzas, preserving the stately rhythm—iambic pentameter marching like a parade of paradoxes—and the couplet's crisp closure. Veracity? Ah, therein lies the delicious deceit: true as

gospel to the uninitiated eye, yet laced with our private hieroglyphics. Let it stand as testament to the art of saying everything by saying nothing.

Here it is, committed to these pages for posterity—or prosecution, should indiscretion ever pry:

No virgin I deflower, nor, lurking, creep,
With steps adult'rous, on a husband's sleep.
I plough no field in other men's domain;
And where I delve no seed shall spring again.

No wife I steal, nor cradle rob of heir,
No lawful bower profane with stolen air.
My furrow falls on fallow, barren ground,
Where harvest ne'er shall crown the fruitful mound.

Yet in my garden, blooms of rarer hue
Unfurl beneath the moon's indulgent view;
No taint of lineage, no bond profane —
Pure pleasure's path, untrod by law's disdain.

The first stanza disowns the cardinal carnalities—no ravished innocence, no cuckold's midnight trespass, no illicit impregnation—all sins neatly notched on society's abacus. Veracious enough for the vicar; to him, a hymn of heterodox virtue. Yet "delve"—that spade-sharp word—hints at deeper diggings, seedless furrows where ploughshare meets not womb but willing counterpart, barren by nature's design rather than denial.

The second extends the disclaimer: no poached spouse, no orphaned progeny, no desecration of connubial nest. Fallow ground indeed—our affections fall where fertility fears to flower, harvests reaped in ecstasy unencumbered by heirs or alarms. The syntax coils like smoke from a forbidden pipe, innocent tillage to the literal eye, resonant ravishment to the keyed ear.

The third unveils the garden's secret splendour—rarer blooms under moonlit mercy, untarnished by lineage or law. Pure pleasure's path: our velvet byways, where no bastard banners wave, no legal lances pierce. Veracity absolute, if one reads slant: society's sins evaded, our own exalted. No poem so chaste has ever sung so lustily of the liberties we claim in shadow.

How it amuses, this verbal masquerade! Were these lines declaimed at Almack's, dowagers would nod sagely over my "moral rectitude"; in the Albion's alcoves, cognoscenti would clink glasses to the coded

confession. Tonight's composition follows a symposium of sorts—a fencing frolic with young Davenport from the Oxford eight, his lithe form foil to my finesse, shirts discarded amid claret cascades. No delving there save delight, no seed but satisfaction. The poem codifies it: we plough our private pastures, harrow-free, reaping rapture sans regret.

Father inquires tomorrow—vague murmurs of "matrimonial prospects". I shall recite this verse, watch his ducal brow furrow in fond approval. Veracity's veil is our victory; the muse, our most merciful masker. Another glass to the garden unseen—blooms eternal, under moon's indulgent eye.

1862: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

This morning opened with a milk-white mist upon the meadow and the smell of rain hiding in the hedgerows. The house labourers were late to stir—or perhaps I was early, being sleepless from the London journey. I have never been so grateful for birdsong. After the choking soot and self-satisfaction of the metropolis, a lark's unpremeditated trill feels like absolution. There is, I find, more of England in this little parish than in all of London's grandiloquent brick.

It is curious that we call London the "heart" of the nation, for it beats only by constraint. The place is dangerous, dirty, licentious in a regrettably unimaginative way. Vice there is a profession, watched by police and stalked by blackmailers who quote the law whilst living by its breach. Men like myself—that is to say, given to friendship too tender for public description—must navigate the terrain with constant diplomacy. Every glance becomes calculation, every kindness an opportunity for ruin. The nightly patrols are less guardians than scavengers.

Yet here, among my Kentish oaks and glimmering ponds, the world seems otherwise organised. The village constable doffs his cap and concerns himself with poachers and drunken carters, not with the abstract crimes of affection. One is free to be silent without being watched, and free to be watched only by the trees. "So long as you are discreet", says old Sergeant Vane, "we have better sins to chase". I admire such practical morality; it is worth ten sermons.

It astonishes me that scarcely a fifth of this race of ours inhabits London, yet it looms as though it were all of England. Our crowned glory, yes—the theatre of Parliament, the promenade of the powerful—but one of the dullest capitals ever devoted to pleasure. Everything

there is organised for display, nothing for delight. A city hurried into self-importance, too frantic to feel. When I return from it, I do so in reverse of my own rule: eighty percent fatigue with twenty of amusement. I suspect the soul may invert that ratio in a place where hedges grow higher than gossip.

