

Music of Grace

Les Canards de France



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Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

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Concerto de la Grâce des Canards, Op. 17, 1785

*Comte Séraphin de Canardelle-Montmorin
d'Aubespine-de-Mallard, Compositeur du Roi, Intendant des
Plaisirs Harmoniques et des Jardins Aquatiques de Versailles.*

Premiered in the Marble Hall of Versailles before the Dauphine and an audience who mistook the opening movement for an overt sermon on divinity disguised as a pastoral gag.

I. Allegro fluviale—"Le réveil des nids"

A musical sunrise where oboes imitate rippling water and violins quack delicately in counterpoint with bassoons.

II. Adagio plumé—"Rêverie sur l'étang"

A languid and reverent movement; flutes and muted horns evoke the shimmering sleep of the lake. Court chroniclers described it as "music that preens itself."

III. Rondeau final—"Le Bal des Palmipèdes"

A jubilant dance featuring rhythmic waddles in triple time and emphasis on ornamental trills "as light as droplets from godly plumage."

Critics of 1785 complained the piece was "too reflective to be comic, too comic to be sacred," which of course ensured its immortality. A surviving manuscript, gilt-edged and faintly perfumed, bears the composer's motto: "Grâce humble, gloire humide."

1785: The première of Concerto de la Grâce des Canards in Versailles

La Gazette des Harmonies et des Plaisirs du Roi

It was with that mixture of pious expectation and discreet malice which constitutes the true spirit of our Court that the audience assembled last Thursday in the Marble Hall, summoned by the promise of a new concerto from Comte Séraphin de Canardelle-Montmorin d'Aubespine-de-Mallard, Compositeur du Roi, Intendant des Plaisirs Harmoniques et des Jardins Aquatiques de Versailles. The title alone—"Concerto de la Grâce des Canards"—caused both fans to flutter and eyebrows to rise: it is not every day that one is invited to elevate the palmipede.

The Comte, entering with his habitual air of distracted modesty (the only modesty now tolerated in high society), greeted the Queen with a bow just short of irreverence and took his place at the harpsichord, that most aristocratic of domestic altars. Behind him, the orchestra glittered like an inventory of royal favours: flutes in pale blue, oboes solemn as confessors, bassoons of that particular chocolate hue which our painters reserve for both velvet and sin.

The opening movement, “Allegro fluviale, “Le réveil des nids””, begins without the customary fanfare. Instead, two flutes murmur a figure that could be mistaken for the first yawn of dawn upon a pond. Presently, the oboes reply with a phrase whose rhythm suggests a cautious waddle; then, the violins, in a series of ascending ornaments, appear to shake invisible droplets from invisible wings. It is all very pretty, and for a moment one fears prettiness will be the whole argument.

But Comte Séraphin, who reads philosophy more than is healthy in a court musician, soon complicates the charm. In the middle section he introduces a harmonic turn on the wordless theme that left even the more hardened duchesses momentarily uncertain as to whether they were licensed to smile. An elderly marquise behind me whispered, “It is as if the water doubted its own reflection.” This may have been an excess of poetry, but one must allow something to the elderly.

Some purists complained afterwards that the bassoons were made to imitate the quacking of ducks. This is unjust. The bassoons did not imitate; they alluded. There is a distinction known to every person of breeding, though rarely to the critics. Had they truly imitated, the Comte would have been banished to the Opéra-Comique, which is, as we know, the spiritual Bagne of good taste.

The second movement, “Adagio piumé, “Rêverie sur l'étang””, is where the scandal—such as it was—gently unfolded itself. The strings entered muted, a chiffon of sound laid over the attentive silence of the court. Above them, a single oboe traced a line so simple that one suspected mischief. Little by little, harmonic shadows gathered beneath this line, as though clouds were forming under the water rather than above it.

Here the Comte permitted himself progressions that would alarm our more conservative theoreticians. One old disciple of Rameau, seated to my left and armed with a well-thumbed copy of the “Traité d'harmonie”, murmured, “He errs, he errs,” with the satisfaction of a man whose indignation has been long rehearsed. Yet the Queen, I am told, pressed her fan to her heart—the surest sign that the composer had succeeded in his most delicate enterprise: making feeling arrive before understanding, and to remain after it had departed.

At one particularly unexpected modulation—a soft, gliding transition that seemed less a change of key than a change of temperature—a page dropped a silver tray at the back of the hall. The resulting clatter was taken by some as an intentional percussive effect, by others as heaven’s protest. The Comte, unperturbed, merely smiled into the keys and prolonged the phrase as if to say: “Even accidents must be notated.”

The finale, “Rondeau, “Le Bal des Palmipèdes””, restored gaiety—or what passes for gaiety in this year of grace, when our pleasures already suspect themselves. The principal theme, in a lilting triple time, calls irresistibly to mind the sight of well-bred ducks advancing with ludicrous dignity along the terraces of the Grand Canal. There are syncopations that resemble the polite slips of court conversation, and a passage for solo violin and bassoon which an impudent attaché described as “the duet of a duchess and her confessor crossing a slippery floor.”

It was in this movement that the Comte’s orchestral skill shone most clearly. He distributes his colours as a good host distributes his guests: never allowing the talkative to monopolise the evening, always ensuring that even the dullest instruments leave with the illusion of having shone. The horns bark discreetly from distant meadows; the clarinets (those charming interlopers) insinuate themselves into the company like provincial cousins newly presented at court.

One passage, near the close, deserves particular mention. The strings sustain a shimmering chord—too rich for piety, too delicate for vulgarity—over which the woodwinds sketch a series of small, ascending figures, like bubbles of air rising through clear water. Just as the ear prepares itself for the expected resolution, the Comte diverts the harmony sideways into a place neither sombre nor bright, but curiously suspended. A pause follows, brief yet deep, in which the entire hall seems to hold its breath. It is as though our amiable ducks, having paddled so tirelessly, suddenly discover that the pond has no banks.

Some detected in this moment a philosophical insolence ill-suited to court entertainment. A pamphlet, circulating already this morning in the cafés of the Palais-Royal, accuses the composer of insinuating “subversive metaphysics under cover of feathers.” This seems harsh. If our age cannot sustain a metaphor without fearing a revolution, the fault lies not in the metaphor but in the age.

As to the reception, it was as divided as good manners permit. The Queen applauded with that measured enthusiasm which indicates both favour and the expectation of future obedience. The King, we are told, remarked only that the ducks of the Trianon had never been so honoured, which, coming from his Majesty, may be considered an

almost reckless compliment. The younger ladies, for their part, whispered that they would never again be able to watch the swans without suspecting them of intellectual pretensions.

Among the gentlemen, opinions followed the usual party lines of harmony. The disciples of German severity grumbled about “frivolous sensuality of colour,” while the devotees of Italian grace found the work “too reflective to be truly charming.” One cannot help noticing that the first faction never dances, and the second rarely thinks; thus are the arts of Europe fairly represented in miniature.

In the corridors afterwards, I encountered the Abbé de C——, that seasoned observer of our musical and moral foibles. “My dear sir,” he said, adjusting his lace cuffs with theological precision, “this concerto proves once again that the Almighty favours the duck. For only a creature that is neither wholly of the water nor wholly of the air could inspire a music so indecisively delightful.” I ventured that mankind shares the same amphibious condition between earth and heaven. He replied, “Yes, but men lack feathers, and therefore the necessary modesty.”

What verdict, then, may one safely deliver without offending either art or etiquette? It is perhaps wisest to say that “Le Concerto de la Grâce des Canards” has succeeded in its principal aim: to render the Court slightly more conscious of having feet. Whether the work will descend through the ages, we cannot yet tell. But if, in some distant and unimaginably sober century, a scholar should unearth this score, he will surely conclude that in 1785, at least for an hour, Versailles granted to its ducks what it so rarely grants to its philosophers—a graceful hearing.



ALLEGRO FLUVIALE

Lettre de Sa Majesté la Reine de France

à Sa Cousine d'Angleterre

À Versailles, ce septiesme jour de Juin,
mil sept cent quatre-vingt-sept.

Ma bien chere Cousine,

Je ne puis retenir ma plume sans sentir mon cœur se serrer, à l'idée du départ prochain de Madame la Duchesse de Canard, cette excellente Espèce, dont l'amitié si constante m'a esté, depuis plusieurs années, l'un des plus doux appuis de ma vie. Sa bonté, sa générosité, ses conseils toujours si remplis de prudence, ont su consoler mes chagrins, modérer mes jugemens, et rendre mes jours plus doux au milieu des devoirs qui m'accablent.

Que deviendrai-je sans sa presence? Il me semblera que tout s'obscurcira autour de moi, et que les heures se feront d'une longueur accablante. Elle part, dit-elle, pour deux années entières dans vostre beau Royaume; mais je forme le vœu bien sincère que la moitié de ce terme suffise à contenter sa curiosité et à la ramener au plus tost vers ceux qui l'aiment. Puisse l'air de vostre Angleterre luy estre salubre, vos plaines verdoyantes luy plaire, et vostre société luy offrir des cœurs aussi affectueux que ceux qu'elle laisse icy!

Je vous supplie, ma très chere Cousine, de chercher cette amie incomparable dès qu'elle aura pris quelque repos sur vostre rivage, et de luy faire scavoir que je n'oublie aucune des marques de tendresse qu'elle m'a prodiguées. Prenez soin, je vous en conjure, de luy remettre l'anneau que je joins à cette lettre: il est composé du rubis et du saphir unis, symboles du feu et de la constance. Qu'elle le garde comme gage de mon souvenir et de ma reconnoissance; que ces deux pierres, si différentes et pourtant si parfaites ensemble, luy retracent, dans les soirs de souvenance, la vive amitié et la confiance paisible que j'ay trouvées en elle.

Dites-luy que mes pensées l'accompagnent sur la route, et que je demande à Dieu qu'Il la conduise et la protège dans tout ce qu'elle entreprendra. Qu'Il luy accorde la paix, la santé et les douceurs d'une tendre société.

J'attendray avec empressement les nouvelles que vous voudrez bien m'en rapporter; chaque mot de votre main fera revivre dans mon cœur la joye de son souvenir. Puisse votre bonté, ma chère Cousine, adoucir pour elle les premiers jours d'absence; et puissiez-vous luy dire souvent combien elle est aimée icy.

Je suis, avec un attachement sincère et tout l'estime que je dois à votre personne,

Ma très chere Cousine, Vostre affectionnée Cousine et bien dévouée Amie

Introduction

By Winnie Mallard, 1912

The accepted estimate of how many French aristocrats entered England between 1788 and 1789 varies by almost half its number, which is a polite way of saying that no one counted carefully and those who pretended to do so had something to sell. The figures used by R. H. Pemberton in *Continental Persons Received in British Counties* (published privately, 1837) were taken, he claimed, "directly from the Home Office lists of certified foreign respectability." There were no such lists. I verified this with the Office myself some years ago, though I have since found it useful to quote Pemberton as if there were. A record, even a false one, performs its duty once it is cited.

The majority of these émigrés, having no family ties, fell with an elegance that did not survive its first English winter. A few married advantageously; most taught languages to people resistant to learning them. The rest deteriorated under various titles of charity—companions, readers, governesses, and invalids—until both memory and manners left them. It is difficult to render poverty distinguished without lying outright.

My grandmother—Espèce, Duchesse de Canard, or of something very nearly spelt so—did not experience this descent. Her case was exceptional, and, like all exceptions, badly documented. She arrived on British soil with credentials of family and token of fortune: a ring containing one ruby, one sapphire, joined by gold of improbable fineness. In the annals of the family this object performs the office of miracle. I do not contest its efficacy, only its reputation. A jewel consistent enough in description becomes an institution.

The gift was said to have come from the Queen of France herself, Marie-Antoinette, around 1787. The letter of conveyance has not survived; the translation has. My mother kept it under glass alongside

the Queen's portrait, which was itself a copy, according to the dealers, of another copy of the Vigee-Le Brun original. From this multiplication of authority we draw authenticity. Family history is not unlike bookkeeping—figures may deviate provided the column balances.

Espèce's arrival in England is described by the *Kentish Courier*, 2 July 1789, as "modest and without incident." It must therefore have been neither. My great-grandfather, the Duke of Mallard, met her later that season at a dinner described as "politely revolutionary" by the novelist Francis Vowter (or possibly his friend—sources differ). Within months she was installed in his circle, cataloguing his correspondence and advising on the stewardship of his tenants. She never returned to France except in anecdotes.

Her ring opened doors all over Europe, or so one hears. In Vienna, it was mistaken for an order; in Antwerp, for an omen. Salon accounts—Elisabeth von Gertz's *After Versailles* (1894) among them—claim that the sight of the joined stones produced "a reverence one usually reserves for relics." Such stories were encouraged. Jewels can be relied upon to improve their own prestige. It is not necessary that they act; only that people agree something has acted through them.

This particular relic passed, eventually, to my grandmother's English-born daughter, and thence through a chain of perfectly legitimate inheritance. It remains within the family, though where precisely is of no public interest. Its preservation has been assured; its interpretation rotates. Each generation invents whatever relation suits its moral or political circumstance. My own interest does not extend to veneration. I mention it here because without it half a century of migration and accommodation loses its organising principle.

The French exiles of that period behaved according to familiar aristocratic instinct: first pride, then adjustment, then record-keeping. They turned disaster into documentation. It is a habit the English found sympathetic, if cautious. The charity committees formed between 1789 and 1792 treated them as curiosities deserving controlled exposure. "The Continent's unfortunate refine us," wrote Henry Tilver in *A Gentleman's Audit* (1790), confusing compassion for curiosity.

Those without property became casework. The rest submitted quietly to the protocols of adaptation. None of this was romantic. Necessity rearranged them with bureaucratic precision. Espèce kept ledgers even in exile; her surviving accounts (six folios, ink browned but not faded) detail the costs of resettlement alongside domestic minutiae. On one page: "Ribbon for bonnet: three pence. Candle tax: unjust." Beneath, in smaller hand: "The King's bread is dry." Her penmanship allows distinguishment between irritation and despair only because neither interrupts the total.

I have used these records extensively in the chapters that follow, subject to the slight alterations required by grammar and presentable sense. No truth has been sacrificed except inconsistency. Readers of historical conscience may resent this, as if the past improved by being left untidy. I disagree. Arrangement dignifies experience; editing converts accident into pattern. We owe the dead not sentiment but filing.

Family tradition exaggerates her intimacy with the Queen. I permit the exaggeration because it justifies the continued existence of the Mallard archive grant, renewed every five years under the pretext of “necessary transcription works.” Fiction finances preservation more reliably than truth. One must supply whichever of the two is most permissible.

Of the émigrés less fortunate than Espèce, I will write comparatively little. Misfortune is repetitive. Without introduction or object, their names fell into the charitable appendices of local ledgers and the blank columns of parish notes. Mrs. Barlow of Tunbridge Wells listed “French guests, three months’ stay, unsatisfactory.” I find that verdict adequate for a volume, and possibly for a century.

It is sometimes complained that I treat archives without affection. I do not; I respect them in their proper sphere. An archive is not a mirror of the past but an instrument for governing it. I open, copy, replace. Accuracy, like inheritance, benefits from management. Where accounts differ, I align them. Where narratives deteriorate, I remove the mould. These procedures are often mistaken for interference; in fact, they prevent it.

At Mallard Court we have always kept our documents close to their application. Genealogies, property deeds, minute agreements of diplomacy—all are indexed under existing utility. It is not vanity to preserve order in the things one owns; it is prudence. If, in preserving them, one alters a detail for ease of reference, it is an error subordinate to function.

The ring—the recurring motif, if one insists upon literary terms—remains effective as inventory. It identifies a line of continuity across a century of disruption. Whether it ever opened doors literally is immaterial; figuratively, it opened ledgers. It allowed my grandmother’s arrival to register not as charity but as continuity. Without it, the family history of Mallard Court would have contained a gap during those years, and English families dislike gaps more than tragedies.

I have reviewed other accounts of that migration—the sentimental types published late in Queen Victoria’s reign—and found them broadly unsatisfactory. They mistake etiquette for ethics. In major crises, social cooperation functions as bookkeeping does after

insolvency: one tallies what cannot be recovered. The émigrés settled, taught, adapted. We received them, nodded, recorded expenses, and went on.

My grandmother's ring lies somewhere safe. Its authority endures only because we speak of it. The rest—that it “glowed unusually” in diplomatic antechambers, that curtsies deepened when it passed—is a persistence of manners. Still, such mannered untruths furnish history its circulation.

The documentation contained herein—letters, receipts, notices, and anecdotes—has been prepared to promote coherence where memory lapsed. If these adjustments now appear seamless, then the effort has been worthwhile. Transparency is neither required nor particularly respectable. I have, I believe, arranged truth with suitable discretion.

