

Aphrodite



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One day, Denys brought him three courtesans and told him to choose the one who pleased him most. Aristippos kept all three, saying in excuse that Paris had been none the happier by preferring one woman above all others. Afterwards, he conducted the girls to his door and dismissed them; with so much ease could he either indulge in love or cure himself of it.

*DIOGENES LAERTIUS,
(Life of Aristippos).*

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The erudite Prodicos of Ceos, who flourished toward the end of the first century before our era, is the author of the celebrated apologue which St. Basil recommended to Christian meditation: "Herakles between virtue and voluptuousness." We know that Herakles decided for the first, and was thus enabled to accomplish a certain number of great crimes against the Hinds, the Amazons, the Golden Apples and the Giants. If Prodicos had limited himself to that, he would have written only a fable of readily comprehended symbolism, but he was a clever philosopher and his repertory of tales, "The Hours," which was divided into three parts, presented the moral truths under their three different aspects which correspond to the three ages of life. For little children he was pleased to propose as an example the austere choice of Herakles; to youths he doubtless related the voluptuous choice of Paris; and I imagine that, to ripe men, he said nearly this:

"Odysseus was wandering in the chase one day, at the foot of the mountains of Delphi, when he met on his path two virgins who held each other by the hand. The one had hair of violets, transparent eyes, and grave lips; she said to him: 'I am Arete.' The other had softly tinted eyelids, delicate hands and tender breasts; she said to him: 'I am Tryphe.' And they said together: 'Choose between us.' But the subtle Odysseus responded wisely: 'How could I choose—you are inseparable. The eyes which have seen you pass—one without the other—have glimpsed but a sterile shadow. Just as sincere virtue does not deprive itself of the eternal joys which voluptuousness brings to it, so luxury would go ill without a certain grandeur of soul. I will follow you both. Show me the way.' As he finished, the two visions melted together and Odysseus knew that he had spoken with the great goddess Aphrodite."

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The feminine personage who occupies the principal place in the romance whose pages you are about to turn, is an antique courtesan; but be reassured: she will not convert herself.

She will be loved neither by a monk, a prophet, nor a god. In present-day literature, this is an originality.

Rather she will be a courtesan, with all the frankness, the ardor and the pride of every human being who has a vocation and who holds in society a freely chosen place; she will aspire to raise herself to the highest point; she will not even imagine a need for excuse or mystery in her life. And this requires explanation.

Up to this day, the modern writers who have addressed themselves to a public free from the prejudices of young girls and school boys have employed a laborious stratagem whose hypocrisy displeases me: "I have depicted voluptuousness as it is," they say, "in order to exalt virtue."

But I, at the beginning of a romance whose intrigue develops at Alexandria, refuse absolutely to commit this anachronism.

Love, with all its consequences, was, for the ancient Greeks, the sentiment most virtuous and most fecund in grandeurs. They did not attach to it those ideas of shamelessness and immodesty which Israelite tradition, along with the Christian doctrine, has handed down to us. Herodotos (1.10) says to us, quite naturally:—"Among some barbarous races it is considered disgraceful to appear naked." When the Greeks or the Latins wished to insult a man who frequented "daughters of love," they called him «μοῖχος» or Moechus, which merely signifies "adulterer." On the other hand, a man and a woman who, being free from other bonds, united themselves, even though this were in public and whatever their youth might be, were considered as injuring no one and were left at liberty.

One sees that the life of the ancients could not be judged after the moral ideas which come to us at the present time from Geneva.

As for me, I have written this book with the simplicity an Athenian would have brought to a relation of the same adventures. And I hope that it will be read in the same spirit.

Judging the ancient Greeks by the ideas actually received, *not* one exact translation of their greatest writers could be left in the hands of a young student. If M. Mounet-Sully should play his rôle of *Œdipos* without cuts, the police would suspend the representation. If M. Leconte de Lisle had not prudently expurgated *Théocritos*, his version would have been suppressed the same day it was put on sale.

One considers Aristophanes exceptional? Yet we possess important fragments of fourteen hundred and forty comedies, due to one hundred and thirty-two other Greek poets, some of whom, such as Alexis, Philetos, Strattis, Eubolos and Cratinos, have left us admirable verse, and no one has yet dared translate this shameless and sublime collection.

One quotes always, for the purpose of defending Greek customs, the teachings of some philosophers who condemned the sexual pleasures. There is confusion here. Those scattered moralists reprov'd all excesses

of the senses indiscriminately, without the existence, for them, of a difference between the debauch of the bed and that of the table.