Anatis, meanwhile, offers me the correct mathematics: eighty percent pleasure, twenty percent torpidity—the perfect composition for contemplation. Here I rise late, rehearse my few lines for the little pastoral we shall perform by candlelight in the stable loft, consult my gardener as though he were a parliamentarian, and dine in linen still scented from last year's lilies. The actors are country youths with excellent calves and uncertain literacy; we are improving both in balanced measure.

Yesterday we rehearsed The Faun in Winter, my own modest allegory of civilisation's chill. I played Autumn—fully clothed, unfortunately—while young Perry from the mill acted the Faun with an instinct that could not be taught at any conservatoire. He moves as though Pan himself still lingers in English blood. Afterward, when the mist returned, we took wine on the orchard wall and discussed the cruelty of the city to any creature that feels too much. The man has never seen London; I advised him to keep it that way. It devours its poets as neatly as it does its oysters.

There is a comfort in the country's conspiracies. The rector nods, the tenants pretend deafness, and discretion becomes a local sport, exercised with tactful enthusiasm. I believe this rural hypocrisy to be the healthiest form of tolerance: we sin, but lightly and with manners. Indeed, hypocrisy is the corset of civilisation; without its lacing, all our virtues would sprawl.

As the evening fell, the clouds turned copper, smelling faintly of mint and distant rain. I walked the terrace alone. Peace here is thick—not the inert peace of absence, but that of perfect privacy: the liberty to exist without audience or alarm. Beauty attends me faithfully; pleasure waits, unhurried. For the first time in many months, I caught sight of my reflection in the window and did not flinch from its contemplation. Rural air performs miracles that no confessor can.

I intend to remain at Anatis through autumn, and perhaps through life. Let London keep its crowns, its scandals, its overpopulated sense of importance. I will content myself with the clearer air, the slower gaze, and the faint suggestion—too faint for the police to notice—that freedom, decorum, and desire may yet coexist beneath a single roof.

1862: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

I have spent a week at my father's estate, which is rather like spending the summer in a cathedral devoted entirely to upholstery. Each room upholstered, incidentally, in guilt and gold. The principal novelty of this visit was his invitation—offered with some ceremony and a decanter of Tokay—to inspect what he called his "domestic arrangements": a series of chambers adjoining the stables which, to my bewilderment, turned out to constitute his all-male seraglio.

I had expected something out of Tennyson, perhaps—moonlight, mystery, faint sighs through muslin—but found instead a set of comfortably carpeted rooms and a quantity of rather languid young men arranged like ornaments in a Turkish fantasy. Silk cushions, citron light, and the haunting sense of something both elaborate and entirely pointless. My father, who has long mistaken indulgence for imagination, seemed in raptures over the convenience of it all.

"It saves travel", he said, gesturing to a boy pouring sherbet with tragic attentiveness, "and imports the necessary colour into English life."

I pointed out that whatever England lacked in colour, it certainly compensated in opportunity. "Surely", I said, "one might hunt such entertainments as one does foxes—the obstacles being half the pleasure". He merely smiled and nodded toward the stable door. "We've horses for hunting."

That was the moment, I think, when the curtains dropped on filial obedience. A man cannot live on another man's fancies, especially if they are arranged by the footman. I resolved to hunt elsewhere—not only flesh but freedom, not only convenience but creation.

So this morning, having made my excuses and distributed the requisite farewells, I have come here to my own small estate at Mallory—a place too ancient to be respectable, too drafty to be fashionable, but very nearly alive. The garden tunnels into its own past; the lake dreams beside the house like a conspiracy. I feel something stirring—something theatrical, perhaps, or at least dramatic.

London calls. I hear its brass and laughter from here, though it lies sixty miles distant. There men dress, disguise, and undress with a purpose nobler than convenience—the performance of the self. Bohemia, they call it; a wilder hunting ground, where one may chase not game, but genius. I think that is where my future lies—amidst the footlights and the painters, the decadent and the damned.

My father may keep his silk-tasselled paradise. I shall make of mine a stage.

1862: a Blandy housekeeper

Mallard House

Well, it is the talk of the servants' hall—though what talk it can be when there's no one left to tell it, I can't imagine. Mr. Alban has gone and done what no gentleman of his family has done before: taken not one of the Blandy servants with him to his new house. Not the footmen, not even the second lad, and certainly not me. It is a break with every tradition of this place, and, if you ask me, rather inconvenient for everyone involved.