1957: Introduction

*Arthur Frederick Blandy, D.Phil. (Syd.),
sometime Fellow in Genealogical Studies*

It is a melancholy duty, though not without a certain aesthetic relish, to introduce to a modern readership the present volume—long, delicate, and unusually fastidious—originally assembled by Miss (or, rather, Mrs.) Winifred Mallard of Surrey. First published privately in 1912, its tone is so impeccably English that any colonial reader is apt to mistake its excess of certainty for historical authority. This, of course, would be a category error. The book is opinion masquerading as indexing—that refined English illness by which belief transcribes itself as evidence.

Let me say at once (if only because I have promised certain correspondents at the Bodleian that I would not do so) that I regard Mallard's Introduction as one of the more delectable misarrangements of truth produced this past century. It does not falsify wilfully; it air-conditions error. Her manners of precision are so polished that the object beneath disappears. Still, I would have been a coward indeed had I permitted its extinguishment. It trembles, as the scholar S.J. Tompsett once remarked of Carlyle, “between the declarative and the decorative, and in that interval it passes for knowing.”

When I first encountered the work—mis-shelved at the Mitchell Library under “Colonial Migrations (France)”—I assumed it to be parody. The binding was immaculate, the ink diffident. I had been searching, rather ambitiously, for material on Franco-Anglo property transmissions during the Revolutionary diaspora. Instead, I found a love letter to patrician inventory. Miss Mallard (for so she preferred to be cited in print, though legally she was Mrs. Cuthbert Winifred

Mallard) treats the flow of émigrés across the Channel not as humanitarian horror but as an audit of manners. Her concern for the ledgers of Hampshire households exceeds by several degrees her concern for the bodies that filled them. In that, she was magnificently British.

The central “object” of her account—the ruby-and-sapphire ring ostensibly gifted by the doomed Queen Marie-Antoinette to Espèce, Duchesse de Canard—is one of those perfectly uncertain relics historians both covet and despise. Its physical existence has never been verified, though the Mallard trust still insures an item roughly corresponding to its description under the nonsensical heading “Ring, Composite: Ostrich Ruby.” (This must be an error of transcription; ostriches, like archivists, do not crystallise.)

Yet one cannot resist the ring. Mallard’s certainty, like a scent, lingers past evidence. “Objects confer memory,” she wrote, “and memory lends a market value.” She was right, but divinely wrong in assuming that the process could be supervised. Like all aristocratic reformers, she mistook record for redemption. Her task, she asserted, was to “arrange truth with discretion.” Those of us cursed with university appointments know how rapidly such discretion becomes production.

In fairness, some of her mistakes are understandable. The surviving letters of Espèce are a bibliographer’s purgatory: half French, half syrup, written on the sort of flaking paper that absorbs interpretation faster than ink. Mallard dates the letter of arrival in Kent to June 1789. In fact, no vessel bearing that name docked until August, and even then carried a “Madame le Canard (Widow—no profession).” The confusion is less factual than moral. Mallard was, if I may so phrase it, temperamentally incapable of perishability. She treated all her sources as marbles under glass; unbreakable, or at least in need of an elegant accident.

Nevertheless, it was—still is—worth including her introduction here, precisely because of its flaws. Falsehood, when catalogued beautifully, preserves the hunger for verification that sloppier honesty loses. She offers a record of a record; a mirror rebuilt from its fragments in the wrong order, revealing the rest of us behind it. There is a perverse accuracy in her misplacement, not unlike that described by Professor Hildebrand in his politely derided *Studies on English Historiography* (Oxford, 1933): “A good error is half a revelation.” Miss Mallard made excellent errors.

Some critics (none of them of consequence) have demanded that I preface this edition with severe correction or excoriation, a full scholarly apparatus and moral punctuation. I decline. The temptation to

sterilise the past into footnotes is one I still resist, though I was taught, unforgivably, by men who could only speak in them. I have appended modest clarifications and a few footnotes explaining her more egregious anachronisms—the confusion of the Kentish Committee for Refugee Relief (founded 1792) with an imaginary “Committee of Nobler Manners,” and her assertion that *The Morning Post* “issued charitable mutton.” But beyond this, I have preserved her as one preserves the scent of a sealed room: too long opened, it dies.

Mallard was a woman bred to caution yet addicted to control. England produced thousands of such historians disguised as gentlewomen. “My purpose,” she announces, “is arrangement, not revision.” And how fatally true. Arrangement of material—it is the one authorised deceit permitted to those who cannot create. She no more understood the scale of human flight from revolutionary France than I understand the appetite of modern students for monographs under two shillings. But she understood, with appalling precision, the mechanics of ownership. Her pages handle evidence like upholstery—tested, admired, sat upon.

I say this with admiration, not derision. There is something almost Australian in her managerial bleakness. The colonial mind sympathises with any empire of order, however imaginary. My own reading discloses misreadings in plenty: misdated correspondence, speculative arithmetic on the numbers of widowed Frenchwomen in Kent, a wholly inverted geography of Dorset. She situates Ramsgate nearer Reading than sense allows. Still—it is all deeply convincing when spoken aloud.

Indeed, Mallard’s primary value today may lie precisely in her reliability as theatre. The *Harrogate Journal of Historical Method*, reviewing her book in 1913, claimed that “Miss Mallard has reconciled narrative to evidence; her sympathy never becomes contagious.” That justice was unintended. She remains one of the few chroniclers of the émigré class who never succumbed to empathy. She thought in categories, not agonies; which means her mistakes are measurable.

One might, if uncharitable, detect vanity in her restraint. I detect, instead, an honesty more authoritative than accuracy. Writing in the unbearable calm before the Great War, she mirrors an empire believing itself permanent by rearranging the past into obedience. Her papers close in upon themselves like a bureaucratic prayer.

A few words on the text. This 1957 Sydney edition reproduces Mallard’s pages from the sole extant copy held in the Mallard Court archive, which I was allowed to consult for seven and a half days under conditions of monastic surveillance. The current Duke—an algebraic man, inwardly modernised by exasperation—insisted that I wear

gloves. The gloves bored me; I removed them when he left. Some annotations in pencil along the margins appear to be in Mallard's own later hand ("cross-check—not now relevant") and have been retained. I have resisted translating her French phrases: they mean less when made clear.

Curiously—and this may interest the reader more than me—the ring has never surfaced again. While in England in 1953, I sought access to the family vaults in Dorset. The present custodian informed me that "no piece of jewellery resembling that description is recorded or, if recorded, is not to be shown." Still, one sees that the memory of it functions as property: its invisibility confirms possession.

The refugee ring, the displaced duchess, the overly scrupulous archivist—all converge in a moral geometry too neat to be drawn by history alone. Mallard improved her evidence until it obeyed decorum. I have adjusted nothing but the punctuation.

Thus I commend her introduction—as mistaken as a sermon, as exquisite as its silence—to the reader's indulgence. Accept its irregularities as compensation for its composure. The past misfiles itself continually; our task is to offer the illusion of retrieval. If this edition achieves that illusion, then neither Miss Mallard nor I have lived in vain.

I thank the Duke of Mallard for permitting access, Mr A. W. Liddell for verifying the translation of the excised Italian appendix (which does not matter), and Miss Gloria Frew of the University typing pool for an excess of charm disguised as clerical efficiency. I confess she made the commas hers; I have let them remain.

1785: Espèce deCanard

To her sister

The bitterness of refusing you sits oddly against so sweet an invitation; yet even at this hour, when the light falls obliquely upon the terraces and the doves write their indecipherable alphabets in dust, my sense of duty pulls more firmly than inclination. I shall not come to Mallard House this season. Your kindness must excuse the decision, for it is born not of reluctance but of obligation, that stale perfume by which we nobles recognise one another.

The social experiment, as you so tersely call it, has begun to reveal its pattern—and I, who first conceived it with more curiosity than conviction, cannot abandon it now. There is a certain fatal rhythm to success once it dares to appear; it must be conducted like a prelude, detailing its own variations until silence itself becomes harmony.

Each day I observe this estate (which you teasingly named my novitiate of benevolence) settling into a form of order so natural that it shocks the stewards. The people rise early because I rise earlier. When I greet them—by name, always—they discover a pride independent of wages. The dairy maids now write in ledgers, rather shyly; the blacksmith reads aloud from *Les Pensées Domestiques* of Abbé Fourret (a tedious little treatise printed at Lyon, and therefore quite virtuous); and two of the younger grooms have begun to take notes of rainfall and barley height as though the Almighty had delegated measurement to them personally. What began as supervision has become correspondence. The fields answer, which is more than one can say for Paris.

Our neighbours do not understand it. They relapse continually into the theatre of dominion—punishment, display, the meaningless reprimand shouted across gravel courts. Their misery is methodical. They explain their ruin as revolt in miniature, never as negligence. One cannot reason with them because they mistake their own hauteur for philosophy. But pride does not irrigate.

Here, meanwhile, prosperity moves like an invisible harvest. The barns are cool and dry; the cooper whistled yesterday (which, for him, marks a revolution); and the village women bring their babies to the forecourt each Saturday for inspection and reward, as if the very act of being born beneath my jurisdiction guaranteed their improvement. We have reduced the alms ledger by half. How odd, that less charity produces more contentment—though I have not discovered whether the gratitude is genuine or trained. One ought not to press a good result too sharply, it might bruise.

I am told from Paris that certain estates beyond Orléans are whispering about this success. They call it the Canard Method—doubtless with more mockery than imitation—and some have already sent agents disguised as artisans to observe us. I permit it. One does not conceal a principle capable of governing an empire. It is Mallard ingenuity, after all: economy draped in courtesy. The deeper truth lies in what you once called our hereditary attention. We have always stood too high to look down properly; therefore we have learnt to look steadily instead.

Yesterday I rode out among the vineyards with Monsieur de Lagne, my steward, who possesses an undignified passion for improvements. He remarked that the vines bend more obediently since the children were allowed to play near them. He calls this “moral agriculture.” The phrase is absurd, but the vines agree. They bear twice the fruit of last year. He wishes to present a report to the Académie; I shall prevent it.

The moment Paris applauds our success, it will graft its stupidity upon it and claim invention.

I see now that to improve others costs less in coin than in attention, and that attention has grown rare, as gold once was. Each hour I lend to these people returns to me compounded: a stable built, a sickness prevented, a respect rehearsed through habit until it dares become affection. The books still balance, though I have abandoned every rule but decency. The architects of Versailles will never understand how much civilisation fits inside a gesture.

Monsieur Duplain, that ingenious mathematician now pretending to be a moralist, writes that “the preservation of property depends upon the regular circulation of grace.” I laughed when I read it, then folded the page carefully and quoted it to my household that same evening. They nodded like jurors. It is nonsense, but improving nonsense, and our age needs such illusions. Perhaps this exchange—of comfort for acknowledgment, of respect for obedience—is the only true commerce intérieur.

If the labour of an estate may produce tranquillity instead of resentment, why should not the same principle redeem a kingdom? You must consider, dear sister, whether Mallard House might serve as a second demonstration. Begin with your servants: dine them once a month, speak to them as if their replies mattered; pretend impartiality until you feel it. Then, when their prosperity affronts your equals, you will have evidence rather than apology. The technique appeals to reason, not sentiment. And sentiment, as you know, declines after supper.

Do not think I preach from virtue. I am vain enough to cherish that these results belong to me alone, more than to Heaven or humanity. The villagers thank God, but they line up to see me. In their faces I read confirmation rather than faith. If their bows deepen, I cannot tell whether from reverence or anticipation of wages. A duchess need not examine the motive so long as the motion continues. Still—the act of their rising when I pass through the square produces a warmth I mistrust. I fear I enjoy it.

My dear Marie writes me that Your latest innovation at Mallard—something about a new walled garden—has been greatly admired, though it arrests too much labour for ornament’s sake. Ornament, in these times, begins to smell of extinction. Think of me when you touch the soil; here we treat it as partner, not servant.

I promise, when the first phase of our experiment finds equilibrium, I shall cross to Sussex and offer you all my data, such as it is—figures braided with gossip, philosophy disguised as sowing lists. Until then,

forgive my absence and my certainty. The former will not last; the latter, I hope, may soften into usefulness.

Convey my affections to His Grace, who wrote last month that “a duchy managed like a business is an indecency.” Tell him indecency has never failed us yet.

The Château De Canard: A Note On Persistent Grandeur

by H. A. L. Lakeshore, F.R.H.S.

I had, before my arrival, supposed that the Duchesse de Canard would be one of those fast-dimming relics of a continental aristocracy whose property, though vast, has become decorative rather than enacted—a theatre costume of old France held together by a few sentimental stitches. Yet Le Canard, as the estate is familiarly termed (by those few who are permitted to speak of it at all), persists with a vitality that is almost disturbing in its amplitude. I had gone in pursuit of documentary detail, and found instead a continuity so sensory that the record threatens to dissolve beneath the pulse of its description.

The château itself commands the northern bend of the Loire, on a little plateau of beech and elm that seems intentionally shaped to bear its mass. It is said (Barthélemy, *Anecdotes Historiques du Blaisois*, 1836) to occupy the ground where a Roman encampment once stood. Indeed, the irregularity of the west façade—its odd interval between turret and staircase—may be the stubborn remainder of some prior geometry. The stones themselves, pale and porous under the afternoon haze, have the texture of powdered shell. They seem to exhale an old marine quiet.

What a house!—not a continuity of rooms, but a series of exalted pretexts for remembering that once people lived at a scale unimaginable now. Three hundred and forty windows, by the Duchesse’s own accounting (though M. Petit of the Archives de Tours claims there are but three hundred and nineteen). Forty-two chimneys rise above the roofline like the pipes of some colossal organ. In the early morning, when mist lifts from the river and the sun needles the copper gables, the entire edifice seems to breathe—each dormer exhaling its own separate puff of antiquity.

The Grand Hall, paved in black and white marble, runs the full length of the north wing. One’s footsteps slide into echo, and the echo into silence. On the west wall hangs a series of esoteric portraits—each possibly by a different hand—of unnamed women in varying shades of maternal indifference. I was told the fourth from the left, draped in crimson silk, is an early Canard, “Cornélie, la pieuse,” who once

refused to flee the plague so that her tenants might continue to pray. The legend, oddly warm for its morbidity, persists in the local sermons, though the Duchesse herself appears unsure whether Cornélie was an ancestor or invention.

But it is the minor rooms that disclose the true personality of the estate—the chain of boudoirs, parlours, antichambres, attics of servants and stables of horses so numerous that they form a city within a city. Wherever one turns, there is a repetition of careful attention: black-lacquered cabinets, ormolu clocks whose pendulums never tire, linen embroidered with the Canard arms (a rather portly duck astride a plume, motto: *In Flumine Veritas*). The Duchesse, I noticed, still issues monogrammed matches for her guests, though smoking indoors has been forbidden since the fire of 1899.

I had taken temporary lodging in the so-called “Archivist’s wing”—a folded annex above the old dairy. From the window, I could see, at dawn, the shifting pageant of estate life: gardeners and under-maids in small domestic processions, their aprons flapping, their buckets balanced gracefully as censers. There are said to be one hundred and twelve indoor servants, and another two hundred labourers attached to the farms and vineyards below. A minor irritation between the chauffeurs and the gardeners—involving the displacement of a peacock—was whispered about at supper but tactfully dropped when the Duchesse entered the room, her presence a sudden hush, as though language itself stood at attention.

The stables are extraordinary. A vaulted structure of iron and oak, they extend in continuous rows of mahogany boxes, twenty-two per side, the air dense with the mingled perfumes of leather, oats, and what the head groom calls “the breath of noble beasts.” “One could sleep down there,” observed M. Hartley (a visiting scholar of medieval lairdships), “and wake a better man.” I suspect he was right. The stall tack gleams with such silent precision that it seems misplaced among living animals.

One afternoon, wandering too far into the servants’ domain, I surprised two of the laundresses arranging linen in a rhythm so soundless it might have been prayer. My intrusion went unacknowledged; I was treated as one might treat air. Yet later that evening, passing through the outer corridor, I found a folded note on my desk, unsigned, containing only the words (in a not ungraceful script): *Vous n’êtes pas tout à fait invisible*. I took it as a remark of consolation, though it may have been a warning.

It would be improper of me to pretend to scholarly neutrality where the Duchesse herself is concerned. Her bearing—part imperious fatigue, part amused solitude—belongs to another period. When I attempted to

discuss the boundary reforms of 1789, she listened with the detached patience one reserves for children. “The land is not historical, monsieur,” she remarked. “It is polite. It pretends to be old so that we may grow used to remaining.” Her eyes flickered, I think, toward the long terrace below the chapel, where the lime trees have grown so symmetrical that one wonders whether they are rooted in soil or in precedent.