He who, today, at a restaurant in Paris, orders with impunity a six-louis dinner for himself alone, would have been judged by them as guilty and no less so than another who would give a too intimate assignation in the middle of the street, being for that condemned by the existing laws to a year of prison. Moreover, these austere philosophers were generally regarded by antique society as abnormal and dangerous madmen; they were mocked on the stage, treated with blows in the streets, seized by tyrants to serve as court buffoons and exiled by free citizens who judged them unworthy of submitting to capital punishment.

It is then by a conscious and voluntary deceit that modern educators from the Renaissance to the present time have represented the antique moral system as the inspiration of their narrow virtues. If this moral system were great—if it merited indeed to be taken for a model and to be obeyed—it is precisely because no system has better known how to distinguish the just from the unjust according to a criterion of beauty: to proclaim the right of every man to seek individual happiness within the limits set by the rights of others and to declare that there is nothing under the sun more sacred than physical love—nothing more beautiful than the human body.

Such was the morality of the people who built the Acropolis; and if I add that it has remained that of all great minds, I will but state the value of a common-place, so well is it proven that the superior intelligences of artists, writers, warriors or statesmen have never held its majestic tolerance to be illicit. Aristotle began life by dissipating his patrimony in the company of debauched women; Sappho gave her name to a special vice; Cæsar was the *moechus calvas*:—nor can we imagine Racine avoiding girls of the theater and Napoleon practicing abstinence. The romances of Mirabeau, the Greek verses of Chemier, the correspondence of Diderot and the minor works of Montesquieu equal in boldness even the writings of Catullus. And, of all French authors the most austere, the most pious, the most laborious—Buffon—does one wish to know by what maxim he guides his counsel of sentimental intrigues? "Love! Why dost thou form the happy state of all beings and the misfortune of man?—It is because, in this passion, *only the physical* is good, and because the moral side is worthless."

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Whence comes this? And how does it happen that across the upsetting of antique ideas the great Greek sensuality remains like a ray of light upon the noblest foreheads?

It is because sensuality is a condition, mysterious but necessary and creative, of intellectual development. Those who have not felt to their limit the strongest demands of the flesh, whether as a blessing or as a

curse, are incapable of understanding fully the demands of the spirit. Just as the beauty of the soul illumines the features, so only the virility of the body nourishes the brain. The worst insult that Delacroix could address to men—that which he threw indiscriminately at the railers of Rubens and at the detractors of Ingres—was this terrible word:

"Eunuchs!"

Better yet, it seems that the genius of races, like that of individuals, is, before all, sensual. All the cities which have reigned over the world—Babylon, Alexandria, Athens, Rome, Venice, Paris—have been, by a general law, all the more licentious as they were more powerful, as though their dissoluteness were necessary, to their splendor. The cities where the legislator has attempted to implant artificially narrow and unproductive virtue have been, from the first day, condemned to absolute death. It was thus with Lacedæmonia which, in the midst of the most prodigious flight to which the human soul has ever risen—between Corinth and Alexandria, between Syracuse and Miletus—has left us neither a poet, a painter, a philosopher, an historian nor a scientist; barely the popular renown of a sort of Bobillot who, with his three hundred men, met death in a mountain pass without even gaining a victory. For this reason, after two thousand years measuring the emptiness of this Spartan virtue, we can, according to the exhortation of Renan: "Curse the soil where this mistress of sombre errors existed and insult her because she is no more."

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Shall we ever see a return of the days of Ephesos and Cyrene? Alas! the modern world succumbs under an invasion of ugliness; the civilizations move toward the North and enter into the fog, the cold, the mud. What darkness! People clothed in black circulate through infected streets. Of what are they thinking?—we know not; but our twenty-five years shudder at being thus exiled among old men.

As for those who ever regret that they knew not this earth-intoxicated youth which we call antique life, let them be permitted to live again, through a fecund illusion, in the time when human nudity—the most perfect form, since we believe in the image of God, which we can know or even conceive—could reveal itself through the features of a sacred courtesan before the twenty thousand pilgrims upon the strands of Eleusis; where the most sensual love—the divine love whence we are born—was without stain, without shame and without sin; may they be permitted to forget eighteen barbarous, hypocritical and ugly centuries; to move from the marsh to the spring; to return piously to original beauty; amidst the sound of enchanted flutes to rebuild the Great Temple; and to consecrate enthusiastically to the sanctuaries of the true faith their hearts ever enthralled by the immortal Aphrodite.