I suppose he means to start fresh, new house, new staff, and no one about to remember him as a barefoot child hiding under the orangery steps. That's modern gentlemen all over—like to think a fresh coat of paint can cover a whole history. Still, I can't deny it gives the rest of us little to talk about, now that no one's gone along to bring back a whispered word or two about how he runs things. Miss Clara says he intends to do everything "in the London fashion". I daresay that means fancy lamps and unreasonable hours.

Cook says if he expects good service without any gossip, he has another think coming. "The whole of society", she says, "runs on scandal—from the pantry upward". I reminded her it's not for us to speculate on gentry habits, which only made her laugh harder.

They say the new place is vast—forty bedrooms, and ceilings high enough to make a sweep dizzy. No doubt he'll fill it with actors, poets, and the like, all eating lobster at dawn and sleeping till tea time. Perhaps it's for the best we're not there; one could hardly sweep properly around such people. Still, I wouldn't object to hearing how it all turns out. As it stands, we're left only the dust of an empty hall and no fresh stories to polish the silver by.

For a housekeeper, silence is the one thing worse than gossip—it means the world has gone somewhere without you.

1862: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

The house is at last complete—all forty bedchambers, three staircases, and ceilings high enough for angels to loiter without stooping. I spent the morning wandering through it as though exploring a continent that had been built from my own notions. Even empty, it already breathes personality—mine, I hope, though perhaps a

touch more vainglorious than I intended. The echo of one's own footsteps in a marble hall is the sound of vanity politely clapping itself.

Today I made a decision which will either scandalise my neighbours or delight them into imitation (both outcomes equally agreeable): I shall employ only male servants. Every position, from the highest butler to the humblest scullion, shall be filled by a man. I am aware the Treasury imposes a tax upon households of such composition, on the assumption that bachelors surrounded by bachelors must have income to spare and discretion to hide. So be it. Let them tax what they cannot comprehend—it is the closest our government comes to philosophy.

Besides, if I am obliged to live among attendants, why not choose those whose presence transforms duty into decoration? I intend a staff chosen less for pedigree than for proportion, less for birth than for bearing. Let each hallway echo with civility, every threshold gleam with youth and competence. If art has taught me anything, it is that labour need not preclude loveliness.

Yet all shall remain entirely decorous, the cynics notwithstanding. My aesthetic is not the vulgar catalogue of indulgence, but rather a cultivated harmony—a small republic of refinement in livery. The newspapers, when they hear of it, will call the arrangement "eccentric". Admirable word! In England, "eccentric" is what one calls happiness one cannot explain.

So the order has gone to my agent: competent valets, footmen of good height and temper, a butler with a voice deep enough to silence moral inquiry. The house will be, I hope, a composition in flesh and etiquette—a painting one may walk through.

To inhabit beauty, even in service, is my rebellion against mediocrity. If Mallory House must speak of me, let it do so in the language of grace.

1862: an architect reports

I have the honour to report that the construction of your Lordship's new country residence, situated approximately sixty miles from London, has now been completed in accordance with the specifications originally provided and approved by your Lordship in the summer of 1859.

The principal structure conforms throughout to the Italianate manner, adapted for comfort and light, and executed in Bath stone of the first quality upon a foundation of local flint and brick. The elevations display a balanced composition, with restrained ornamentation in the cornices and window pediments, while the

house's interior arrangement, as designed, ensures both grandeur of impression and convenience of access.

The principal suite of state rooms occupies the south and west aspects, admitting full light throughout the day. These include the drawing room, dining salon, and principal library, each distinguished by high decorative ceilings elaborately modelled in stucco, with motifs derived from Renaissance arabesques. The library measures some sixty feet in length and is fitted with mahogany shelving and concealed cases for maps and manuscripts, as requested. A conservatory of iron and glass, communicating directly with the morning room, affords agreeable prospect of the grounds and ample air in all seasons.

Accommodation has been provided for forty principal bedchambers, exclusive of ancillary apartments, bath rooms, and dressing rooms, all opening onto broad corridors designed for ventilation and warmth. The servants' wing, to the north, is self-contained and connected by lower passages, its offices arranged about a quadrangle for efficiency and oversight. Detached buildings comprise the stables, coach-houses, dairy, and laundry, together with suitable quarters for the grounds staff.