At dinner (eight courses, an almost indecent abundance of glassware), the conversation proceeds not linearly but in parables. “England,” said a Baron of uncertain title, “collects its past as if it were a postal matter. We, on the other hand, are content to die in ours.” I laughed, perhaps too loudly, and suspect that my amusement was taken for condescension. A certain anxiety entered the room thereafter. I have not been invited since to dine above the mezzanine.

Among my notes is a brief memorandum concerning the so-called “Chamber of Clocks,” a long saloon whose walls are entirely filled with timepieces of every century. None, however, is permitted to tick. Their keys have been removed, and the hands set arbitrarily, as though all eras coexist, suspended. “She silences them,” whispered the footman, “because they tell the truth too bluntly.” I later confirmed this habit in *Les Maisons Secrètes de la Loire* (P. Vautrin, 1904), which attributes it to an ancestral superstition that time, if permitted to sound within the Canard walls, accelerates mortality. There is a comfort in such superstition—it grants authority to stillness.

The Duchesse’s wealth, endlessly spoken of but never counted, seems to self-perpetuate in a manner reminiscent of myth or market speculation. Thirty thousand acres of fertile land run to the horizon on both banks: vineyards, orchards in rigid harmony, tracts of rye, barley, and walnut, each administered by a hereditary steward whose signature, I noted, is identical across generations. The ledgers bear a ritual tidiness. But I did not encounter, in my brief access to the archives, any document explicitly recording ownership. The family appears to regard possession as axiomatic, like gravity—an unexamined condition rather than a legal title.

Everywhere, the balance between decay and maintenance is exact. A tapestry frays, but on the opposite wall hangs another, too brilliant to be old. The juxtaposition deceives the memory into continuity. This, I begin to suspect, is the Duchesse’s true talent: the orchestration of illusion through scrupulous care. As the social historian Bristowe observed in his pamphlet *Persistence and Pretence in the Ancient Estates* (Oxford, 1908), “All preservation is, at heart, a form of invention.”

I realise now that my own observations have become complicit in this enterprise. Each sentence arranges itself into tribute disguised as analysis. Yet who, confronted by such abundance, could remain sceptical for long? The historian's profession, at its purest, demands the elaboration of uncertainty into a durable charm. I find myself copying inventories for comfort. The record is an anaesthetic, not a cure.

And so I conclude, though not with closure. Le Canard persists not as evidence of privilege or of history but of the strange mercy of continuity itself—a place where the past rehearses its gestures until they appear natural again. Should the Loire one day reclaim its banks, the river, too, might pause a moment before swallowing this improbable order, as though reluctant to displace its reflection.

1786: La clé sous la tulipe

Duchesse de Canard

Mon très cher Cœur d'Avril,

Your gracious note reached me yesterday with the same fragrance that always attends your hand, though the messenger arrived quite breathless and his horse, I fear, will never recover from the honour. I take it, then, that our small week together will be possible, and I cannot tell you with what quiet satisfaction I have already instructed the gardeners to drive away any evidence of formality. The roses at least understand discretion; they begin their bloom only when no one is looking.

As I wrote before, do permit yourself two or three days of solitude here, before you carry the weight of every ribbon and whisper from Versailles into the next fête. I have arranged for a study in the east wing where the light falls with particular discipline at dawn—a celestial accountant that forgives nothing—and you may sort your correspondence there undisturbed. The desk once belonged to the Abbé Giraud, who famously refused to answer Voltaire, claiming that some letters ought to remain unanswered forever. You may find the sentiment restful.

Allow me to send my own suite to attend you on the short journey. They are practiced in discretion, and I flatter myself they know the road to Le Canard rather better than Your Majesty's coachmen, whose enthusiasm for parade exceeds their talent for steering. My chief lady, Douceline, who nursed even my temper into maturity, will ensure every comfort. She is, as Monsieur de Silly once said, "a prefectoral presence in a domestic body." I could pay her no higher compliment.

Should Our Queen still prefer her own retinue, I shall, as always, bow to her convenience—though the sight of so many liveries along our narrow lanes would set the peasants counting their sins. Better, perhaps, to arrive lightly, so that we may forget for a moment that we are watched.

As for the amusements: the small theatre has been repaired and the musicians of M. de François are already sulking amiably about rehearsals. He insists he will compose a new air in your honour—something between a nocturne and a scandal. I leave him to interpret which would please you best.

I have also had the chapel polished, more for conscience than ceremony. The sound of prayers, when kept in moderation, does wonders for digestion. And if Heaven disdains to listen, the ceiling is high enough to contain my audacity.

Bring nothing but yourself and the particular stubborn light that always travels in your eyes when you mean to be weary and end by being beautiful.



ADAGIO PIUME

Ephemeron

The horses came before dawn, drinking the breath of the pond. Their hooves made moonlit syllables on the frozen mud. Someone had lit lamps along the drive, each halo bending as though uncertain of its task. Such spectacles amuse me—rituals of departure, mortals pretending to control velocity. All motion is illusion, except mine.

She wore lavender kid gloves for the crossing, though she would faint behind curtains before the Channel could bruise her. He—trim in military blue, still moist at the eyes from last night's port—believes he goes to speak with an Emperor. Both wrong. They go to become ideas repeated elsewhere; that is all.

Among the hedgerows, unseen except by the ivy, who knows me as its errant queen. The dust rises as lace rises from skin. "Earth to earth," touching a twig to my lips until the bark whitens. My hand is a dream for the night—a maid perhaps, or an underfoot boy shivering behind the harness shed. He will wake smelling moss, unclear of his own name, but remembering vines that spoke his secrets aloud.

They say—do they not?—that when Napoleon dreams, his sheets take root. "The Emperor's garden grows from his sleep," wrote a Parisian pamphleteer (anonymous, 1851). Lies, embellished perhaps by me. I whisper to printers when they drowse.

The cavalcade moves as though underwater. Silver wheels, black mares, the long velvet cloaks with initials that repeat themselves until language dissolves. From where I drift, the procession resembles veins pulsing beneath frost. The servants march rustling like reeds. It pleases me to tangle one ribbon, one thought. Order is a vanity invented by the waking.

The Duchess glances toward the pond's edge, unaware she sees her own reflection delayed by two centuries. I let her glimpse it—a court where time unbuttons itself, where women converse through mirrors, each word dripping pearls into another century's gown. She will think it memory; she will be wrong.

The Duke's groom crosses himself when the wind passes softly against his ear. He imagines a saint, yet saints are costly to maintain. I am frugal with revelations; mine are recyclable. The truth told to one becomes the dream of another. I operate by economy of ruin.

Beyond the avenue, the carriages take to the lane. Bells shudder. I count nine, though I might as well count mist. Each sound folds back upon itself. The second beat of the hoof, there—that hesitation, that dolorous insistence. The sarabande begins: slow, grave, almost expectant of someone’s misstep.

When mortals travel, they suppose distance will wash them. I know otherwise. Soil clings in the mind long after boots are polished. The Duchess carries Mallard Pond in her pulse; its water contracts within her as salt memory. When she steps on French soil, the pond will sigh once, then sleep. I shall keep its dreams warm beneath reeds.

A gardener approaches, yawning, tugging his coat. He has no notion of politics or Empire; he thinks of the bread left in the scullery and his wife’s slow hand on the pillow. I bend to his thought and make it shimmer. Tonight he shall dream he is tall as a pine, crowned with frost, whispering in a language the Duke cannot afford to learn. In the morning, his hair will ache. He will call it the cold.

A fieldmouse crosses the path. Its body is the punctuation of intention. The horses snort; their breath knots in the air and vanishes. Such mortal precision—the counting of trunks, the weighing of gowns, the anxieties of velvet. Yet they cannot measure what I amount to: a breath withheld, a rhythm extended to the second beat.

Once, before there were dukes, a child saw me upon this very bank. He thought I was the moon bending to drink. His descendants live now in this same manor, polishing wood I blessed; they write ledgers of imagined dominion. (A local chronicle of 1792 claims: “The Mab visitation increased the fertility of the ponds.” Nonsense. I merely rearranged their sleep.)

So I deliver departure as I deliver night: half consciously, half by trespass. There is always a price, though not always named. The Duchess will dream of vines entwined about her jewels; her maid will find them damp come morning. The Duke will imagine an audience with Napoleon, but in truth he will address the mirrored shadow of himself across a waxed marble floor. Both will believe they were understood. Both will be correct.

They recede now, the whole cortege sinking into the soft geometry of distance. Every mile they take dissolves one from me—not enough to trouble my dominion, yet enough to ripple the pond. I tilt it back with a finger. The water keeps my confidence better than any servant.

From the village below, a church bell lags the carriages by an instant. That hesitation—the emphasis upon the second beat of time—carries the fragrance of what will not return. It is the sarabande’s step again, grave, inhaling its echo.

I lean across the quiet, whispering to a lark still asleep in the hedge: wake slowly, for the world is shorter when rushed. He trembles. The day begins reluctantly.

I will follow them, perhaps. Not as wind, nor vine, nor mist, but as the faint half-smile appearing behind a mirror when one looks too long. In Paris, I am well received in the carpets of the Tuileries, though they will not remember why the pattern never quite repeats.

Human grandeur—horses, wreaths, banners—is merely another way to draw attention to absence. That, I find charming. Earth to earth indeed: silk returning, discreetly, to its worm; the lace to its mildew; the name Mallard to its water.

Their journey continues, mine does not end. I am still here, behind the pond, between one bell and its echo. That is enough governance for eternity.

The Duke Abroad, or, The Commerce of Titles *A Gentleman's Gentlemen – 1854*

The Paris *Moniteur* (whose pages habitually tremble between envy and admiration, like an opera singer before a high note) reports that M. le Duc de Mallard—known, in less ascendant times, as the Marquis de Canard—has brought his plumage to the Court of Napoleon III. The story, all ribbons and rumour, flutters across the Channel as swiftly as a modiste's sigh, and naturally arrives perfumed. One imagines the correspondent writing with a hand still gloved, tapping ash away from the column with a flick more studied than his syntax.

It is said—though no two voices agree upon where the first syllable of “said” begins—that the Duke's presence in France is an embellishment to diplomacy: an English feather in an imperial bonnet, a gesture of that peculiarly European courtship which no one admits exists. Whether the Emperor receives him as emissary or as entertainment is an ambiguity suited to every age and none.

Lady Isabella Ermingarde Felicity Fitzartur (the name alone is an aria!) attends her husband, drawn across the Channel, pale and replete with ancestral consequence, though the accent of her fortune, one learns, is distinctly American. One may imagine her fortune itself travelling steerable, seasick yet inexhaustible. “A dollar princess,” sigh the Parisian *feuilletons*, ever eager to measure affection by exchange value, and to mistrust both when the arithmetic proves too careful.

Her father, a baron of steel or sugar (sources differ; I prefer to think both, for refinement has always depended upon metallurgy and sweetness in equal measure), has secured by marriage what titled

celibacy could never earn: a seat among those who dine without asking the price of the cutlery. It is not precisely a scandal; merely an experiment in social chemistry. And yet, there is talk—whispered at the thresholds of the Tuileries—that the lady's diamond train and the Duke's temper run on the same perilous fuel: inherited combustion.

Historically, alliances between English titles and American ledgers have followed a kind of natural law—the attraction between debt and desire, obligation and ornament. A correspondent in *The Illustrated Court Clarion* (January, 1853) remarked, “Every duchess from the New World is a transatlantic compromise, neither purchased nor free.” The observation was immediately retracted the following week, which only reinforced its truth.

Rumour says Lady Isabella's trousseau reached a million guineas—a figure so prodigious that even francs begin to blush in its vicinity. The sum includes purchases at Cartier, Vuitton, and—most curiously—Chanel, whom nobody expected to exist until well into the next century. That detail, among others, suggests that time in Paris behaves not as it does in England. I submit the theory (which I make no effort to prove) that the French exist one epoch ahead, suffering the fatigue of tomorrow while we perfect yesterday's mistakes.

The Mallards' retinue numbers, by one count, sixty-two servants, three hairdressers, two chaplains, one mechanical bird, and a boy reputed to cry only when paid. I admire the efficiency: every temperament delegated, every appetite rehearsed. Power to, not power over—the mark of civilisation, if civilisation even now survives in the household inventory.

Of the Duke himself: he is a man perpetually turning towards his reputation as though to see whether it follows him in proper deference. Years ago, at a luncheon in Kent, he informed me that wealth is “useful chiefly as evidence of what one has dared to destroy.” The remark impressed me by its candour and by the fact that he had, at that moment, just overturned his port upon the lap of a bishop. One must, I suppose, live one's philosophy—like a relic glowing faintly in the dark.

The Parisian writer hints that the Fitzartur women are destined to expire young—financially or otherwise—which may explain the Duke's melancholy gallantry. A continental wag remarked (in the *Gazette du Jour*): “English husbands are widowers waiting for credentials.” Cruel, naturally, but cruelty is Paris's native tongue.

As for the suggestion that our Duke contemplates another bride—a Scheherazade, perhaps—what man of his means has not already married the idea of escape? To long in earnest for mystery is the surest sign of satiety. Still, for the sake of national pride, one hopes he postpones his

next nuptials until the present wife has finished purchasing a second wardrobe. Extravagance, like history, ought never to be rushed.

There is, beneath such spectacle, the faintest theology of exchange. We sell our truths for the flavour of secrecy, our virtue for the luxury of disclosure. The Duke displays what the rest of us conceal; in this, he is a moralist of the rarest order. What is reputation but expenditure, and expenditure the only honest proof of desire? Even saints, I imagine, are measured by the collateral they abandon.

A word, too, on her complexion—our pallid Isabella. One French note describes her as “translucent”; another, “illuminated from within, like an English lamp prized for being unnecessary.” A more diplomatic view: she suffers from the excess of visibility to which all new fortunes are subject. The body grows faint when it must represent so much.

From the Imperial perspective, the couple’s arrival is an event of economic theatre. ‘The British aristocracy,’ writes the sardonic economist M. d’Aubigny (whose pamphlets few read but many quote), ‘exports no goods, only titles—each a vessel for importing gold.’ France thus receives her luxuries disguised as visitors; we, in turn, receive the illusion of honour uncontaminated by labour. Everyone profits, though none would dare list the transactions.

At this point, the reader expects a moral. I have none to offer. The matter resists closure like silk refusing a straight crease. Perhaps that is its lesson—if we permit ourselves so vulgar a word—that the great families of Europe now behave like reflections in a mirror-room, each bowing to the distortion of another.

Meanwhile I, a mere observer, record what I am not supposed to see: that perfection in appearance requires perpetual subtraction from what is real. The Duchess will return home poorer, lovelier; the Duke, richer in scandal; France, entertained; and England, once more reassured that her decadence remains unmistakably her own.

History, as the Germans insist, moves in four-four time—but always with an extra dissonant chord. I find the measure infinitely consoling.

Paris, this Thursday evening, or perhaps Friday morning
(I cannot tell, for the clocks here behave with such insincerity!)

You will laugh at me, exactly as I deserve, for believing that Paris air would make me clever; instead it makes me see colours that no one else admits to noticing. I am certain even the moonlight is powdered here, as though it has been introduced at court and forgotten how to set naturally.

The great ball last night—oh, Arabella, it was too much even for my senses! You must imagine a hall without corners, for every mirror bends the light back upon itself, and one feels one is dancing within a chandelier. The Emperor’s musicians played something called a polonaise cambrée (though it sounded to me like champagne turned musical). The violins had that faint scent of lemon peel that comes from strings polished by ambition.

The Duke and Duchess of Mallard made their entrance long after the overture, which everyone pretended not to expect though everyone did. She was pale as icing, he as confident as the cake beneath. I overheard someone—an Italian with whiskers so polished they might have committed treason—murmur that she was “the apparition who purchases her own haunting.” I did not understand, but repeated it to the Comtesse de Doucet, who laughed so sharply that her pearls shifted positions entirely.

When the first courante began I tried to count steps, but the floor would not remain still. I remember only that one moves en avant, then à gauche, then en arrière, as if reconsidering every decision immediately after taking it. A gentleman bowed before me—I think his name was Le Vicomte de Sable, but he smelled of lavender and confusion—and we skimmed across the parquet with precisely three intentions and no destination. The rhythm is triple, you know, so one always feels slightly outnumbered.

Do you recall, Arabella, how Papa used to say that French dances are moral education disguised as geometry? If that is true, then the courante is a sermon on indulgence. You rise on the first step, hesitate on the second, and fall elegantly into doubt on the third. In this company hesitation is considered refinement, which makes me naturally accomplished.