Pierre Louys.

BOOK 1

CHAPTER ONE. CHRYSIS

LYING upon her bosom, her elbows forward, her feet apart and her cheek resting in her hand, she pierced little symmetrical holes in the pillow of green linen with a long golden pin.

Since she had awakened, two hours after mid-day, and quite tired from having slept too much, she had remained alone upon the disordered bed, one side covered by a vast flood of hair.

This mass of hair was deep and dazzling, soft as a fur, longer than a wing, supple, numberless, full of life and warmth. It half-covered her back, spread itself under her body and glittered to her very knees in thick and rounded ringlets. The young woman was rolled up in this precious fleece whose golden brown, almost metallic, reflections had caused the women of Alexandria to name her Chrysis.

It was not the smooth hair of the Syrians of the court, nor the tinted hair of the Asiatics, nor the brown and black hair of the daughters of Egypt. It was that of an Aryan race, of the Galilæans from beyond the desert.

Chrysis. She loved that name. The young men who came to see her called her Chrysé like Aphrodite in the verses which they left, with garlands of roses, at her door in the mornings. She did not believe in Aphrodite but she was pleased that they should compare her to the goddess, and she went sometimes to the temple to give her, as to a friend, boxes of perfume and blue veils.

She was born on the banks of the lake of Gennesaret in a country of shadow and of sun, over-run with rose-laurels. Her mother went in the evenings to wait upon the road to Jerusalem for travelers and merchants, in the midst of the pastoral silence. She was a woman much respected in Galilee. The priests did not avoid her door for she was charitable and pious; the lambs of the sacrifice were always paid for by her, the benediction of the Eternal extended over her house. But when she became enceinte, her condition was a matter of gossip—for she lived alone. A man who was celebrated for the gift of prophecy said that she would bear a daughter who would one day wear at her throat "the wealth and the faith of a nation." She did not quite understand how that could be but she named the child Sarah—this is to say *Princess*, in Hebrew. And this silenced the scandals.

Of this Chrysis had never known, the diviner having told her mother how dangerous it is to reveal to people prophecies of which they are the objects. She knew nothing of her future; wherefore she often thought of it. She recalled but little of her childhood and did not like to speak of it. The only very clear sentiment which had remained with her was of the fright and the vexation which were caused every day by the anxious surveillance of her mother who, the hour being come to go forth upon

the road, shut her up in their room for interminable hours. She recalled also the round window through which she saw the waters of the lake, the mist-blue fields, the transparent sky, the light air of the Galilæan country. The house was surrounded by pink flax and tamarisks. Thorny caper bushes raised their green heads at hazard over the fine mist of the blue-grass. Little girls bathed in a limpid brook where red shells could be found under tufts of laurel blossoms. And there were flowers on the water, flowers in all the meadow and great lilies on the mountains. She was twelve years old when she escaped to follow a troop of young riders who were going to Tyre as merchants of ivory and whom she had chanced to meet beside a well. They had adorned their long-tailed horses with many-colored tufts. She recalled well how they carried her away, pale with joy, on their mounts, and how they had halted later for the night—a night so bright that not a star could be seen.

Neither had she forgotten their entry into Tyre, she at the head, on the panniers of a pack horse, holding to the mane by her fists, flaunting her bare calves to the townswomen, proud now to be a woman herself. The same evening they departed for Egypt. She followed the sellers of ivory to the market of Alexandria.

There they left her two months later, in a little white house with a terrace and little columns, with her bronze mirror, soft rugs, new cushions and a handsome Hindu slave-girl, skilled in dressing the hair. As she dwelt in the extreme Eastern Quarter which the young Greeks of Bruchion scorned to visit, she met for a long time only travelers and merchants, as did her mother. She did not see again her passing callers; she could please herself with them and then leave them quickly, before loving them. However, she had inspired lasting passions. Masters of caravans had been known to sell their merchandise at a beggarly price, bankrupting themselves in order to remain near her a few days. With these men's gifts she had bought jewels, bed-cushions, rare perfumes, flowered robes and four slaves.

She had come to understand many foreign tongues and knew tales of all countries. Assyrians had told her the love-story of Douzi and Ishtar, Phœnician tales of Ashtaroth and Adonis. Greek girls of the isles had told her the legend of Iphis, and she knew also the love-story of Atalanta. Finally her Hindu slave-girl, patiently during seven years, had taught her to the last detail the complex art of the priestesses of Palibothra.