The heating, water, and drainage systems have been laid in accordance with the latest sanitary principles, and each fire-place has been tested. All interior painting and flooring are complete, and the furnishing and hanging of draperies may proceed at your Lordship's convenience.

With regard to the external works, the landscaping of the immediate ten acres surrounding the house is in progress under the direction of Mr. Talbot, landscape gardener. The principal terraces are already formed and grassed, while the laying out of the ornamental lake, northern drive, and parterre gardens will be completed within the season. The kitchen gardens and glasshouses stand ready for planting.

Your Lordship's estate, in all essential particulars, is therefore ready for inspection at any time convenient to yourself.

1859: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

I have today been reminded—by my solicitor, of all prosaic messengers—that within the year I shall come into my inheritance. Whether it arrives through my late grandmother, my distant aunt, or the collective confusion of both, no one appears quite certain. The Mallard genealogical tree, like all trees left to overgrow, now resembles a topiary in the shape of lunacy. At any rate, the process requires only my continued survival, and that, I flatter myself, is within my powers.

The sum is to be something in the vicinity of £200,000 income per annum, derived from various properties so geographically scattered they might as well exist in myth. It is a curious sensation to be informed that one will soon be "comfortably burdened". Comfort, in my experience, is rarely so numerically expressed. Still, I shall not quarrel with fortune merely because she arrives wearing the wrong cousin's name.

My circumstances differ from my father's in one notable respect: I am not shackled by that gaunt legal ghost, primogeniture. My elder brother has absorbed the title, the estates, and the ancestral conviction that ownership requires solemnity. He can keep them. I, unencumbered by entail, may lose one name and adopt another with impunity. The family has always collected them—Duke this, Baron that—like medals from wars it never fought. There are more Mallard titles than Mallard heirs; I shall simply steal one of the spares should I ever need to impress the uncurious.

It is a comforting sort of independence—to belong to consequence without being consumed by it. I fancy myself, if not a black sheep, then at least the decorative variety—the kind embroidered on the family tapestry, gazing impudently away from the rest of the flock.

So here I wait: suspended between insolvency and embarrassment, a reluctant chrysalis of respectability. In the meantime, I mean to study the city, the stage, and mankind, all of which possess more vitality than the peerage. Money may provide liberty, but observation provides adventure—and I have the feeling my life's play, still behind the curtain, will be worth the wait.

1858: The Witches of Lefame

A Pastoral Masque
Composed by Lord Alban Fitzartur (1858)

Dramatis Personae

- DUKE ORLUNO — Ruler of Lefame, haunted by visions of virtue.
- ART — A restless ghost, once a painter, now condemned to inspire mortals.
- MAB — Queen of Mischief, quicksilver spirit of moonlight and mockery.
- THE WITCHES OF LEFAME — Six beautiful men, sworn to the creed of honest desire.
  - PERRIN, LYDON, RUSSELL, GILES, NICK, and SWANNUS.

- CHORUS OF NAKED SWANS — Attendants upon virtue, ever bathing, ever gossiping.
- BEASTS MYTHICAL AND OTHER — A unicorn that quotes Plato; a bear enamoured of verse; two satyrs competing in modesty.

Scene I — A Beach on the Isle of Lefame

(Moonlight. The swans preen themselves and argue morality.)

First Swan. O brothers, what's virtue but the freedom to float unclad?

Second Swan. Virtue, say I, is a well-feather'd backside viewed at sunrise.

Third Swan. Then we are saints entire!

(Enter MAB, dancing above the surf.)

Mab. Peace, peacocks of purity! Yon tides grow jealous of your polish. I bring news: the Duke shall wed to-morrow, a thing both lawful and lamentable.

First Swan. Mab, why lament the lawful?

Mab. Because lawful love is ever half-dressed.

(Music of pipes. Swans caper. ART the Ghost arises, transparent, clutching a painter's brush.)

Art. What mortals call corruption, I call colour! The soul in greys is half-alive.

Mab. Ghost of pigment, why haunt our isle?

Art. To teach these lovely witches that honesty and appetite are kin.

Scene II — The Grove of Witches

(Enter six witches, shirtless, garlanded in herbs.)

Perrin. Brothers, what new sermon whispers that pleasure is sin?

Lydon. The priests on the mainland. They would ban our bathing as lewd display.