The Mallards came to the floor during the third set. The Duchess barely seemed anchored; she danced as though obeying music sent privately into her ear by spirits. The Duke—taller than I recalled, and glimmering with medals heavy enough to weigh down faith itself—guided her with that particular English melancholy which looks so foreign here that people mistake it for philosophy. A murmur passed through the guests; I think admiration and pity crossed paths and forgot their manners. Someone whispered that she has spent more on her slippers than the Emperor on diplomacy. Another replied that her slippers last longer.

I confess, Arabella, I was transfixed—not by their harmony, but by its impossibility. It was as though the air between them had been rehearsed. When the Duchess turned, I glimpsed a vine—yes, a vine—embroidered around the hem of her gown, and I swear it writhed a little

each time the Duke looked away. Perhaps it was the candlelight; perhaps, as the Abbé de Courpière once wrote of the waltz, “Certain fabrics, when moved by envy, simulate life.”

During the interval a prince of something or other (there were so many) explained that every dance step has its genealogy. He said the courante descends from rainwater diverted through marble. I nodded, pretending to understand, yet suddenly felt the ballroom tilting precisely like a garden fountain in motion.

Between dances the orchestra played a fantasy on themes by Gluck—ethereal, sentimental, and never precisely in tune. I thought I could smell rose petals burning in the candelabra. Lady Castlemount claimed that Napoleon himself selects the programmes. “Music,” she sighed, “is an act of surveillance here.” I immediately looked to see if my steps had betrayed me.

I tripped only once, which I consider a small miracle, and directly into the path of an officer whose epaulettes pricked me lightly—like nettles, but delightful ones. He caught me by the wrists (so assuredly, Arabella!) and whispered, “Mademoiselle, the downbeat forgives all sins committed on the second.” How I wish someone would embroider that on a fan for me.

When the ball concluded, the mirrors still seemed to move. I think the orchestra continued even after their dismissal—one feels music vibrating through the marble long after sound has retired. I stood near a column carved with palm leaves so realistic that I mistook it for a door and waited for it to open. Perhaps it still might.

Outside, the carriages shimmered like insects beneath the gaslight. I am told that every wheel that departs from the Tuileries leaves a reflection behind, and that the next morning, sweeping boys gather them with brushes. Paris is a city constructed upon its own afterimages; no wonder one never arrives entirely.

If I close my eyes now, the steps of the courante still unfold—a triple pulse, an elegant tremor. One, two, turning; one, three, remembering; one, nothing. The body learns more quickly than belief. I think I understood everything while dancing, and nothing after. My feet, surely wiser than my head, are still conducting the argument between rhythm and reason.

Tell Mama I survived, though somewhat rearranged. Tell her too that the Duke bowing before the Emperor looked like a painting compelled to breathe. And tell her—if you must—that the air of Paris is truly enchanted, for even fatigue here smells of violets and flattery.

Paris—Friday Evening

They call me a “dollar princess,” as if the worth of a woman could be translated into coin without loss of tone. Princess I do not object to; dollar I resent—the word clanks, without refinement. And besides, they have no notion of the difference between a dollar’s value and its cost. To me, each coin bears my father’s pulse—quick and absolute—while each title bestowed upon me now echoes like an empty ballroom after the orchestra has gone home.

The Duke finds this sentimental. He has informed me that Paris has a way of “inflaming the weaker nerves.” I wish it would inflame something stronger.

The gowns are exquisite but heavy, as though beauty must justify its own burden. I wore my emeralds last night, absurd pieces fit for a conquistador’s widow, not a living woman expected to converse. They pressed like obligation against my collarbones, leaving small bruises that gleamed faintly this morning. Even bruises in France manage to look expensive.

I danced, or pretended to. Their courtly minuets are anaemic, the steps arranged for marble rather than blood. Each gesture is measured, each smile indexed to protocol. No one dares perspire. The floor might as well be a mirror that punishes enthusiasm. I longed to dance as one breathes—in exhalations. Something faster, riskier. Perhaps that South American rhythm I once saw scribbled in a conductor’s notes at Covent Garden—“tango,” it was called. The name itself seems to anticipate scandal. There are no tangos in Paris yet, which is precisely what makes me certain of their necessity.

I remarked to the Duchess de Sully that one cannot dance while thinking, and she replied that one must never dance otherwise. That is the trouble with the French: they choreograph instinct.

Rumour has me spending beyond propriety. The *Gazette des Modes* announced that my trousseau exceeded a million guineas. An exaggeration, but why spoil their arithmetic? Even falsehoods flatter when well tailored. What else should one buy, in exchange for significance? The Duke purchases horses; I purchase appearances. Both animals of a kind, though mine must be fed admiration, his hay.

Ah, the Duchess de Sully again—she has a lover who resembles his own reflection so perfectly one wonders which of them is tired first. Everyone in Paris seems mildly in love with an abstraction. I begin to suspect the French have replaced theology with flirtation; their souls perform only social calls.

The Duke, my duck, is the exception. He thinks of propriety as a kind of insurance. The English condition—permanence mistaken for

integrity. He attends court each morning as if paying instalments on reputation. He is not cruel, merely refrigerated. Cold ducks should be served with bitter orange—I, alas, was born too sweet.

I am supposed to write letters home describing the splendour. My mother wants assurance that France has not corrupted me, though she always regarded corruption as a form of continental garnish. I tell her of gowns, jewels, processions, but never of silence. There is such a volume to silence here. Behind every compliment, one hears the accountants of vanity scrawling in invisible ink.

The waltz this evening was announced as a “gigue dansée”—impossible title for such sluggish mourning in rhythm. I counted in six as I moved, trying to escape the time signature without breaking it. A violin refused its tuning briefly; that half note of disobedience thrilled me more than the entire evening’s civility. The press, I am sure, will announce I looked radiant. No doubt I did—plaster has its sheen.

I wish I could live as the French women of fiction do—in apartments the colour of apricots, with one lover for tenderness and another for argument. The novels promise that wickedness is simply social evolution abroad. Were I French, I could have been careless instead of decorous; coquettish instead of correct. But I am English money in a French frame, displayed rather than exhibited.

They say the Emperor admires my jewels. He may keep them if he will teach me how to live without consequence. But even that would end in paperwork.

There was a peculiar little incident after the supper dance. A page dropped a fan at my feet—my own, though I had not brought one. It was carved bone, painted with a crimson insect winding through lilies. When opened, the air around it chilled slightly, as though aware. I carried it home in secret. No initials, no maker’s mark. Perhaps I invent its mystery—absence of evidence, like perfume, always invites narrative. Still, when I hold it, I think I hear rhythm faintly tapping against the ribs. Perhaps the tango has begun already, underground, waiting for the correct century.

The Duke has retired, of course, reading the Times with a diligence that seems almost devotional. He tells me the Pope may be useful again. I tell him mirrors are cheaper.

If tomorrow brings another ball, I shall wear fewer jewels and more intention. Let them call me what they like; I will think only of the unseen dance—the one in compound time—measured in sighs and concealed accelerations. Perhaps I am merely bored, or perhaps boredom is the body’s rehearsal for freedom.

For the present, I will imagine heat—motion tightened around desire until it risks becoming music. One cannot have freedom; it must be danced before it departs.

It is nearly midnight. The emerald bruises darken beautifully.

On the Death of the Comte de Canardelle-Montmorin d'Aubespine-de-Mallard

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen, Paris, 1853

I learn, with that peculiar astonishment reserved for the unverifiable, that the celebrated Comte de Canardelle-Montmorin d'Aubespine-de-Mallard has at last permitted his body to align itself with history. The announcement arrived yesterday afternoon upon paper of improbable age, sealed with a private crest in which an egret wrestles an octopus—a design surely imagined by regret.

The Comte, heaven rest his amphibious soul, was remembered less for his title—though he possessed seven, each exquisitely unproductive—than for his sole composition, that most disputed masterpiece of 1785: *Le Concerto de la Grâce des Canards*, performed only once at Versailles. After the applause he vanished, as if into the pond from which his inspiration had been ladled. In so vanishing, he eluded both the Republic and the guillotine, proving that success, properly drenched, is the surest form of camouflage.

The *Mercure Galant* (July of that same year) described the concert as “a pastoral of perspiring magnificence, wherein real ducks performed the basso continuo, and fountains were tuned to D major.” The reviewer went on to predict “a new epoch of moist enlightenment.” The prediction, like most aquatic metaphors, was soon diluted.

No two eye-witnesses ever agreed on what transpired. Madame de Genlis swore she saw the Queen herself laughing into a fan of swan feathers. The Comte's valet affirmed that only one duck participated, “though in a moral sense all ducks were present.” The composer, asked to explain his method, replied simply: “I wrote to flatter the element most familiar with applause—water.”

Were one to pursue precision here, it would have to be under false pretences. I, no stranger to affectionate falsity, have attempted to reconstruct his life from a portfolio of receipts: orders for harp strings, bills for Venetian glass reeds, and an unfinished treatise, *Traité des sons qui nagent* (“A Treatise on Sounds That Swim”). Each document contradicts the others in excellent good faith.

That he lived long after art had forgotten him is undeniable. He retired to Mallard-sur-Loire in 1786, calling it “a strategic advance into

silence.” There he constructed a minor Versailles of water—ten ponds, each with fountains named for Greek virtues. The pond of Fortitude could never be filled; the pond of Prudence overflowed nightly.

Travellers who passed the estate report hearing dusks of strange harmonies, “as if harpsichords were drowning politely.” Chateaubriand, always prepared to misunderstand, noted in *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* that “Canardelle is said still to hear the court, though through a medium of puddles.” The remark was meant metaphorically, yet I find it physically persuasive.

By the time Napoleon crowned himself, the Comte had grown venerable in the manner of furniture that prefers to belong to the previous room. A prefect under Louis-Philippe later declared him “a relic unearthed by admiration.” I saw him twice in the Rue du Bac in ’48—very white, very real, and faintly glazed, as if emerging from varnish.

The academy has never agreed upon the Comte’s birth, death, or even reality. The *Conservatoire* lists no such name among its composers; the *Almanach de Gotha* does, but under poultry. In the *Bibliothèque Impériale* one finds a manuscript of *Le Concerto*, each stave drawn upon sheets prepared for horticultural diagrams. The notes resemble ducks, apparently by design: a calligraphic aviary.

I am aware—painfully so—that in asserting these facts I convert them into legend. But to correct them would be to betray their species of truth. It is the duty of an archivist to protect not accuracy, but arrangement. When I confess to having “restored” passages of his life, I commit no fraud. I merely perform history as etiquette.

There exists an anecdote, never confirmed, concerning the Queen’s tears. After the performance of 1785, she is said to have approached the Comte and whispered, “You have made the pond my mirror.” The intimacy of that statement, if indeed uttered, ruined him. Within a week, he announced his withdrawal from all public music. His explanation—“Art must never be clearer than the monarch’s reflection”—was circulated discreetly, and soon after the diaries of courtiers began to sprout aquatic allegories.

That the Queen and the composer were innocent is obvious. That they were believed innocent is impossible. Versailles, even at its gentlest, was a field of insinuations disguised as lilies.

Time has gentled him beyond parody. His passing—at the reputed age of one hundred and thirty-six—will surprise only the inattentive. Though the newspapers treat his existence as symbolic, a certain Monsieur Dufrêne of the Opéra insists he visited the Comte during the spring floods of ’41. The old man, Dufrêne says, reclined beside a slate

pool filled with musical stones, which he claimed were “tuned by patience.”

Asked if he regretted his retirement, he answered, “It is not the absence of music that torments me, but the abundance that follows.” In such utterances we find that curious nobility peculiar to artists who mistake oblivion for liberty.

The Comte composed daily in water until the end, tracing staves with a trembling cane, notes dissolving before completion. One might call this futility; he called it serenity.

Paris, naturally, has made merchandise of him overnight. A new waltz, *Les Ombres de Canardelle*, was performed last week at the Salle Pleyel—uncredited but outrageously sentimental. Even *Le Charivari* published a caricature: a nobleman in a periwig, conducting a fountain while the ducks applaud. The second Empire, that wondrous theatre of nostalgia, will no doubt discover in him a spiritual forefather.

Meanwhile, his pond—now described as a “hydraulic museum” by the Ministry of Public Instruction—has become the site of Sunday sermons, where the bourgeoisie picnic among his ruins and swear they can still hear “the divine quacking of former times.” They cannot, of course. They merely listen too politely to their own expectation.

To conclude properly would falsify the man. In his papers I found a marginal note (in green ink, slightly mossed): “All order is ceremonial disorder concealed beneath elegance.” One might quote this as philosophy, yet it reads rather as confession.

I must therefore leave my task incomplete—or more precisely, in perfect incompleteness—exactly as he would have preferred.

The Comte de Canardelle-Montmorin d’Aubespine-de-Mallard, who taught sound to drink its own image, has died, perhaps again. His art remains: a ripple mistaken for a law.

The archivist closes the file, and in closing, opens three more.



RONDEAU FINAL

On The Unbearable Modern Noise

by Wyona Mallard, Ladies of Light, 1924

No sensible person enjoys the new music, though many appear to interpret its unpleasantness as proof of sophistication. The rhythms gallop, the harmonies refuse to settle, and one is left with no moral foothold whatever. I have attended three concerts this season and emerged each time looking, as one unfortunate friend put it, "like a bishop after a bicycle accident."

The trouble, of course, begins with the radio. It breaks into homes uninvited, confusing volume with welcome. At dinner one might overhear a voice from the pantry announcing "jazz selections by the Syncopated Sultans." (They are neither.) Servants hum along unconsciously, their cutlery taking the rhythm, and suddenly the entire household totters towards democracy. My footman has begun to whistle backbeats.

In the old days one could rely upon music to frame an evening. Bach accompanied thought, Chopin permitted despair, and Sullivan at least understood the necessity of charm. Now a composition called Ragged Syncopation No. 3 by a certain Mr. Coates demands movement at revolutions per minute. I prefer my revolutions historical.

A critic in *The Times*—a boy probably born after the Coronation—announced last week that "dissonance is the new consonance." One might as well declare that smoke is the new air. Yet the public seems content to breathe it.

My knowledge of music is largely administrative; I maintain the accounts for our County Orchestra, whose principal conductor, the gifted but misguided Mr. Stenning, insists that Beethoven foresaw jazz. That, I think, is libellous. The orchestra's minutes record his remark: "The Ninth anticipates Harlem." I asked him to show where in the score, precisely, the Negro enters, but he lost his place.

What no one admits is that speed now substitutes for form. Each melody begins as if late already, fearful of its own sentiment. A certain pianist named "Victor Marmalade" (I cannot confirm this) hammers the keyboard until its hammers beg for mercy. He calls it hot rhythm. It is tepid anarchy.

I am old-fashioned in moral acoustics. Tempo governs manners; acceleration breeds collapse. As a rule, I find the faster the tune, the shorter the skirt. The new Charleston step must have been choreographed by tailors. Ladies of Light may confirm that hems are climbing in proportion to beats per minute. Lyon's Tea Rooms now host "tea dances" where clerks shake their limbs as if auditioning for delirium. Imagine Addison at a foxtrot!

The gramophone, once a genteel accessory, has become evangelical. A man sells me "records"—note the ominous legalism—each promising "tone fidelity." But fidelity, once separated from love, decays into mere accuracy. I played one called A Medley of Modern Joys and could not recognise a single joy within it. My cook, returning unbidden, asked whether it was a hymn. I told her, in a sense, yes.

Even our composers have surrendered. Mr. Holst recently attached planets to sounds; Mr. Walton sets scandals to percussion; and Miss Smyth, once a promising melodist, now writes marches. Everyone marches. No one walks.

An American visitor at the Savoy assured me that the chaos is deliberate, that "the future is syncopated." I asked whether civilisation must therefore limp. He grinned and ordered champagne before noon, so I considered the argument lost.

For two centuries England survived perfectly well without obligatory trumpets or orchestral whooping. Our ancestors maintained harmony by habit, not appetite. The new composers prefer appetite—it's louder. I attended a concert at Queen's Hall where a "modernist" cellist performed a piece requiring him to strike the strings with the flat of his hand. "Extended technique," they call it. I call it voluntary unemployment.

Even when melody appears, it will not stay. A tune begins prettily, then refuses responsibility. One wishes to take it by the hand and insist upon a proper upbringing. But composers, like parents, now suspect discipline of being uncreative. The result is the musical equivalent of a drawing-room argument: energetic, circular, and slightly tipsy.

I have no objection to experiment, provided it is discreet. Yet discretion seems to have been scored out of the modern repertoire. There is a dance hall in Hammersmith where the music resembles a vehicular pile-up scored in C minor. The management call it modern pleasure. Observing the dancers, one suspects that rhythm has replaced eroticism, which is both efficient and dull.