For love is an art, like music. It gives emotion of the same order, as delicate, as vibrant, perhaps even more intense; and Chrysis, who knew its every rhythm and subtlety, felt herself, and rightly, a greater artist than Plango herself, who was a musician in the temple.

Seven years she lived thus, without dreaming of a life more happy or more diversified than hers. But a little before her twentieth year, when

from a young girl she became a woman, ambition suddenly awoke in her with maturity.

And one morning as she came out of a deep sleep, two hours past mid-day, quite tired from having slept too much, she turned over on her breast across the bed, her feet apart, rested her cheek in her hand and with a long golden pin pierced with little symmetrical holes her pillow of green linen.

She reflected profoundly.

There were at first four little points which made a square and a point in the middle. Then four other points to make a larger square. Then she tried to make a circle—but that was a little difficult.

Then she pierced points at random and began to call, "Djala! Djala!"

Djala was her Hindu slave whose name was

Djalantachtchandrapchapala, which means: "Changeful-as-the-image-of-the-moon-upon-the-water." Chrysis was too lazy to say the entire name.

The slave entered and stood near the door without quite shutting it.

"Djala, who came yesterday?"

"Dost thou not know?"

"No. I paid no attention to him. I was weary. I was drowsy the whole time, and I remember nothing. Was he pleasing? When did he leave? Early? What was it he brought me? Is it valuable? No—don't tell me. I don't care. What did he say? Has no one come since his departure? Will he return? Give me my bracelets."

The slave brought a casket but Chrysis did not even glance at it and, raising her arms as high as she could, "Ah! Djala," she said, "Ah! Djala! . . . I would like to have extraordinary adventures."

"Everything is extraordinary," said Djala, "or nothing. The days are like each other."

"Not at all. Formerly it was not so. In every country in the world the gods have come down upon earth and have loved mortal women. Ah! in what manner must they be awaited, in what forests must they be sought, they who are a little more than men? What prayers must be said that they come, they who would teach one something or make me forget everything? And if the gods will descend no more, if they are dead or if they are too old, Djala, will I also die without having seen a man who will bring tragic events into my life?"

She turned over on her back and interlaced her fingers.

"If someone should adore me, it seems to me that I would find much pleasure in making him suffer until he died of it. Those who come to me are not worthy of being wept for—and then, it is my fault too—it is I who call them, why should they love me?"

"What bracelet today?"

"I will wear them all. But leave me. I need no one."

"Thou wilt not go out?"

"Yes, I will go out alone—I will dress myself alone. I will not come back. Go!—Go!"

She let one foot drop on the rug and stretched herself erect. Djala had gone out softly.

She walked very slowly through the room, her hands clasped behind her neck, absorbed in the delight of applying her bare feet, moist with perspiration, to the cool pavement. Then she entered her bath. To regard herself through the water gave her great pleasure. She saw herself like a great shell of pearl open upon a rock. Her skin became harmonious and perfect; the lines of her body lengthened in a blue light; her whole figure was more supple; she recognized her hands no longer. The lightness of her body was such that she raised herself upon two fingers, let herself float for an instant and fall back softly upon the marble amidst a light stirring which lapped under her chin. The water flowed into her ears like a kiss.

The hour of the bath was that where Chrysis commenced to adore herself. The loveliness of her body became the object of tender contemplation and admiration. With her hair and her hands she made a thousand charming plays; now and then she laughed softly, like a child. The day drew to a close. She rose up in the basin, came out of the water and walked toward the door. The marks of her feet glistened upon the stones. Swaying and as though exhausted, she opened the door wide and paused, her arm stretched out on the latch, then entered. Standing, still wet, near her bed, she commanded the slave, "Dry me."

The Malabar woman took a large sponge in her hand and passed it into the soft golden hair of Chrysis, which streamed backward laden with water; she dried it, scattered it, shook it gently, and then, plunging the sponge into a jar of oil, passed it gently over her mistress's body before rubbing her with a rough cloth, which made the pliant skin glow. Chrysis buried herself shudderingly in the coolness of a marble seat and murmured, "Dress my hair."

In the level rays of the evening, the hair, still damp and heavy, shone like a shower luminous in the sun. The slave took it in handfuls and twisted it; she made it turn upon itself like a great serpent of metal which the pins of gold pierced like arrows. She rolled it about with a green band, thrice crossed, in order to enhance the gloss by contrast with the silk. Chrysis held at arm's length her polished copper mirror. Idly she watched the dark hands of the slave move in the heavy hair, round the clusters, gather in the straying locks and sculpture the head-dress like a vase of moulded clay. When this was done Chrysis said in a low voice, "Tint me."

