

August 09, 2003

The Demi Monde

*Between the Idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow.
T.S. Elliot, The Hollow Men (6)*

ACT ONE: Prologue

Paris. 1885. The Death Aria of La Traviata.

Violetta, on her highest note, is smacked by the Translator. After a moment's horror, he speaks out, apologetically:

TRANSLATOR

Mesdames, Messieurs. Je vous en prie. Please to banish from your minds this maudlin bagatelle, this shameful deceit, this unfortunate *succés du scandale* of my client M. Dumas-fils, which he himself assures me, he wishes to forget! What can we say about this unfortunate woman and her wilted camelias, other than that her misfortune, like her consumption, appears to be infectious. Indeed, her representation on our stages daguerrotypes with fearsome fidelity a female type that is rotting the fabric of our society; a type that is more prevalent among us than we realize, a type that my client now wishes to make the target of his moral scorn.

How can one recognize this type today, when nobility, honour and decency are disguised by glittering appearances? Behold, M. Dumas offers you a guide. Olivier de Jalin is a gentleman of marriagable age and fortune, who seeks to live honourably, despite the traps and pitfalls of a decadent society. He passes equally in high and low society, satisfied with neither, for virtue tarnishes, wives philander, and desperate women become panders...

SCENE 1

Enter Countess

Good day, Madame la Contesse de Vernieres

He gives the audience a look that says:(Speak of the Devil!)She is unable to avoid him.

COUNTESS

How do you do? I would request, dear Sir, that you not mention seeing me at this particular door; pray do not speak my name so loudly nor delay me here in conversation.

TRANSLATOR

Countess, I presume only to wish you fortune in preventing this scandalous duel.

He gives the audience a look that says (We will begin and end with a duel!)

COUNTESS

Shh!

TRANSLATOR

I beg your pardon, Countess...Madame. Good day!

Martin invites the COUNTESS to step through the door to OLIVIER'S house.

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TRANSLATOR

See the twitch of lace curtains across the street! “Who is that veiled lady visiting the private lodging of this eligible bachelor of society?” “In this case, oh watchers of propriety, there is nothing to report : the lady pursues an honourable mission. Can she persuade the rational M’sieur Olivier de Jalin to calm the disputation that arose during a game of cards at a certain house? Oh these young men! “They could not love money so did they not love Honour more!”

SCENE 2

Inside the House of Olivier de Jalin.

OLIVIER & the COUNTESS de Vernieres.

COUNTESS

They are to duel tomorrow! With pistols! Latour’s second, is to call on you shortly to arrange the time and place--

OLIVIER

Calm yourself. Nothing will come of it.

COUNTESS

You will intercede? You will make Maucroix apologize to Latour?

OLIVIER

I won’t allow Latour the possibility of injuring an honourable man.

COUNTESS

Thank you! You will “hush it up” Olivier? The world must not know that I allow gambling at my house. If the gazette should get hold of this...it would damage Latour at a very sensitive moment in his political career, and I worry for my own reputation—

In the Drapery Store

A Drapery Store with A GENTLEMAN, LATOUR, and VALENTINA

TRANSLATOR

Ah...Henri Latour ,the Asistant Head of the Municipal Property Tax Department, assists Madame de Zantis with an important interior decorating decision.

Latour and Valentina flirt and make out amid the draperies as Scene 1 continues .

OLIVIER [*continues but speaks silently*]

An action at law could not possibly implicate you—

COUNTESS [*continues but speaks silently*]

--I would be arraigned as a witness; it would become known that cards and drinking are [*continues audibly now*]

“chez La Verniere”; and for a woman of position—do you smile at me?

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OLIVIER

Not at all, Contessa.

COUNTESS

You think my social caché long gone, perhaps.

OLIVIER

I think of you as my oldest, saddest friend.

COUNTESS

You—I—no, do not tell me why. I trust you to avert this unpleasantness. Where is Madame de Zantis? She promised to rendezvous with me here en route to her new apartments.