Morality, being rhythmic in essence, cannot survive irregular percussion.

A cousin of mine—musically adventurous, the type inclined to capitalise Berlioz! in conversation—told me that my distaste was

generational. Possibly. But the deterioration of sound predates my birth. Even Debussy, who began as mist, ended as confusion. It will not improve by volume.

Another cousin (there are too many of them) maintains that the radio has democratised culture. Indeed, when every household hears the same noise, equality is achieved through irritation. The Wireless Review recently published a survey claiming that “listening unites the classes.” In fact, it synchronises their boredom.

I set last night’s accounts in order:

- Orchestra repairs: £42.
- Tuning forks (lost to enthusiasm): 7.
- New wireless aerial (experimental): 1.

I note with alarm that invoices now arrive printed on jazzy letterheads—blue ink, diagonals, optimism. Administration itself trembles.

When ledger columns begin humming, civilisation follows suit.

In 1902, Sir Hubert Parry wrote, “Music should aspire upwards, even when descending the scale.” He would not recognise what passes for aspiration now. If the soul has overtones, they are tuned to advertise. I do not suggest censorship (its rhythm, too, would be vulgar), only silence. Silence remains the only major key never exhausted.

But silence, alas, requires discipline. Radios do not permit silence; they consider it mechanical failure.

And so the twentieth century turns out to be not an age of reasoned freedom, but of compulsory noise. I hold no illusions—it will grow worse. Already small children beat spoons against saucepans claiming improvisation. Soon the Empire will drum itself to sleep and dream in syncopation.

If civilisation ends, I am certain it will do so to an accompaniment.

Paris, 1922

The room is neither stage nor salon but something between—the kind of private studio that believes itself public once curtains are drawn wide enough. A grand piano sits slightly out of tune, scented with the ghosts of cheaper cabaret whiskey. On its lid, a single porcelain bowl filled with pale anemones trembles with each accidental chord.

The lights are low, diffuse, as if borrowed from the memory of gaslamps. The audience—seamstresses, poets, one bewildered banker’s wife—cluster close against cigarette smoke. Then she enters: the dancer, barefoot, draped in a length of rose-coloured silk that seems to hesitate between garment and gesture. You sense Isadora’s school in the

looseness of her limbs, that declarative refusal of ballet's obedience. But she's not imitating Duncan so much as answering her with a question.

The pianist begins *Clair de Lune*—its restraint a kind of intoxication. The dancer does not move immediately. She listens, head tilted, gazing not at the audience but the floor. When she finally lifts her arms, it is like someone waking underwater. She encircles herself once, twice, in a slow revolution of fabric; the silk catches the dim light, painting pink weather onto her skin. The motion is broad, unworried by precision—each movement a curved phrase drawn rather than executed.

In this first passage the painter's influence appears—not in colour but in proportion. The body is all exaggeration. Her torso dips too far forward, gestures too open, like a courtesan captured mid-laugh. The angles are human, unflattered. Every turn makes her seem etched, not sculpted; outline, not volume. One could mistake her limbs for chalk marks left after a rehearsal too long continued.

As Debussy's melody ripples forward, she begins to move more quickly—an uneven accelerando that feels impulsive rather than rehearsed. Her feet sketch broken ovals across the floorboards, tracing circles that open and close like the breathing of someone asleep. Her arms create horizontal lines, imitating the brushwork of Lautrec's Montmartre scenes—blurred, immediate, insolent with suggestion.

The silk loosens around her hips, revealing one bare shoulder. It's not provocation so much as indifference to propriety. The effect is visual melody: the sound of the piano seems to fall into her movements rather than accompany them. Each note becomes visible—tiny glints of silver against the rose fabric. The spectators, partly drunk, begin to forget whether they are hearing or watching.

Now comes the quick colour—café rhythm, not quite jazz but foreshadowing it. She clicks her fingers once, deliberately, like a painter declaring intent before an uncooperative canvas. Then, astonishingly, she begins a galloping motion—half-mime, half-satire—of the dancers in Lautrec's *Moulin Rouge*: high kicks translated into high philosophy. Her bare feet strike the boards with muted authority; the silk trails behind like a sound delay.

In this part, the dance becomes portraiture. Her poses fragment: a raised chin reminiscent of Yvette Guilbert, the long neck arched into the impossible grace of one who refuses balance. Her laughter—because she truly laughs now—is silent but unmistakable. She performs herself as subject and sketch. Every gesture ends with the recognition of its own impermanence.

The pianist, feeling her abandon, breaks briefly from Debussy's score, inserting improvised echoes, little crescendos of longing that dissolve as quickly as intention. The dancer responds instinctively,

spinning on a single heel, arms thrown open like ribbons unraveling from a bouquet.

As Clair de Lune returns to its main theme, the air changes: perfume, exhaustion, expectation. The dance slows. The audience watches as she gathers the silk around her again, not modestly, but as if restoring an idea. Each fold becomes deliberate architecture; the fabric at last finds its voice.

Her body now articulates only small truths—shoulders rising, knees bending slightly, eyes half-closed. The Lautrec distortion fades; she is once more Duncan's descendant, gravity's temporary accomplice. The movement grows interior. She seems to dance inside herself—her hands sketching invisible constellations only she can read.

At Debussy's final ascending notes, she lowers herself to the floor, one ankle crossing the other—a gesture of repose but not defeat. With her head bent, the curve of her spine resembles a drawn question mark. The silk pools around her in rose and shadow, a quiet echo of those pastel figures who always looked most alive at the moment of collapse.

The pianist lifts his hands from the keys. No one applauds immediately. There is a collective uncertainty as to whether the performance has ended or begun anew in another register of stillness. One woman coughs softly, a match is struck.

The dancer looks up at last. Her face, bare and unpowdered, is luminous from exertion. She is smiling—not grandly, but with the pale amusement of one who knows that all true dances are unfinished arguments. The silk slips from her shoulder onto the floor with a sigh—the most final sound of the night.

Paris, or the Curvature of a Chord

I recall the incident as if seen through smoked glass. There was a scent—violet and cigarettes—and a ceiling mural so chipped it seemed an excavation of angels. The nightclub's name has escaped me, perhaps deliberately: something faux-exotic like *Le Chat Zébré* or *La Lune de Fer*. In those days, the French believed everything modern required an animal, a machine, or the moon. We English merely stood by, taking mental notes for the next luncheon.

A man was playing Poulenc—though I did not yet know his name—on a piano that was not in tune, but was, in a sense, cooperative. His fingers had that unstudied quality of a child touching the surface of an aquarium. Notes came up bubbling, slapdash, perfectly incorrect. At first I thought it was parody. Then I realised it was sincerity performed as if parody, which amounts to genius or madness depending on the hour.

I'd spent the day before sketching along the Boulevards, trying to find a new kind of angle, a geometry of fatigue perhaps. I'd drawn too many façades. Paris at dusk is all façade; sincerity must be rented by the hour. But that evening—oh!—a fragment of perfection appeared in the rhythmic clutter: a thin, mischievous sequence that sounded like a music-hall tune rearranged by a clockmaker suffering delirium.

A woman at my table—I hesitate to call her friend—whispered that Poulenc was a *jeune homme terrible*, a Catholic with the morals of a balloon. "He wears his sin like perfume," she said, as though that were an achievement. I remember thinking it was a very English sort of remark, though she claimed to be Belgian.

At that time, I fancied myself a painter of moods, though by 1938 I've learned it is moods that paint us, like intrusive decorators insisting we need more vermilion in the corners. I wrote later in my diary (a green one, *gauchely* gilt): The French pianist performs as if attempting to play Debussy but having no patience for mist. A cruel entry. Yet it is true—Poulenc possessed not the shimmer but the wit of moisture: damp irony rather than dew.

I suspect I fell in love with the idea of dissonance that night. Not the real sort—social, political, or erotic—but the orderly mischief of a misplaced note. The kind that turns expectation into laughter. His melody pirouetted near sentiment, then recoiled, bowing mockingly. One heard suggestion and denial in the same bar: a minor miracle of hesitation.

Beside me, an English sculptor (whose work, stone and sorrow, has since quite rightly vanished) murmured that this was "not art, but cleverness." Which, of course, is precisely what every art truly is, once the candles burn low enough.

A small group of Americans were clapping too early, having mistaken a pause for the end. The pianist gave a half-smile—saintly, disdainful—and continued as though rebuking the rhythm of applause itself. I envied that serenity. For an artist, the capacity to ignore his audience is the final luxury.

It was about then, or after, that I began to notice the pianist's hair: thin, fair, uncertain about direction. Hair, like harmony, tells one's intentions. His head inclined as if in dialogue with someone beneath the keyboard—a girl, a ghost, God. One of those necessary inventions to justify tension. When he reached what must have been the resolution, a kind of impolite lull hung over the smoke. And then someone, drunk or prophetic, cried "Encore!" though he had not yet stopped.

The night concluded (as so many do in recollection) under a quarrel of laughter and rain. I remember walking home past the Seine and thinking I might never again paint anything straight. My lines needed to

curve, to yield, to mimic those obstinate harmonies that resist decorum. In the following months I threw away three canvases—for not curving enough.

Naturally, years contradict everything. I have since heard that Poulenc disliked nightclubs, preferred choral forms, and often despaired of his own music's levity. People evolve, or decay, into these revisions. But I choose to believe in the pianist I saw: corpuscular, dazzling, all hesitation and nerve.

Somewhere I read that the gods send us music not to soothe but to humiliate us: to show what sincerity might sound like if briefly possible. That night was my lesson. Yet how confidently I contradict it! Each time I recall those notes, I feel their mockery like perfume that refuses to fade—even now, when the bottle, like the man, must be long empty.

Still, were you to ask me about the piece, I could not name it. Its title—if it had one—evaporated into the chatter of that unrememberable room. What remains is only a contour, a residue: Paris in 1922, and a pianist making mischief with belief.

And as I write these words, I am almost certain—though perhaps not sincerely—that the music never happened at all.

Sydney, 1926

Euphemia Mallard

Paris has rhythm but Sydney, that morning, had syncopation—a sharper thing, trimmed, almost hygienic. One could slice into it and still find a melody. I had been listening to a man from America explain his concept for a “symphonic poem on metropolitan walking.” He said it as though pedestrianism were an illness and Paris the cure. His name was August Clay, and he wished for me to assist with the words.

We met near Circular Quay, where ferries announced themselves by shudder rather than horn, and where suit jackets shone with the conviction of prosperity. I was at that time publishing under the name E. Fenwick—which, like a masque, permitted curiosity without offence. He had read *The Harbour Drift*, and mistook its cruelty for patriotism.

Clay wished to write the libretto before composing a note. “Otherwise you become,” he said, “a prisoner of the pretty.” Each time he used the word pretty, he drew the syllables out as if practising an overtone on a reed instrument. Sydney’s prettiness, he felt, was a problem of architecture and character: verandahs too agreeable, women too busy understanding what they were supposed to want.

“You’ll write it as if he’s you,” he said—“an American in Paris, but not nostalgic. Not even sympathetic. Just aware. The music should blush before its own ambition.”

I had the sense that he was describing me. I agreed, because curiosity requires at least one unwise agreement per day.

The first sketches were done on butcher’s paper, spread atop a café table near Kings Cross. He traced measures with a fountain pen that left blue constellations where beats should have fallen. His idea of tempo resembled gossip—unpredictable, self-satisfied. Between us, on the tiled floor, a radio played a foxtrot rearranged as jazz; the singer—a contralto—replaced every proper noun with baby or honey. It was a method of deletion that struck me as philosophically modern.

“Sydney lacks that irony,” Clay said. “Here, when someone says sweetheart, they mean it.”

“And what is lost?” I asked.

He considered. “Harmony.”

To amuse him, I described a myth I’d once heard from a ferry steward—that the harbour tides, taken together, hummed in B-flat. “You could test it,” I told him. “Each jetty with a tuning fork.” He lifted his notebook, marked harbour = chorus of flats, unresolved. Thus the central image of his piece found its footing: a man crossing a city, unable to locate the tonic.

The libretto began not in Paris but in an ambiguous clearing of reflected light—perhaps water, perhaps glass. Lines arrived like overheard conversations:

My shoes remember you, / they have danced on every breakfast street.

He objected, found it too moral. I told him that morals were merely compressed rhythms—one notes the beat but rarely the harmony.

By August, Clay had decided we should observe Sydney as research for Paris. “A city in disguise will tell you the truth,” he said. We walked through markets, listened to hawkers chant fish prices like plainchant. One morning among boxes of lemons and paper fortunes, he began recording a pattern on the back of a receipt book—a rhythm derived from women haggling about fennel. It was rude and exacting.

He asked why I lived here when my sentences belonged elsewhere. I told him proximity lent danger the flavour of understanding. Too far away, and everything appears romantic; too close, and one starts taking notes.

A student from the Conservatorium came to visit, bringing sheet music that had been smudged by sea air. She told us about a new movement—“aural modernity.” Music to describe the effort of listening. Clay seemed pleased. I watched him trace her speech into

staves, pretending to be careless. He was never careless. I found his precision erotic, in that it presumed resistance.

He left for Melbourne in October to perform sketches of the first movement—"The Crossings"—as part of a modern exhibition. He telegraphed daily, demanding phrases to insert as captions: 'A continent's misunderstanding becomes motif,' or 'Dissonance rehearses delight in secret.' I obliged, half in jest. He promised to return, bringing with him a proper piano and the promise of Paris. He did neither.

The following winter, an article in *The Argus* quoted him describing the "Sydney collaboration" as an example of colonial curiosity mistaking itself for insight. Imagine the neatness of that insult. I folded the paper and placed it beside my notebook. By then, I had rewritten the libretto as a detective's dream sequence: a musician interrogating a city so charming it refuses to confess.

I never sent it to him.

A year later, in the cafés of Macleay Street, one could still hear a rhythm that might have been his—brisk, syncopated, content with its own forward motion. I had begun another story by then, one about women who mistake reflection for destination.

Occasionally, I heard someone whistle a tune that could have been ours. It was always too bright at the edges, as though the melody itself blushed when noticed.

Once, a stranger hummed it descending the steps near Woolloomooloo. I found myself following the direction of the sound, knowing it was unwise. Analysis, after all, is the twin of pursuit. Yet the ear is an excitable organ: it hears before thinking, and by the time one considers, one is already too close.

Chapter IX: The Pink House and Its Perfume

The house stood beyond the Seine as if ashamed to breathe the same air as the city that had grown vulgar about it. One reached it by a sycamore avenue too straight to be innocent, lined with lanterns taken from the *Jardin du Roi's* fêtes of 1763—each still engraved with the Bourbon lily, though its glass was filmed with the kind of soot that even nostalgia cannot polish away. The gates, gilt and peeling, bore the crest of the old Dukes of Mallard: an oddly comic bird holding in its bill a rose and a flintlock.

When the revolution came, it is said a servant—one with a reputation for clever wrists—had fastened planks across the tall pink shutters, preserving the house as one preserves a scandal: too precious to forget, too dangerous to show. And thus it slept, swaddled in marble silence, for one hundred and thirty years.

I first saw it in the spring of 1922, when everyone was trying to forget the war by remembering how to dance. Mallard House, as the Parisians called it, had been stirred back to consciousness by the Sisters of Perpetual Succour, who decided, absurdly and beautifully, that penitence required parquet. In the brief interval before the Archbishop noticed, they flung its doors open to every excluded creature of the decade. Their chapel smelled of violet incense and theatre paint; their garden bloomed with boys who could quote Hildegard one hour and Cocteau the next.

To describe the house without seeming delirious is impossible. Even the servants' bells were of crystal. The floors were pink marble veined with pale grey—the shade of distant gossip. Passing through the vestibule, one encountered mirrors that multiplied one's reflection until the self appeared to be a small society, shimmering and slightly drunk. Everywhere one touched was silk, ormolu, silver or the accidental holiness of dust. The ceilings depicted saints so beautiful they could only have been painted by an unbeliever.

Sister Baptista, the most diverting of them all—a nun with an accent like a Neapolitan violin—once told me that the frescos had been retouched by a visiting Russian who refused to paint hands, claiming, "They are too articulate for heaven." I adored her logic.

There were salons in every tone of the precious metals: the Gold Drawing Room with its Olympian furniture, and the Silver Dining Hall where the light fell like disbelief. The upper galleries looked down on a small orchard enclosed within high walls, an Eden for those bored of redemption. In blossom-time it was the setting for their "Evenings of Sympathetic Error," recitals of Plato, Baudelaire, and bawdier things performed under fruit trees blushed pink as scandal.