Russell. Let them! We are decadent — which word, says the ghost, doth mean incorruptible in delight.

Giles. Amen to incorruption!

(Enter Mab and Art.)

Mab. Fair witches, teach the Duke this lesson: that goodness and luxury are twins long parted.

Art. Decadence is no disease but health unashamed. Paint your ethics bright!

Nick. Shall we dance him to conviction?

Swannus. A dance unclothed is argument enough.

(They dance. Thunder of laughter. A unicorn peeps through the leaves.)

Unicorn. Gentlemen, modesty is over-rated. A pure horn needs no curtain.
Mab. Hark, even beasts preach virtue! This island shall be canonised for its pleasure.

Scene III — The Duke's Court, Next Morning

(Enter DUKE ORLUNO, attended by clerics.)

Duke. What riot was this that shook my dreams? Methought my virtue juggled with a ghost.
(ART appears.)
By Heav'n! the same pale painter!

Art. My lord, your virtue's colours fade. You starve the spirit with too much fasting. Look to the witches of your isle; they feast and yet offend not Heaven.

Duke. Witches? Men who bathe by moonlight?
Mab. Men who dare be honest.

(The witches enter, radiant. Swans trail behind scattering feathers.)

Perrin. Kneel not before us, sire; stand with us bare!
Duke. Bare?
Lydon. In truth, your Grace—unclad of hypocrisy.

Duke. If this be witchcraft, bless me, for I feel it good.

(All sing a madrigal on the theme that pleasure is the soul's true cleanliness.)

Chorus of Swans:

White be our feathers, white be our sin,
Where joy is honest, the heart is thin
Between the world and Heaven's grin!

(The unicorn blesses them; ART dissolves in sunrise.)

Art. My work is done; the brush is flesh again. Let every man be his own masterpiece.

(Thunder of applause from invisible spirits. MAB closes the masque.)

Mab. Thus ends the dream of Lefame, where witches prove saints, ghosts preach ethics, and the only evil is dullness. Now wake, dear audience, and sin—but virtuously.

(Exeunt omnes in a whirl of laughter, feathers, and light.)

1858: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

This afternoon I went to the library in search of a parcel of letters—dull correspondence from Father's estate accountant—and while rummaging through the trunk beneath the window (the old one with

brass corners and a broken latch) I came upon something I had not expected at all. It contained not accounts, but contraband of the most exquisite sort: books my father would condemn on sight and burn without remorse, as he did poor Shelley's verse when I was ten. Why, then, they should be hidden here of all places, in his own domain of pious catalogues and parliamentary papers, I cannot imagine. Concealment suggests shame, yet his footmen dust this room weekly and no one remarks upon the trunk. Perhaps it belonged to Grandfather—the libertine Duke—whose portraits Mother cannot bear.

At first I thought them foreign bibles: gilt lettering, faint perfume of tobacco and ink. But when I opened the first, Les Fleurs du mal by one Charles Baudelaire, I realised I tread on dangerous, delightful ground. Evil flowers—what an intoxicating notion! I lingered upon those words as one might over wine forbidden by the doctor. The lines within seemed to glow like embers: sin made articulate, melancholy dressed in velvet. Instead of condemning pleasure, this Parisian creature makes of it a kind of sacrament. He praises desire, decay, and perfume with the gravity of sermon, but a sermon turned inside out.

And there, in the margin of one poem titled La Débauche—To my Youth, I read a word which startled me: décadent. I had heard it muttered once in chapel, hissed through a curate's teeth as though venomous. Decadence, they say, is the rot of the soul, the slide from virtue into velvet ruin. Yet in this Frenchman's company it feels quite another thing—not decay but refinement, the deliberate bruising of experience to release its rarest scent. He writes as if the pursuit of beauty and sensation were not sin, but salvation from the dull sermon of progress.

Beside it lay another volume, Théophile Gautier's essays, their pages foxed with affectionate handling. He continues the theme, though more elegantly: decadence as devotion to the exotic, the elaborate, the unnecessary. He argues for art as dream, for life conducted as pageant rather than duty. Reading him, I felt as though he had given language to an appetite I did not yet dare to name—the longing for worlds more radiant than the one prescribed.

The church tells us that pleasure is evil because it distracts from God. But what if pleasure is the sign of divinity, the living spark within the clay? What if the so-called "fall" was merely man's first dance? When I read Gautier describing the artist's surrender to fantasy, I felt some answering stir within myself—not wickedness, but recognition.