At the mention of her name, Madame de Zantis moans loudly.

OLIVIER

I have warned you that Valentina de Zantis --

COUNTESS

--Has a box at the opera and a carriage and a heart full of generosity—

OLIVIER

--Which she spreads around without distinction...yes, I know, and I am surprised that you are so uncritical as to accept a woman who claims to be married—but whose husband has never has been spotted by the most avid social gazeteer and who claims to be respectable-- but –

COUNTESS

--But who doesn't give a thought to social opinion!

OLIVIER

Fortunately, or she would weep. My dear, *should* the *gay* de Zantis be Marcella's intimate friend? Where does she get her money?

COUNTESS

That question could be asked of any one of us. But Aha Olivier! Why are you so concerned for my niece? You know how my late husband hoped there could be a match between you--

In the Drapery Store

TRANSLATOR

The lovely Marcella.

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Marcella enters the drapery store. Valentina & Henri hurriedly compose themselves.

MARCELLA

Oh, Heavenly! What do you think of this blue satin, Valentina?

OLIVIER [*continues in silence*]

Well, I--

COUNTESS [*continues in silence*]

Marcella is a good girl, and you know how much she likes you...

OLIVIER [*continues in silence*]

Please, say no more.

COUNTESS

...but you have ceased and desisted in your visits to our house....she's trying to forget you...

[*continues audibly*]

Marcella believes you never had marriage in mind.

OLIVIER

You may assure her she is right!

COUNTESS

Why ever not? Because she has no parents? Because she is poor?

OLIVIER

Good God, I've no need to marry for money! The profits I got from the mill alone...!

COUNTESS *sourly, aside*

(Yes, you sold your shares in time).

OLIVIER

...I won't marry your niece because if I marry--when I marry—it won't be to a woman of the world; it will be to one who has no reputation for wit or desire for independence.

COUNTESS

I am bewildered, Olivier. You, the man of the Town? No wit, no independence...?

OLIVIER

Marcella has an over abundance of both: you are raising her very badly. She will not find acceptance to good society. You should have sent her to convent school with Mlle de Tonnerins – yes, I know how the Marquis offered to foot the bill, but you stood in the way.

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Outside the Drapery Store

TRANSLATOR

The Marquis de Thonnerins

The Marquis approaches the Drapery shop as Marcella steps out. He bows.

MARQUIS

Mademoiselle de Sancenaux.

MARCELLA

M'sieur le Marquis! What a pleasure! Please let me introduce—

MARQUIS (*eying Valentina with distaste*)

Excuse me, I am pressed for time.

VALENTINA

Pressed in vinegar more like!

He leaves. Valentina & Henri are put out. They exit with Marcella.

COUNTESS [*continues in silence*]

You are very harsh, Olivier. You know how sweet she is. I loved her too much to part with her.

OLIVIER [*continues in silence*]

It was selfishness, not love. You will live to regret it and she will live to reproach you.

Inside the House of Olivier de Jalin.

COUNTESS [*continues audibly*]

Of course it's none of your business, but Marcella will be married within two months if she wishes !

OLIVIER

She has a suitor? Is she in love?

COUNTESS

No, but that's of little consequence if he marries her. In marriage-- and here experience speaks-- if there be love, habit kills it; and if there be no love, habit builds it!

OLIVIER

Hm. Who is he?

COUNTESS

M'sieur de Nanjac whom you will meet today. He is the Friend of Henri Latour.

OLIVIER (*aside*)

Another trumpery of corruption no doubt...

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COUNTESS

Raymond de Nanjac is a military man, who enjoys extensive properties in Algeria and an income of twenty thousand francs. He's free as air and knows no-one in town save for myself, M'sieur Latour and Marcella, of whom he has grown very fond. We could do a lot worse.

Enter a SERVANT, followed by Valentina .

MARTIN

Excuse me, M'sieur de Jalin, a Madame de Zantis is here to see you.

SCENE 2

VALENTINA

Oh God, here you are! One thing after another!