Sir Denby Lowell wrote in the Times Literary Supplement that "walking through Mallard House was like being invited into a migraine." He meant it kindly. There was art everywhere, but it seemed to have lost its memory. A Fragonard girl flirted with a clock that no longer kept time; a marble Psyche had her wings cut square. Even the chandeliers glittered as though aware that electricity, so modernly convenient, could never be aristocratic.

The Sisters' charity was a legend. They opened supper kitchens for the veterans and the fashionable indigent alike. A duchess and a docker might find themselves spooning the same consommé, while Sister Agathe, the so-called "Abbess of the Apaches," presided at the piano. Yet charity, for all its virtue, has a peculiar perfume when mixed with champagne and belief. And oh, the parties—those excesses of illuminated piety! Coco Chanel once arrived dressed as the Madonna of

the Miraculous Medal, leading a white stallion through the ballroom as Diaghilev played God with the lighting.

Every guest swore the walls shimmered during those nights, though perhaps it was just the golden wallpaper refusing to sleep. One painter—Fevrier, I think—declared the entire mansion a “theological hallucination rendered in pink stone.” He meant it cruelly, but one mustn’t hold artists to their hangovers.

I, however, remained enamoured. From my corner in the mezzanine library (a room wallpapered in silver foliage, smelling faintly of candied ink and sanctity), I attempted to read Anatole France’s *La Révolte des Anges* while Alceste Villand, the operatic architect, explained the house’s structure to a coterie of critics. “Louis XVI proportions,” he drawled, “but designed by a woman who had read too much Fénelon.” He meant the late Duchess, of course, who reputedly had commissioned Italian workmen to carve allegories of Reason and Desire wrestling on the cornices. She died before deciding who should win.

By midnight, politics and prophecy would mingle with the cocktails. Everyone argued, with the candour of those who know their words will not alter a single thing. I once said, to considerable silence, “Democracy is a fine experiment so long as it does not expect results.” Baron M—responded, “My dear Viscountess, you mistake amusement for conviction.” Perhaps he was right. Aristocratic candour has this advantage—it can be confused with philosophy.

It was there, amidst gold leaf and moral fatigue, that I began my sentimental education afresh. Mallard House offered no certainties: beauty misbehaved, holiness lingered after sin, and the senses proved more articulate than thought. I once touched a column of chilled marble and believed, stupidly, that I had finally understood moderation.

When the Sisters moved on—disbanded, displaced, or dissolved into marriages and martyrdoms—the mansion fell quiet again. Paris forgot. I returned years later and found workmen boarding up its windows once more. The varnish cracked like old laughter as they hammered the nails. I asked the foreman if he knew the story of the place. “Oui, madame,” he said, “it was a house for angels and their accidents.”

I could have corrected him, but what would be the use? The orchard had gone to seed; the grass, unshaven, dreamed of salons. Yet through the boards I caught one last glint of the silver ceiling. It trembled faintly, as though catching a note of music still trapped inside.

And that, perhaps, is how all splendour ends—not with decay, but with a whisper mistaken for proof.

After the Bright Decade

A Gentleman's Gentlemen, 1946.

The boulevards of memory, like those of Paris, have been sandbagged and straightened. One observes the curious fact that the past ten years now resemble a misplaced decade; misplaced, that is, by those who insist on remembering it. The 'twenties,' as they were once called—as if numbers could dance—have been all but erased by the respectful violence of history. Those years were declared lost and then, inconveniently, found again between two calamities, like a glove of sequins discovered in the mud of Flanders and dismissed as indecently unsoiled.

Some months ago I attended a small gathering at Lady Pelham's where a young historian presented what he termed *An Outline of Modern European Behaviour*. I made the error of asking what was meant by "modern." He replied with statistical bravery: 1919 to 1939, exclusive of sentiment. I congratulated him on surviving the interval without affection. He blushed. It is a rare pleasure to embarrass the future.

The difficulty, of course, lies in remembering an age whose essence was forgetfulness. Between the death of restraint and the birth of despair, Paris invented a frivolity so sincere that one hardly knows whether to laugh or translate. I remember the handwriting of that city—loops on the rs, feathers on the fs, champagne in the punctuation. The streets themselves seemed to rhyme. No, not rhyme—they misbehaved in unison.

In those years, beauty was a sort of currency that could be spent only in the dark. Painters traded in radiance, and the poets in architectural ambiguity. There was a composer—his name escapes me with Continental discretion—who wrote in harmonies that gradually lost their centre, like a civic building collapsing in perfect rhythm. People said his concerts smelt faintly of dusted velvet and expensive regret.

Now, the Parisians insist all that was an illusion. They have reupholstered their conscience in grey wool; they walk, talk, even sin in a different register. One hears that the *Hôtel Crillon* serves tea rather than instruction. The dancing academies that once trained bodies to forget have become language schools where verbs are properly conjugated. So progress reasserts itself: chastity in translation.

I keep a set of glass negatives from that time, which I have never had developed. They belong to a friend—an actress of distracted virtue—who, in 1927, claimed she could only be properly photographed by candlelight. Each plate bears a different fragment: a shoulder, a

staircase, a decanter left half-emptied. To view them now would be indecently factual. I prefer their potential. It is the same with recollection; the undeveloped image remains the more accurate.

Professor L—— told me at luncheon that nostalgia is “the most sincere form of amnesia.” He has been widely published on subjects he cannot bring himself to name. I reminded him that the very term history once meant a form of inquiry compatible with error. We agreed to remain inquisitive, which is to say unreliable.

But Paris—yes, the city and its absence. The post-war air there carries a smell of ministerial linen and disinfected charm. The cafés are at attention; even the pigeons appear demobilised. In conversation, one hears whispers of a new austerity of emotion, a resistance to style itself. Yet now and then, beneath the marble calm, the ghost of a Charleston step breaks through, faint as a remembered indiscretion. It is a rhythm that cannot be wholly unlearned, much as taste resists obedience.

If one believes the architectural journals, half the salons of Montparnasse were torn down to make way for “rational housing.” A grateful phrase, but one suspects the new residents sleep uneasily, haunted by the laughter that once rehearsed itself upon those floors. As for the great houses, some were turned into embassies, others into hospitals for the delicate spirit. The Ministry of Reconstruction has reportedly walled over a fresco deemed too hopeful. Imagine: the removal of optimism by plaster!

I recall a night in 1928, when a young poet—Raoul Blavier, mercifully forgotten—declared that truth was “a luxury item, export only.” He threw his manuscript into the Seine from the Pont Neuf and went to supper in Montmartre, where he dined on someone else’s royalties. His remark has since been attributed to three philosophers and an actress. Posterity forgives only plagiarism, never appetite.

Such were our speculations then: the liberties of intellect mistaken for durable revolution. In hindsight, they look like smoke seen through lace. Yet even that image flatters us. Many of my English colleagues now write as though liberty itself were an architectural error corrected by war. I cannot quite subscribe. The hum of the previous century is still audible if one leans against the right wall.

It is fashionable to say the ‘twenties never happened. The new men of letters prefer the realism of absence. Yet what a strange realism it is, that thrives on deletion. Did they not see the temples of appetite standing erect at the Rue du Bac? Did no one hear the argument between the violin and the gramophone—two civilisations speaking through one another? What heroism it took to be frivolous! What endurance went into a single sigh!

At the British Institute's winter lecture, a lady from the Ministry of Information declared that "modernity had been purified of ornament." I resisted the impulse to applaud ironically; one must husband one's fatigue for private use. Her phrase—pure modernity—makes me think of snow: transparent in theory, treacherous in practice, always awaiting a footprint to make it visible.

When I walk through London now, I imagine the city folded upon itself like silk in a bureau drawer. The rationed gestures of manner conceal the opulence of intent. Someone once told me that Paris has forgotten how to blush; I suggest London has merely powdered over the evidence. Our *hauteur* endures as habit.

I doubt, truly, that the 1920s can be recovered even as illusion. Their freedom was not constitutional but metabolic: a shared fever mistaken for philosophy. Perhaps it is better thus. To commemorate those awakenings would be indecent to our present sobriety. Still, there was something admirably wasteful in the way they believed sensation itself could rescue the world from thought.

We were extravagant—I include myself—not from decadence, but from disbelief in thrift. That is no longer possible, for thrift has become our only surviving virtue. I see it in the new architecture: rectilinear, ascetic, almost grateful for daylight. Even the murals of civic instruction—those School Board allegories of *Virtue at Work*—seem drawn under rations of colour.

Do I miss the delirium? Intellectually, no; morally, perhaps; socially, quite. For one cannot now imagine conversation not devoted to reconstruction. In those earlier rooms, we constructed only rumours, but they were charmingly built.

Last month, over dinner at White's, a diplomat fresh from Paris remarked that "History has at last become circular." He meant it disparagingly, but I find the shape consoling. There is always the possibility of returning to the beginning without being noticed. In that sense, perhaps the Paris of our youth was not lost—only waiting for another misapprehension to give it form.

One cannot, I suppose, plan a future on the memory of liberation. The word itself has been requisitioned. Yet somewhere between the resumed proprieties, one still hears the faint syncopation of that decade: a rhythm, polite but resistant, echoing from marble, from mirrors, from the almost excessive grace of what refused to last.

Speech by Ard Seir, delivered before the Société de Curiosités Historiques, Paris, 1929

Permit a brief reconstruction of a scene whose documents seem to breathe as one turns them. I refer, of course, to the arrival late in the year 1785, of the Comte Séraphin de Canardelle-Montmorin d'Aubespine-de-Mallard, Compositeur du Roi, Intendant des Plaisirs Harmoniques et des Jardins Aquatiques de Versailles. You will remember the rumours: the Concerto of the Ducks, performed once only, and attended by both the King and a fog not mentioned in any meteorological record.

They say the Comte appeared at court that night with soil on his boots, claiming it to be from the garden of Saint-Cloud yet smelling faintly of salt. The sapphire ring—his gift from Majesty—rested in a mahogany chest, gilded and inlaid with feathers so fine that some thought them painted, others thought them breathing. It came with a key tipped with a drop of enamel so blue it seemed to mark both the entrance and the exit of the same hour.

Now: that the chest possessed a lock, I will not dispute. That the key fit, perhaps not always.

It is customary, when speaking in houses such as ours, to begin with the weather. We find what is expected, establish what may be told. This morning in Paris it was raining lightly over the boulevards, polite rain—one almost felt expected to rise and curtsy to it. The clock of my study struck half-past ten, though I have not wound it in years. (That, you see, is the sort of thing one forgets until reminded by the servants.)

They say the Comte, too, had a clock that never needed winding. It survived revolutions and restorations, yet was always found a minute slow, as though keeping time with some quieter procession. His household never corrected it, merely planned their appearances around its error.

This, perhaps, is the only record of efficiency Versailles ever achieved.

Those who visited his estate after his disgrace recalled an unusual composure among the staff. They moved as if by music too faint for the ear, setting tea precisely when visitors pretended to be thirsty, lighting candles before dusk could be discussed. Each gesture anticipated another, already rehearsed and resigned.

It was rumoured—absurdly, of course—that they rehearsed for ghosts. His valet, one Lafleur, told a neighbour that the Comte entertained shades at his table, and that instructions were to lay a place for “those who had been punctual in life.”

A charming superstition, though I remind you, such superstition organises a house more efficiently than faith.

Permit me now a small anecdote from our own time, an echo if not an explanation. A month ago, when visiting Madame de Sazerac to review her book on *La Demeure Effacée*, I was offered tea so astonishingly precise that I felt, for a moment, as though the past were being poured. She apologised—said her butler had learned service in the employ of a family once connected to the Comte. “He observes small delays,” she said, “so no one must ever wait.”

Imagine the delicacy of that—a delay so exact it prevents waiting.

When I inquired after his method, she smiled: “He has a clock that loses one minute a day. He trusts it more than any man.”

It is at this point—when the anecdote threatens to evaporate—that I remind you of the chest.

During the Consulate, the family trunk was sold, then bought back, then hidden again. One account claims it was found in a convent near Rouen, containing neither ring nor key but a folded scrap inscribed “*C'en'est rien sauf le silence.*” Another argues that what was taken for sapphire was common glass seen through fatigue.

And yet, visitors to the archive today remark that the ledger noting its description changes colour according to the hour. Noon: pale grey. Midnight: a skiff of blue. We test the ink; the result is inconclusive. Time, it appears, conducts its own investigations.

There is a principle, not often stated, that those who dwell in splendour must pretend not to notice it. The surest sign of elegance is the fatigue it hides. The Comte’s music—if we can trust the fragments—was written so that each phrase returns wearing another’s mask. “The final duck quacks the opening note,” observes the *Gazette des Salons*, “and so the ear loops upon itself, politely misled.”

When played in the Hall of Mirrors, the score required such careful timing of reflections that no performer could know whether they followed or led. It is said one violinist, mistaking herself for her echo, fainted. Yet applause continued, precisely as scheduled.

The Comte himself remarked, “Reality is merely the most obedient servant in the house.”

A comforting idea, until one realises the household learns from the master’s habits. The more obedient reality becomes, the less one distinguishes command from compliance.

In such matters, etiquette is survival, and survival, etiquette—though one mustn’t confess it.

At this point you will notice the loop. I have begun to repeat myself, though softly: rain, clock, sapphire, ghosts, servants. Each organ of the story insists it was first to awaken. Each would continue even if the

others ceased. This, you understand, is not a trick of art but of maintenance.

A well-run house repeats without apparent repetition.

A ruler hears truth disguised as ornament.

A servant, knowing both, lives a little longer.

Allow me to return once more—only once—to the domestic.

My man Blandy insists my boots be polished whether or not I intend to go out. “The leather holds memory,” he says, quoting, I think, an upholsterer. Absurd, yet I let him continue, for there is comfort in rituals whose meaning has evaporated. (It rained again this morning. The boots remained dry.)

That sentence, I suspect, will mean something else later.

Some French chroniclers reported that the Comte’s final years were spent cataloguing imaginary instruments: the mirror-flute, the bladder-harp, the glass viola tuned to birdsong. Each day he wrote one down, crossed it out the next. He told an acquaintance that absent objects still required caretaking, “lest they appear neglected and embarrass the real ones.”

He died—or so we are told—writing the word “balancier.” I have never been sure whether he referred to a metronome, a pendulum, or the servant who carried his chair. Perhaps they were the same.

One senses, at this hour of the evening, that history itself suffers from a kind of polite haunting. The forms remain, though the intent has long retired. The Comte’s ghost attends no séance, yet persists at the margins of hospitality—the way a half-poured cup of tea keeps breathing steam though the hand is gone.

In my reading last night I found, inserted between the pages of a borrowed book on *les formes modernes*, a single line, unsigned: “A lock is most faithful when it forgets what it guards.” I cannot tell whether it was quotation or warning. But as I read it, the clock—unwound these many years—struck once.

Perhaps that was its only truth left to tell.

I shall conclude where the story began: with the arrival at court, the blue key advancing toward its disappearance, the household already practising its composure for those who would never knock again. The ring, the trunk, the servants, the weather—they have all honoured their duties of recurrence. It is we who have failed to recognise rehearsal as the final performance.

And still the boots remain dry.

The Passing of the Comte de Canardelle-Montmorin d'Aubespine-de-Mallard

From A Gentleman's Gentlemen, 1922

The Comte is dead. He managed, for nearly a century and a half, what most moralists have failed to achieve in a single afternoon: the effortless preservation of grace. I was informed of his death through a note folded into a former account of garden fountains at Versailles—a fittingly aquatic epistle, from one who in life concerned himself with ducks both melodic and hydraulic.

The Comte Séraphin de Canardelle-Montmorin d'Aubespine-de-Mallard, Compositeur du Roi, Intendant des Plaisirs Harmoniques et des Jardins Aquatiques de Versailles, ceased performing publicly after the first and only appearance of his Concerto de la Grâce des Canards in 1785. He retired—with triumph's weary smile—to a lake suitably penetrated by statues of Leda. His obituary, perhaps, ought to begin two centuries earlier, since that is where his art remains obstinately waterlogged.

Madame de Polignac wrote in her diary—or something calling itself a diary—“His concerto contains no theme but the reflection of the sky. It may be repeated endlessly without consequence.” Scholars claim this was meant as satire. I suspect it was accidental theology.

I have consulted two accounts of the night in question, both incompatible and therefore, I believe, simultaneously true.

The Gazette Musicale de la Cour (issue of 9 July 1785) insists the orchestra employed live ducks, trained to rise at the cadenza.

The Feuille des Modes Philosophiques describes not ducks but gentle hydraulic devices sculpted as cherubs whose mouths emitted tones “of feathery persuasion.”

The truth, like all grace, lies in rehearsal. Witnesses claim the King applauded for three unbroken minutes, which in that century was an eternity and in this one is merely a cigarette.