A little box of rosewood, brought from the isle of Dioscoris, contained tints of all colors. With a brush of camel's hair the slave took a little black paste which she placed on the long finely curved lashes in order that the eyes should appear more blue. Two decided strokes of a crayon

lengthened them, softened them; a bluish powder leadened the lids; two spots of bright vermilion accentuated the corners of the tears. Then, to fix the tints, the face must be covered with ointment. With a soft feather dipped in white pigment, Djala drew white streaks along the arms and on the neck; with a little brush full of carmine she ensanguined the mouth; her fingers spread over the cheeks a light cloud of red powder. Then with a pad of tinted leather she colored the elbows faintly and revived the luster of the ten nails. The toilette was finished.

Then Chrysis began to smile, and said to the Hindu, "Sing to me." She sat with arched back in her marble armchair. Her pins were like golden rays behind her face. Her hands, resting upon her breast, spaced between the shoulders the red necklace of her painted nails, and her small white feet were reunited upon the stone.

Djala crouched near the wall and recalled love songs of old India:

"Chrysis . . ."

She sang in monotone:

"Chrysis, thy hair is like a bee-swarm, at rest upon a tree. The warm south wind blows through it with the dew of love and the moist perfume of the night flowers."

The young girl, with her slower and softer voice, took up the song:

"My hair is like an infinite river in the plain where the flaming evening flows away."

And they sang, one after the other:

"Thine eyes are like blue water-lilies, stemless and still on the pools."

"Mine eyes in the shadow of my lashes are like deep lakes under dark branches."

"Thy lips are two delicate dowers where the blood of the deer has fallen."

"My lips are the burning edges of a wound."

"Thy tongue is the bloody dagger which has made the wound of thy mouth."

"My tongue is encrusted with precious stones. It is red from mirroring my lips."

"Thine arms are rounded like two bars of ivory and thine armpits are two mouths."

"My arms reach out like two lily stems whereon my fingers cling like five petals."

"Thy limbs are the trunks of two white elephants which carry thy feet like two rosy flowers."

"My feet are two water-lily petals upon a pool; my limbs are two swollen water-lily buds."

"Thy bosom is a shield of silver."

"It is the moon—and the moon's gleam on the water."

A deep silence fell. The slave raised her hands and bowed forward.

Chrysis went on:

"I am a crimson blossom, full of sweet scents and honey. . . . I am like the sea-hydra, soft, living dower of the night. . . . I am a well, in an ever-warm shelter."

The prostrate one murmured very low:

"Thou art awesome as the face of Medusa."

Chrysis placed her foot upon the slave's neck and said, trembling, "Djala

...

Little by little the night had come, but the moon was so luminous that the room was filled with blue radiance.

Chrysis, naked, gazed at the still gleaming of her skin, and on her body where the deep shadows fell upon it.

She rose abruptly. "Djala, of what are we thinking? It is night and I have not yet gone out. Only sleeping sailors will be on the Heptastadion. Tell me, Djala, am I beautiful?"

"Tell me, Djala, am I more beautiful this night than ever? I am the most beautiful woman in Alexandria; dost thou know it? Will he not follow me like a dog, he who will presently pass into the oblique regard of mine eyes? Will I not make of him what pleases me—a slave if it is my caprice; and can I not expect from the first who comes the most abject obedience? Dress me, Djala."

Around her arms two silver serpents twined, upon her feet were fixed sandals attached to her brown ankles by crossed leather thongs. She herself buckled around her waist a young girl's girdle. In her ears she placed great circular hoops, on her fingers rings and seals, on her neck three necklaces of golden images, chiseled at Paphos by the hierodules. She studied herself for some time, wearing only her jewels; then drawing from a coffer where she had folded it a vast garment of sheer yellow linen, she wrapped it around her, draping herself from head to foot. Its diagonal folds furrowed that little of her figure which could be seen through the light tissue; one of her elbows thrust out under the close tunic, and the other arm, which she had left bare, carried a long train so that it would not drag in the dust.

She took in her hand her fan of plumes and went out nonchalantly.

Standing on the steps of the threshold, her hand resting against the white wall, Djala alone watched her mistress depart.

She walked slowly along the houses in the deserted street where the moonlight fell. A little dancing shadow frisked behind her steps.