I replaced the books at dusk, though reluctantly, hiding them beneath the dull ledgers where no servant will trouble them. Yet I find myself changed. There was a scent upon those pages—not merely of

Parisian dust, but of liberation. Perhaps Father has forgotten them, or perhaps he remembers and cannot admit their power. If decadence means awakening to beauty through disobedience, then I am content to be decadent.

1857: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Private papers

I have this evening returned from what society persists in calling "an honour", and what I persist in regarding as an ordeal: appearance at Court, commanded—or rather, blackmailed—by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales himself. The whole affair would have been intolerable had it not been so exquisitely absurd.

The invitation (or summons) arrived yesterday, sealed and smug. I was to attend the next drawing-room, recite something gentlemanly, smile dutifully, and lend the Prince the illusion he was adored. Since I had expressed more than once my distaste for these brocaded bear-bazaars, His Highness employed a cunning diplomacy: "If you come, Alban", wrote he, "I'll place my yacht Seraphine at your disposal for the summer."

Blackmail in its silkiest form! I laughed aloud when I read it, for really there is nothing more diverting than a royal attempt at bribery dressed as benevolence. When we met this morning, he repeated the offer with that half-serious twinkle of his—half-schoolboy, half-tempter. I replied that whilst Seraphine is doubtless a capable vessel, the Mallard yachts are not merely superior in rigging but in reputation, being morally unsinkable. I added, with all humility, that what I truly desired was no gift in kind but in kindliness: his gratitude, a bow, and a kiss upon the cheek.

A pause—delicious, comic, dangerous—then the Prince, trying not to smirk, said something about "the limits of royal patronage." I assured him all nations are safest when their princes know where to draw such lines… and slightly cross them. He blushed—charmingly—and I consider that a victory.

The Court itself was as it must ever be: miles of velvet, mirrors, and polite yawnings arranged to music. The ladies shimmered; the gentlemen perspired in their uniforms of boredom. I recited my little verse with professional grace, bowed to the Queen (as custom demands), and survived without catastrophe. His Highness stood behind her chair, smiling like a cat who has just stolen the cream only to discover that it was milk less sweet than advertised.

I left promptly thereafter, pleading an engagement that did not exist. One must be seen to have purpose, and I had accomplished mine—to amuse myself at royalty's expense without losing a friend. He shall recover; princes always do. And if, come summer, a letter arrives inviting me to join Seraphine for a voyage, I may yet forgive him his attempted coercion.

Still, between the company of courtiers and the company of gulls, I prefer the latter: they at least scream honestly. As for the Prince—charming scoundrel—he may blackmail me again, if only he remembers the exchange rate: one recitation equals one kiss.

1857: Lord Alban Fitzartur

Letter to his cousin, Jeanne d'Anatis

What a tiresome world it is when even one's invitations arrive wrapped in the crepe of obligation. I have received a command to attend Court—yes, that glittering mausoleum of protocol where one stands for hours in the hopes of catching a royal yawn. The card arrived this morning, all embossed and imperious, as if the mere sight of my humble self might redeem the season's dullness. I confess, Jeanne, the prospect fills me with a boredom so profound it borders on the metaphysical. Velvet breeches, feathered hats, and the endless parade of dowagers in puce—it is less a levée than a funeral for good taste.

I have already penned Father a note begging intercession. I wrote, "your influence is my only hope against this royal durance vile. Surely a word in the right ear might consign me to the library instead?" He will no doubt oblige, for he knows my patience for such spectacles is thinner than a debutante's fan. Besides, what use have I for Court favour? I am scarcely the sort of son whose ambitions require a monarch's nod—more likely the reverse, should my little indiscretions ever demand royal clemency. Sardonic, perhaps, but true: the Palace is a poor ally for those whose pleasures stray from the straight and narrow path of Hanoverian propriety.

Pray, how did you escape this year's muster? Did you plead the migraine, or some more inventive ailment—a sudden passion for the cloister, perhaps? Your letters from last season hinted at a talent for such diplomatic withdrawals; I envy your ingenuity. Write soon with your stratagems, for if Father fails me, I shall be forced to attend in a state of simulated ecstasy, nodding at every platitude as though it were Sappho herself reciting from the balcony.