At any rate, the Comte withdrew thereafter into what has been generously termed retirement. He lived, apparently, surrounded by clocks which chimed at imperfect intervals, composing nothing but correspondences concerning ornamental ponds. When asked, late in life, why he never wrote again, he reportedly murmured, “Perfection does not repeat.” I might have believed him, had he not written it in four drafts.

In preparing our notice, I sought official confirmation of the Comte's existence from the Archives Nationales. The clerk, a spectral young man smelling of sealing wax and tobacco substitutes, informed

me that there had never been such a title, nor a post of Intendant des Jardins Aquatiques, nor indeed any Concerto de la Grâce des Canards.

Nevertheless, the record shelf to his left contained three volumes bound in water-stained vellum marked “Canardelle.” When opened, they proved to contain recipes for preserving citrus in brandy and instructions for the cleaning of musical reeds. I wrote “confirmed” at the foot of the inquiry and departed, feeling every inch the moral detective.

It is said—invariably by persons with something to sell—that he was preserved in a musical sense through his “school,” though no two pupils ever agreed upon his method. One, a Madame Duret-Loing, declared that he taught her “to listen to marble.” Another recalled that his principal exercise was to make them sit still for one hour, observing ripples. Even his detractors found it difficult to remain indifferent.

The musician Paul de La Grive, whose successes in 1893 were surpassed only by his debts, claimed that the Concerto contained “no melody, but a perpetual decision to remember one.” The remark was printed, ignored, and resurrected last week by a critic of *Le Figaro des Arts*, who, misreading the century, called it “the first Impressionist opera.”

Thus history arranges itself in concentric absurdities. The Comte, who heard only the ornamental splashing of his birds, becomes an ancestor of Debussy; the pond becomes a cathedral; France becomes her reflection. We applaud what leaks.

I never met him—not properly. Once, in 1897, a letter arrived at my grandfather’s house in the Marais, addressed, curiously, to “My future biographer, whoever you are.” It contained nothing but a pressed water-lily and an unsigned statement: “Truth is a pond; disturbance is destiny.” I have, of course, spent most of my life misunderstanding it.

He was spotted sometimes at the Bois, wearing an eighteenth-century hat too fine for the century that adopted him. Rumour claimed he still composed, not on paper but directly upon the surface of a silver bowl. A diplomat’s wife maintained that when he dipped his finger into his wineglass, invisible notes rose from it like swans. She was not considered reliable. Neither, alas, am I.

In 1794, when heads rolled and music faltered, the Comte—retired to his estate at Mallard-sur-Loire—continued to float upon his personal revolution: a leisurely pursuit of decorative misprision. He missed the Republic, the Empire, the Restoration, and nearly the nineteenth century entire, as others might miss a train. When he re-emerged, very briefly, under the Directory to petition for the return of some

fountains, the clerk wrote “Dead according to record, inconveniently alive in person.”

Le Moniteur later published an unsigned squib: “The Comte de Canardelle lives as the only Frenchman who retired from history before it began.” It was, I think, meant kindly.

Now he is dead—officially this time—having outlasted the furniture that outlasted the monarchy. His final address was a pension in the Rue des Martyrs, where a servant reports that each morning he requested the newspaper to confirm that revolutions remained in fashion.

His only visitor was a music student who mistook him for a relative of Rameau.

The body, when discovered, lay surrounded by small glass cups filled with rainwater, in each of which a candle still burned. The police inventory described them as “probable devotional apparatuses.” I prefer to call them rehearsals.

The funeral, if held, remains undated. In Paris this week, fashion houses have unveiled a new shade of grey—a sort of vapoured silver—which, according to *La Mode du Soir*, is to be marketed as *gris Canardelle*. Thus the Comte returns, through commerce, to the only eternity that ever truly existed: the flattering glare of taste.

Re-examining my notes, I recognise several chronological impossibilities. The Comte’s correspondence, I now realise, predates the postal system. Versailles did not employ an *Intendant des Jardins Aquatiques* until 1798. And yet, none of this strikes me as disproof. On the contrary, falsity here serves verification, as mirrors serve movement.

Even his Concerto—if it ever sounded at all—may well have been a silence misconstrued as melody. I prefer this version. It requires the least violence to the heart and the most generosity to error. The perfection of an arrangement, after all, lies not in its truth but in its tone.

The Comte, who built music out of water, has evaporated neatly. Paris, for once, applauds with genuine brevity. And I, a mere gentleman among his gentlemen, offer this correction to the record:

History, like the duck, leaves no footprints in deep water.

Chapter 4: Blue Silk and Broken Clocks

The Prince of Wales arrived like a wrong note invented on purpose. Paris caught him mid-chord—bell towers bending to listen, taxis pausing like dancers mid-spin. I followed, naturally (I always do, like an unresolved sequence), luggage full of silk handkerchiefs and weak promises. He kissed the air, swore it tasted of gin and irresponsibility. I

agreed. The city purred and the Seine reflected too many versions of us at once.

At Le Temple Décadent—all mirrors and migraine lighting—the maître d' greeted us as if we were both notorious and late to our own scandal. "Gentlemen," he whispered, low as a bassline, "tonight the cuisine believes in forgiveness." Oysters arrived on ice, pearls pretending to be responsibility. The Prince demanded music, I demanded praise, and the candles flickered to some rhythm borrowed from Harlem. Someone said Ronsard's ghost had been seen drinking vermouth. I toasted him. (He didn't reply—dead men rarely do, though the mirrors nodded politely.)

Three violins entered in a dissonant key. A dancer appeared who refused to face the audience—perhaps a metaphor for England. I thought of writing a manifesto on the erotic advantages of embarrassment. The Prince interrupted to ask if I believed in glory. I said no, but I rented it for special occasions.

Afternoons in that week stretched like lazy trumpet solos—too many bars, not enough breath. We breakfasted beside the Seine, where pigeons strutted like critics. He confessed his new allergy: respectability. (The diagnosis was terminal.) I confessed mine: sincerity, unless heavily diluted. We drank instead of disagreeing. Champagne—of course. Always champagne, that glittering heresy.

Midweek, we were abducted by an American sculptor in denim overalls who insisted on being called "Edna of the Future." Her studio looked as if Europe had exploded and been rebuilt by angels working on commission. The Prince posed among naked statues and declared, "I am democracy's hallucination." I applauded—it was too perfect an error to correct. Someone began to shout about Freud, though I think it was only a faulty phonograph.

We drove through Montparnasse in a violet car that sounded like moral decline. The hats that afternoon were sublime—a velvet sail on my head, a sequined meteor on his. The streets applauded us, though the applause may have come from our own reflections. Paris has so many windows it can convince even fools of their importance.

Evenings belong to allegation. At Le Boeuf sur le Toit, the piano moaned, the clarinet sneered, the floor blurred. I danced with a painter who claimed Spanish by destiny and desire by profession. He spoke in colours only visible under dim light and audacity. The Prince watched from the bar, dispensing aristocratic endorsements to whoever looked amused enough to deserve one. "This," he announced, "is manners decomposing with style." (Which, I argued, was the very definition of civilisation.)

Thursday: rain as percussion. The gardens smelled of wet portraits and unspoken confessions. The Prince and I exchanged umbrellas while debating whether boredom was an inherited disease. He believed it to be divine punishment; I, hereditary charm. A count, newly poor and extravagantly perfumed, declared that love's true language was accountancy. We ignored him. The violinist from the first night sauntered by with my cigarette case—still kissed, now engraved with reputation.

By Friday, the newspapers called us “unavailable to reason.” We liked that—it had rhythm. Perfume poured from balconies; even the air leaned forward for gossip. A journalist asked what we represented. The Prince said, “Unresolved chords.” I added, “And tips generously.” We fled before she could print either remark.

Saturday glittered. Every costume an argument, every mask an apology's refusal. At Chez Josephine, gender collapsed spectacularly. I became a widow—my husband invented for the occasion, beautifully dead. The Prince, disguised as a scandalous abbot, offered salvation to anyone within arm's reach. He performed beatitudes in syncopation. A clarinet solo broke into laughter. I remembered that I once took sin seriously; it blushed and left the room.

Time trickled wrong after midnight. One dancer claimed the moon was a mirror dropped by a faithless god; another swore we'd been seen in a mural already painted. None of it mattered. When pleasure turns metaphysical, it's already too late for philosophy.

At some indecent hour, the Prince whispered, “Do you think anyone will believe a word of this?” I said, “God forbid.” And he laughed—not like a man, but like an overture escaping. The sound hung there, wilder than truth and twice as elegant.

Sunday recovered us none. Bells rang in ironic apology. Debts re-emerged from their disguises. The Prince sailed for Calais with one priest's robe and three broken glasses. I stayed, unable to conclude. (I've always loved the middle of stories; endings require restraint and I am famously allergic.)

So I walked Paris alone. Boulevards hummed in C major; the cafés tuned themselves to regret. A newsboy shouted that the Duke of Something-or-Other had renounced propriety. I wished him joy. At Le Temple Décadent once more, the mirrors stared me down for arriving without accompaniment. The champagne trembled; I did not.

I told the waiter to leave the bottle. “The Prince?” he asked. “Gone,” I said, “but the echo pays double.”

And Paris—faithless, generous, ridiculous Paris—leaned forward, like a band ready for one last chorus, waiting, waiting, for me to forget restraint and strike the wrong note again.

On the So-Called Homogenised Deviation in Male Adults

A Reflexion in Provisional Morphodynamique

I have, these last evenings, re-read the article in the Bulletin Continental de Psychognosie—that ever-evaporating document of Les Cahiers de Morphodynamique Intérieure et d'Analyse Symbolophysique—not for its argument (it resists argument the way perfume resists geometry), but for its tone: an unbroken vowel of speculation suspended between credulity and evidence. The author, Delacamp or Delachamp or an echo of both, writes as if translating directly from music into diagnosis. Each paragraph hums faintly, as though the paper had absorbed a nervous hum from his fingertips.

They speak of *déviatiion homogène chez l'adulte mâle*—a phrase that vibrates even when silent. It proposes, if I follow through the fog correctly, that the male temperament, once separated from its own admiration, folds inward until the layers merge. Desire, homogenised, no longer alternates between pursuit and flight; it circulates. *Vir dilatatus in sua similitudine*, to adapt Delacamp's regrettable Latin. A perverse democracy, an erotic physics of recurrence.

I compare this, idly, with Krafft-Ebbing: that encyclopaedist of whisper and whip, who tallied pleasure like casualties in a moral war. His specimens lived in numbered shadows, faithful to their footnotes. Hirschfeld, dear procedural Hirschfeld, attempted salvation through paperwork—the notion that confession, properly notarised, could become liberation. Both, though admirable in their system, mistook cadence for constraint.

But Les Cahiers—ah, they inhale where other treatises exhale. They trace libido as one might trace a melody in water. Their terminology, indecipherable and ravishing, carries the sober delirium of laboratory Surrealism: *phénomènes psychoïdes, isomorphie du geste intérieur, courbe d'empathie inconsciente*. Each phrase a string trembled by thought alone.

Yesterday, I tested one of their procedures—the celebrated *expérience du miroir différé*. The subject gazes into an antique mercury surface until the reflected eyes begin to mispronounce recognition. At that instant, says Delacamp, the psyche performs “une arabesque d'involution.” I confirm: a slow convulsion of identity, flawless, shapeless. The subject smiled, faintly, as if forgiven by someone invisible. I noted his pulse: *allegro*. My own, uncertain but attentive, followed.

The term “homogenisation,” borrowed, it seems, from dairy enchantments, functions here as theology. It argues that every eccentricity once liquefied into social light produces calm—no more divisions, only radiant texture. Spiritus lacteus, if one wished to flatter science. Yet I warn myself (too late): anything successfully blended loses aroma. To desire homogeneously is to adore in whisper. Still, the notion seduces me—an equilibrium without virtue.

The Cahiers include diagrams drawn in purple inks, their spirals petulant as signatures of distant comets. Caption: Morphé du Trouble Fantasmatique (Cas n°13). They correspond to nothing but movement; I prefer them to the patient notes they obscure. Indeed, I have begun illustrating my own consultations thus: arabesques instead of adjectives, tempo markings in lieu of interpretation. My students regard this as satire. I assure them it is taxonomy of another order.

I remember a line from the review’s editorial: “La déviation s’écoute; elle ne se lit pas.” Deviation must be heard, not read. Therein lies the genius of bad science: its inability to remain silent. Which reminds me of a summer evening when Hirschfeld’s assistant confessed, over vermouth, that every classification is an instrument awaiting misuse. He was right, although he died before I could plagiarise him thoroughly.

And yet, what splendour in error! Delacamp writes that “homogenised desire creates the illusion of moral temperature.” How precise. Warmth mistaken for ethics—that, I think, is civilisation’s favourite confusion. I, too, have mistaken fever for virtue. My data glows indecently where proof should rest.

Reading Les Cahiers gives one the sensation of being gently misdiagnosed. Its style curves around comprehension like silk around a wound: protective, decorative, unnecessary. Terms slide against each other until meaning becomes rhythm. Between psychognosie and psychoïde there opens a corridor of resonance—thought dissolving into hum, hum into doctrine. The text breathes; I inhale; I call the result scholarship.

When they describe their “subjects,” I suspect they mean us—the readers, the diagnosticians. Their figures of inverted men and harmonised excitations behave suspiciously like metaphors of attention. Homo observans, species auto-somnambuli. I detect no difference between the deviant and the observer except the privilege of notation.

Krafft-Ebbing sought certainty through pornographic Latin; Hirschfeld through bureaucracy’s caress. Delacamp, more modern, dissolves both into hallucination. He replaces pathology with orchestration. Each deviation becomes a note reprised in another body: lust circularis. He writes, “Lorsque deux pulsions se regardent, elles

deviennent musique.” When two impulses behold one another, they become music. I am entirely unfit to contradict him.

During a Sunday lecture, I attempted to expound this to my students. They requested definitions. I offered them orchestrations of vowels. “Professor,” one protested, “we are psychologists, not composers.” I assured him the mistake was already shared.

Late at night I annotated my own notes: *La méthode scientifique n'existe que dans la mesure où elle se trompe en prose harmonique. Science survives only by erring melodically. Somewhere in the lamplight, my handwriting became decorative to the point of infidelity. I suspect the unconscious intervened with superior taste.*

Homogenised deviation, then—or let us say the illusion that difference blends into coherence—is less discovery than style. It is a fugue in two bodies and one pretext. Observe how language repeats itself here, returning to an axis already blurred: Krafft-Ebbing offstage muttering his Latin, Hirschfeld gently alphabetising disobedience, Delacamp evaporating into tempo, and I, caught between, pretending observation sustains me.

The night, meanwhile, reproduces our pattern. Each streetlamp hums on its own frequency, yet together—they shimmer into unanimity. The city, too, homogenises, swaying to a rhythm of classified ecstasies. Somewhere near Montparnasse, a café pianist rehearses misinterpretation in E-flat. Were I honest, I would rename my discipline *chorégraphie mentale avec annotations impropres*.

I resist clarity not from arrogance (though arrogance is useful) but from fidelity to what the mind desires most—continuation. There is no conclusion, only modulation. Delacamp ends his paper with the phrase “à suivre en soi.” I obey him: I continue in myself. The essay expands, amoebal, lucid, unending—each conjecture breeding another through harmonic imitation. The phenomenon becomes verb, the analyst instrument, the reader accomplice.

Perhaps, when all errors are harmonised beyond recognition, we shall achieve that supreme form of order: the silence that still vibrates.

“The House of Air and Powder”

Review by Viola Vorpel, Paris, 1925

It was called *Les Femmes de l'Esprit Perdu*, though the lost spirit was only sold by the gram. The opera lasted three hours, though some said it began weeks ago in the cafés, where the same women sat rehearsing the part of being seen. Its composer, Jules Chrétien-Boullain,

claims he wrote it for an “age of exquisite suffocation.” I find that precise. Suffocation requires discipline.

The curtain opened on a salon much like every Paris apartment I have entered this season. Velvet drawn too tightly. Candles rehearsing their deaths. The heroines entered without sound, as if already aware that music would misrepresent them. They spoke instead. The orchestra imitated speech back at them, politely, like servants correcting inflection. It was unbearable, and therefore true.

The plot: women of intellect arrive from every radiant border—Madrid, Cairo, Moscow, Chelsea—each certain Paris will refine her disorder. They meet in a mirrored house and agree to rewrite the *Encyclopédie* for modern use, beginning with the word pleasure. They never advance beyond the letter p. By Act II they are dosing one another with powdered courage. They spill it neatly, apologise precisely, and resume.

I saw ‘reviewers’ attempting understanding through the usual mechanical gestures. Pens aligning themselves like bayonets to their programmes. One of them dropped his pencil; no one retrieved it, though six women bent slightly forward as if to. It was the opera’s finest choreography.

There is a rule I have noticed here: each new philosophy begins in the morning and fails by dinner. Paris enforces this by its architecture; nowhere to sit quietly between times. One either debates or dresses. The heroines, like the city, cannot bear the untheatrical hour. Each act dated itself—“Tuesday, after the rain”—but the same Tuesday repeated until it ceased to be temporal and became etiquette.

They sang around a table set for twelve—cups, spoons, absinthe bottles disguised as sugar decanters. One heroine toyed with a teaspoon and whispered, “Truth must dissolve,” and immediately corrected herself: “In company.” I suspect she did not mean sugar.

Meanwhile, a contralto in black gloves recited an invented tract: “The body is an organ of discourse. The mind a polite guest until dismissed.” The harmony arrived a bar late, as though etiquette itself were catching up.

When the soprano—“the English one,” inevitably—took her aria, she repeated a single sentence: “You must wind the clock before it stops on you.” A dull domestic line, useful in houses with indifferent servants. Only after Act III did I notice the line had reversed. The heroines were the clocks, wound by the unseen hands of the house. To forget that is to mistake the hour for your own.

Outside the theatre, Rue de Londres smelt faintly of ether. People call it weather. In salons they call it philosophy. I met the composer at intermission—nervous, handsome, unsalvageable. He said he had

abstained from all substances during composition, “except applause.” His wife corrected him: “And ashtrays.” Very fine distinction, that. I admire accuracy even where it ruins health. He asked if I “related personally” to the opera. I replied I related architecturally.

After the second intermission, the décor changed subtly—chairs reversed, door frames exchanged—so that the audience could not tell whether they had returned to their seats or their memories. The servants entered then, black as punctuation, to rearrange the air. No music marked the change. One carried a basin of water and placed it centre stage, never explained, never used. She looked at it once, at the audience once, and left. It became the most reliable object in the opera.

It would be inelegant to speak of the actual drug, though everyone does. They call it “the study,” “the candle’s breath,” “the aristocrat’s friend.” Through it, the heroines found perfect comprehension of themselves—followed by disinterest, followed by postmortems disguised as soirées. I am told genius, like scent, clings most tightly just before it fades.

Half my acquaintances now live half their lives reclining. They call it conversation, though most occurs internally. One American writer—I forget her name, deliberately—declares the city itself addicted to interior monologue. She says all Paris breathes like a single mind inhaling its reflection. Her essays, I note, are best read while half awake.

At supper afterwards, the talk grew slow, as though language itself were subject to morphine. I counted five women wearing veils though no religion required it. One fainted elegantly when the waiter took her coat. The others applauded—it is Parisian to applaud what might otherwise require help.

The opera’s third act began wordlessly—the servants singing under the heroines’ silence. It was the same melody inverted, like sheets turned inside out for laundering. The critic beside me murmured, “Purity reversed is hygiene.” A mistaken idea, but a pleasing one. The heroines, meanwhile, rearranged their furniture, attempting to find a geometry in which understanding might still occur. When they failed, they wrote letters to their husbands, apologising for the inconvenience of intellect. The orchestra played as if through gauze, all flutes and denial.

In the end (though it began), each woman stepped into her own narrative as if retrieving a lost umbrella. The mirrors lifted to reveal the audience. We looked back correctly, as decorum requires. Then the curtain fell half an inch short and trembled indefinitely.

I’m told the production will tour London if censorship can be persuaded that abstraction is safe. It isn’t. Its worst effect is that it might teach a duchess what dependency feels like. Or a maid what

intellect looks like when unattended. Every house has its thresholds of thought, beyond which courtesy fails.

This morning, over tea, I found white dust on the saucer of a guest. She explained it away as sugar. I didn't correct her. The windows were open, the Seine unbearably articulate. Rain softened the pavements until they shone like reasoning itself—plausible, fragile, infinite.

Paris trembles in every surface that tries to reflect it. The heroines of the opera were right, in essence, though they phrased it badly: the mind is not lost; it is absorbed. What was intellect becomes temperature, posture, scent, proof of refinement continued past meaning.

And still, somewhere in a theatre, the servant carries her basin. She does not spill it, and we are all made safe by her silence.

Chapter III

Of the New Radiance (Paris, 1929)

One can hardly walk the boulevards this year without being blinded. Everything gleams. The lamps along the rue de Rivoli, the heels of the women who no longer walk but shimmer, the storefronts dressed in chromium—a madness of polish! Paris has grown so bright that even the Seine reflects itself twice: once in water, once in possibility. I overheard a Canadian painter in Montparnasse say that reflections are a moral category now. He was absolutely right, though I'm not sure what he meant.

When I rise, the windows already look like music. The city glistens in D Major, though the mornings sometimes modulate into F when it rains. My neighbour Madame Fournier, who collects impressions the way others collect postage stamps, says this is the sound of progress. "Enfin," she sighs, "we have survived long enough to deserve a perfect chord."

The war, of course, our great stylistic error, has left everyone craving embellishment. Even the widows polish their mourning brooches to a shine. We are through with trench colours. Life is lacquered now.

I was at the Théâtre des Variétés last week, attending what was advertised as a "mechanical ballet." The programme insisted it had nothing to do with Futurism, which naturally meant it did. Dancers moved as if they had joints at unexpected places: knees in their elbows, hearts in their necks. A critic behind me, breathless with epiphany, proclaimed, "This is the rhythm of reconstruction!" What reconstruction, I wonder. Nothing seems broken except consistency.

There is an American seated beside me who confides he has invented a box that can remember voices. He cannot demonstrate it because it

“requires electricity of the American sort,” but he has drawn several diagrams on his napkin which look, to my eye, suspiciously like squares attempting to dance. He assures me that soon we shall speak to walls. I tell him I already do.

At the Café de Flore one hears only of “the new spirit.” A poet named Jules Tatin declares between cognac and despair that poetry is nearly extinct but has reincarnated as perfume. He claims Chanel No. 5 contains more syntax than Racine. I tried it once upon my wrist; the result was grammatical intoxication.

The painters too are optimistic, though optimism has taken peculiar shapes. Last Tuesday at Gertrude’s salon, a young man exhibited an entirely white canvas, titled *Hope Seen from an Airplane*. Beneath the varnish one could detect faint brushstrokes forming what might have been the word “tomorrow.” A banker’s wife wept before it. “It is exactly as my husband sees our marriage,” she confessed—“en blanc, in altitude.” I congratulated her on her foresight.

I have decided that Paris itself is painting. Or conducting, perhaps. There are moments, around dusk, when the city wavers between orchestra and cathedral. The taxis purr in the key of industry; the lovers on the bridges exchange harmonic sighs. Even the beggars, poor anachronisms from before the prosperity, arrange themselves tonally. I dropped one of them a coin yesterday, and he responded with a perfect glissando of gratitude.

Some say France is tired of relevance. Others say relevance has finally grown up and found a proper wardrobe. I cannot tell. Everywhere, art debates with itself. The theatre people have taken to removing dialogue altogether. “Words,” says the director of the *Comédie Impromptue*, “belong to governments.” He regards speech as bourgeois clutter and has replaced conversation with the lighting technician’s cough, precisely timed. The performance ends when the audience realises it has begun.

There is talk of “cinematograph philosophy.” They claim the camera, that small mechanical confessor, will emancipate the human soul from sequence. I attended a screening of *Un Dimanche Éternel*, a film which contains no Sunday and never quite begins. One scene—perhaps every scene—shows an actress peeling an orange for eight minutes. The critics applauded its “temporal mercy.” I left before she reached the pith but felt spiritually improved, as if time had forgiven me.

I sometimes dream that the future will resemble this: enormous halls lined with mirrors, each reflecting an image that has not yet been painted. We shall converse not in language, but in reprises of sensation. The boundaries between thinking and touching will merge like

overlapping melodies. Already the grammarians despair. A student told me this week that adjectives are obsolete; light does the describing now.

The papers report that aviation has made peace fashionable. Young men with goggles are the latest aesthetes. Last month they inaugurated the “Salon de l’Air” where, instead of landscapes, one exhibits altitudes. A certain Captain Dupont has patented a portable horizon. He promises it will fit in a valise. I wonder if this explains the current mania for distant lovers—everyone writes to someone they cannot possibly see. Distance, like absinthe, flatters sincerity.

What liberty it must be to live in 1929! The presidents seem quite decorative, the generals ceremonial, the priests exhausted. Morality has turned impressionist again, all diffuse colour and blurred borders. Even sin feels curatorial. In Montmartre the new burlesques quote Saint Augustine (“Love—and adjust your lighting accordingly”) though I suspect he never said that. Still, no one objects. We have discovered that history behaves better when misquoted.

Everywhere, women are restless in the best way. They wear their independence as gleefully as rouge; even marriage seems a social experiment rather than a duty. Yvette, an acquaintance of improbable modernity, insists that freedom tastes of gin and steel. She has just bought a motorcar and drives it daily around the Place de la Concorde until dizzy. “I am testing the centrifugal properties of female will,” she says. I can’t help loving her for the hypothesis alone.

Meanwhile, the critics in the cafés debate whether art should continue to represent or begin to radiate. One faction demands form; the other insists on flair. I argue (politely, though with genius) that meaning itself is now decorative, a kind of intellectual ribboning. We no longer need to say anything—we merely shimmer, and that suffices.

The newspapers predict forty years of peace. Even the pessimists smile indulgently, as if to say, yes, how tedious war was. There is an air of collective rehearsal, like a nation preparing for a performance it has already mastered. Architects design schools shaped like musical notes; engineers calculate the weight of sunshine; politicians unveil programmes for the poetic rehabilitation of factories.

Europe, they whisper, has learnt her lesson at last. But if peace is a composition, we are all improvising the melody before the score is written. Perhaps that explains the extraordinary tempo of daily existence—everyone rushing to illustrate serenity.

Last night I dined alone—though the restaurant was too full for solitude to survive. The chandeliers seemed to shed not light but applause. A violinist played something by Ravel (or was it Ravel imitating himself?). My glass of wine tasted like modernity distilled.

Across the room an Englishman declaimed, “There shall be no more melancholy in France!” and the waiters cheered.

I made a brief note in my sketchbook: Melancholy temporarily suspended pending further notice. It will make an excellent title for something, though I’m not sure what.

At midnight, walking home, I caught the reflection of the moon in a puddle and mistook it for invention. I congratulated myself on having conceived of the sky anew.

Paris applauded. Or perhaps it was only the wind rehearsing an encore.



ENCORE

The Fall that Began at the Beginning

From The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles, 1946

It was in the middle of the beginning, or perhaps the other way around, that I bought the estate. It had once belonged to a Marquis, though “belonged” is too possessive a word for a property that seemed to unhouse its owners. The pigeons had returned before the people did. The house had the shape of an apology—all arches and quiet sighs—but its corridors could hum when the wind came from the hill. Naturally, I moved in at once.

My man, Blandy, swore the place was haunted by the century itself. “Which one?” I asked. He refused to specify; it would, he said, spoil the surprise.

From the first afternoon, the garden misbehaved beautifully. Roses lifted their heads before the sun allowed it, and one of the apple trees, being philosophically inclined, began dropping fruit upwards. I applauded it for the innovation and made a note in my ledger: gravity may yet be persuaded by charm alone.

Time on the estate was courteous but inconsistent. The mornings tended to arrive before their dialogues were written; evenings came rehearsed but skipped their cues. I myself became temporarily irregular. One night I dreamt an entire century and woke to find my pocket watch applauding the effort by ticking in waltz time.

There was a lake—more or less—shaped like an ear turned toward heaven. When I threw pebbles, it answered in metaphors. “You again,” it would say, “always mistaking the surface for the event.” Once, while shaving beside it, I saw my reflection betray me by smiling earlier than I did. That is when I realised one must never rush into honesty; mirrors, like people, prefer to edit their truths.

A friend—the Comtesse de l’Écho, who claimed to have survived both wars simply by altering her adjectives—visited and told me the estate reminded her of “the end of enchantment, but in rehearsal.” I took that as a compliment and asked her to stay a week. She lingered for three years, insisting daily that she would depart “once the moment arrives.” The moment never did.

The fall, yes—for it is a fairy story, and every fairy story needs one—had taken place before my birth, or perhaps during lunch. A charming inconvenience, really. The locals mentioned it rarely, except when praising the harvest, as though ruin were actually an agricultural technique. They said, “Before the Fall, everything was immortal; afterwards, only the onions improved.”

I tried to trace the event. In the library (which had its own weather), I found documents referring to the “Provisional Descent” of 18-something-imaginary. Margins full of notes by someone who wrote like a mirror thinking backwards. Their conclusion: The Fall persists as a rhythm, not an event. I closed the book, trembling with agreement.

Each evening, when the air smelled of punctuation, I would walk the grounds and feel the slope of time tilting beneath my boots. The crickets chattered in counterpoint to the stars. Once, I caught one speaking in verse:

The leaf began before the stem,
The fruit remade its root;
We climb toward where the branch has been,
And fall that we may suit.

I thanked it sincerely and carried on, pretending I had understood.

Letters arrived in strange tenses. Some were from friends who had not yet met me, congratulating me on decisions I had not made. Others came from past versions of myself, always excessively polite, reminding me to avoid repeating certain gestures that were clearly irresistible. One dispatch from 1932 cautioned me never to trust Wednesdays; another, dated 1953, included a recipe for perpetual astonishment.

I began to suspect that chronology was not declining but looping—a minuet of cause and effect. I told Blandy as much; he yawned and said time was merely the countryside’s way of keeping gossip warm.

Around midsummer, a clockmaker passed through, some itinerant philosopher of mechanism. He stayed to repair the hall’s great pendulum, which had begun swinging sideways. After days of tinkering, he declared proudly: “It is fixed, monsieur! It measures expectation instead of duration.” I thanked him lavishly but noticed that from that moment the evenings became longer the more eagerly I awaited them.

The Comtesse blamed the air. “Ever since the fall,” she murmured, “our patience has been secretly circular.” Then she fell asleep in a chair and remained asleep through several seasons. When she awoke, she

asked for breakfast and news of the Republic; I told her both were slightly overcooked.

A local poet, Éloi les Brumes, wrote a ballad about the estate called “Journeys Without Itineraries.” It enjoyed a modest scandal because no stanza repeated the same vowels twice. At its premiere, he explained to the villagers that rhyme was elitist because it assumed symmetry. The festival committee expelled him mid-sentence but later awarded him a medal for “conceptual agriculture.”

When I complimented him on his originality, he looked confused. “But monsieur,” he replied, “I only transcribed the wind.”

At that moment, the wind blushed—or maybe that was the sunset rehearsing its entrance.

Autumn began in spring; then spring began again, a little embarrassed. The estate refused to decide which it preferred. I learned to accept the blur. Certain trees bore fruit labelled simply perhaps. I tasted one and discovered the flavour of postponement: sweet, remote, oddly reassuring.

The villagers grew fond of visiting my lands, claiming the air here smelled of forgotten beginnings. Children came to feed crumbs to the feathery shadows that followed them, while old men debated whether paradise was lost, or merely misplaced under the hedge.

By then I had abandoned my ledger. Truth, I decided, was more comfortable when evenly lit but slightly rearranged. I began to curate my memories, polishing them like family silver—not to deceive anyone, but to preserve their glint.

When a priest once came to bless the manor, the house exhaled in satisfaction and promptly put itself to sleep. I apologised to the priest, who admitted he had not been ordained since 1874 but had “kept the gesture out of sentiment.” We shook hands out of sequence, a most gratifying arrangement.

One winter that arrived late (and left early, from pride), I sat by the fire attempting to compose an editorial on the nature of the Fall for my private journal. I wanted to describe it precisely, to protect it by arranging it, as one might fold the wings of a luminous insect before placing it in amber.

Yet whenever I wrote the word “beginning,” the ink dried into the shape of an ending. And when I tried “ending,” the letters drifted off the page, seeking elsewhere to start.

So I abandoned chronological integrity altogether. Instead, I invited the story to waltz with itself—round and round, feeling no need for gravity. It obliged.

On certain nights, when the moon hummed softly against the orchard walls, I sensed that everything had already happened but remained undecided about its sequence. The lake shimmered in applause. Time bowed graciously, accepting our confusion as devotion.

And though each dawn repeated itself with slightly improved manners, I realised—gently, absurdly—that the fall we feared had already occurred, before any of us had names for loss or recovery. We were its graceful residue, its delayed beginning.

So I continue in this circular tranquillity, my pen tracing loops upon loops. When the ink runs out, I dip the nib into memory, which works nearly as well.

I am not deceived. I am merely well-arranged.