The house here is a haven of comparative tranquillity: the sea whispers secrets more interesting than those of St. James's, and my

mornings are spent in pursuits far preferable to curtseying. Do come visit once the Court circus has passed; we might stage our own masque, free of ermine and etiquette.

17: The Marchant of Mu: A Fairy Tale for Decadent Gentlemen

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Far beyond the charted oceans, beyond the monsoons where compasses falter and maps dissolve, lies the floating realm of Mu—half isle, half mirage. Sailors would swear that it rises and sinks with the breath of the world. On clear days they see its mountains gleam like mirrors; by starlight it vanishes, leaving only the scent of fruit and laughter on the water.

In that ambivalent paradise the air itself has manners: the wind bends graciously round the trees; rain arrives perfumed. And there, in the golden age of wonder, lived the first Marchant of Mu, called Felix—adventurer, poet, and (whispered some) the legitimate child of Pan.

Felix was, from earliest youth, a creature without solemnity. He wore wit as other men wear armour. His smile was a declaration of independence, and his body a kind of hymn to sunlight. A lover of men and of nature in equal measure, he could no more resist beauty than a bird can resist the open air. Yet there was in him no vice, only a curiosity which refused extinction.

He spoke in riddles, those playful labyrinths of words he called "realities' disguises." When asked what he loved most, he answered, "Anything that returns one's gaze." To some that meant vanity; to others, faith. He preferred to leave them puzzled while he danced away, pipe in hand, to teach the rocks how to echo.

One evening, wandering through the violet forests that surround Mu's capital, Felix found a beast as large as a lion yet gentler than a lamb. It wept in sleep. Beside it lay the broken fragments of a silver mirror.

"Why dost thou weep?" asked Felix.

"Because", said the beast, "when I gaze upon myself, I dream another creature—fairer, freer—and when I wake, I am I again."

Felix smiled. "Therein lies thy blessing. For if thou wert fully awake thou wouldst never know longing, and without longing even paradise would dull."

So he took up the shards and, arranging them upon the grass, bade the beast admire its reflection in a thousand pieces. "Behold thy truth," he said. "It is not unity but variety that makes thee beautiful."

And from that hour the beast ceased weeping and began to sing; its song was so clear that sailors mistook it for wind in rigging. Thus Felix taught Mu that virtue is no single mirror, but a thousand.

In the month of the honey-moths, a festival was held upon the Yellow Lake, whose surface caught the moon like a plate of molten gold. Felix presided, crowned with vine and water-lilies, surrounded by companions of great laughter and greater limbs. They danced upon rafts, instruments clanging, torches shedding petals of flame that perfumed the air.

A missionary once shipwrecked among them cried out that such revel was sin, that labour and restraint alone ennoble the soul. Felix answered with a bow: "Good sir, in Mu we labour only for pleasure—which is to say, honestly. When joy becomes duty, the gods themselves applaud." Then he took the missionary's hand and drew him into the dance, and by dawn the poor man had forgotten both sermon and Sabbath.

Later came a hermit from another shore, austere and desiring proof of reality. Felix introduced him to a fawn of remarkable civility who could quote philosophy between bites of fig. All noon they argued whether the world was dream or substance. At sunset the philosopher dozed; the fawn vanished.

When he woke, only Felix sat beside him, holding one of the fawn's golden hairs. "Was it a dream?" the man murmured.

"Doubtless", said Felix, tucking the hair into his own curls, "and therefore the more real. Dreams are reality unclothed."

The philosopher returned home proclaiming madness as revelation.

At the close of his days (though none can say he ever truly aged), Felix walked by a lagoon filled with swans—all male, all gliding in immaculate contention. He loved to watch how they quarrelled for grace rather than for gain. When a traveller mocked them as unnatural, Felix replied, "Nothing is more natural than what rejoices in its own reflection." That jest became the island's motto.

At last, growing tired of being worshipped, the Marchant of Mu stepped onto a ship woven from reeds and sailed toward a horizon no one perceived. Only a trail of perfume, laughter, and unfinished poems remained. Some say he became the spirit of the island itself; others, that he walks still among us whenever men find dream preferable to duty.

Virtue may wear peacock feathers as easily as sackcloth; that moralists mistake exhaustion for piety; that labour suits the strong and leisure perfects the wise; that life, radiant and excessive, is the only faith worth professing. And if this be decadence, then decadence is Eden regained—not corrupt, but conscious; not idle, but alive.