(she embraces the Countess)

Olivier. It's an age since I've seen you. How are you?

OLIVIER

Older, thank you.

VALENTINA

Aren't we all in the fullness of time? The more time speeds up, the more we manage to stuff into it and the fuller it gets! I mean, just as I was leaving home, up drives Jean-Pierre and the dress maker's team; they're galloping to finish my gown for the races tomorrow! I had to have a fitting; I thought it would never end. It's like posing for a portrait! But oh dear God, this gown is so beautiful! Flemish silk with a little "mm" here and a little "rhh" here, and it matches the seats of my carriage, which I went to select immediately afterwards—I have hired a famous Austrian coachman; then I had to call, oh boring, on my landlord—did you know I'm moving house? What's your rent here?

OLIVIER

I prefer not to say.

VALENTINA

Ooo! In any case, this is too far off the beaten track. I've decided on Avenue de la Nouvelle Revolution, the sweetest apartment, second story over looking the park. Four and a half thousand, but...The landlord is allowing a complete redecoration. Let me show you...here's the living room—

She gets out some fabric swatches

OLIVIER

Crimson and gold.

COUNTESS

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And all new furniture.

VALENTINA

And my boudoir—I have to tell you because you'll never see it, my dear Olivier, will be dove gray and blue satin. Beautiful!

I know you must be wondering who's paying?

COUNTESS (*embarrassed*)

Valentina—

VALENTINA

I'm selling my property in Touraine. My agent, M'sieur Michel, has been an absolute saint. I couldn't wait, so he took over the title deeds and personally loaned me five thousand at eighteen per cent.

(*To the Countess*) Which reminds me, my dear, I can't give you a cent, so sorry: I had to pay the milliner.

OLIVIER

Michel. Moustache, snappy dresser, Bank de Ville?

VALENTINA

Yes.

OLIVIER

He's a thief.

VALENTINA

Impossible.

COUNTESS

Oh dear.

OLIVIER

He tried to lure me in with loan's on my mother's capital. I was lucky to inherit anything. In fact, he has so many claims against him, I'm amazed he's still working the gullible.

VALENTINA

Ah, but he adores me.

OLIVIER

Valentina, I'm trying to warn you. Your property value won't last in his hands—what will you do when it's spent?

VALENTINA

Well...

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OLIVIER

Ask the Countess how hard it is to maintain your social class once you have rolled in the smell of financial need.

The Countess looks alarmed.

COUNTESS

Manners, my dear Sir.

OLIVIER

Honesty, my dear Countess.

COUNTESS

This talk of loans and income is ill mannered.

(They ignore her)

VALENTINA

I'm a married woman...I would return to my husband until the debts were paid off.

The Countess looks doubtful. Valentina continues:

Indeed, I would. He cannot divorce me and the law says I am entitled to live under the conjugal roof; besides Even after ten years estrangement he still loves me.

OLIVIER

I 'd like to see his face when you confront him with that assumption.

VALENTINA

I'll issue you a gilt-edged invitation. In fact, I haven't seen nearly enough of you recently.

COUNTESS

Perhaps, Olivier, you will come to tea tomorrow? M'sieur de Nanjac is to present a picture show of Algeria.

OLIVIER

No, thank you.

COUNTESS

He's out of sorts, Valentina, and we should leave him to stew with his own sour grapes.

VALENTINA

He's sore because he hasn't heard from Madame d' Ange! Missing your letters are you, poor boy?

OLIVIER

I do not correspond with the Baroness d' Ange.

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VALENTINA

Ah hah! That's a good one! You don't know who you're talking to, because I was just at the spa with her and—

OLIVIER

And?

VALENTINA

I mailed her letters! Come on now, don't look so worried, I can keep a secret, wild though I seem to be, I can be very discrete, can't I Contessa?

COUNTESS

I do so hope so.

VALENTINA

Anyway, I know why you haven't heard from her these past two weeks—because that was when her postman—that is I-- left!

OLIVIER

They completed your treatment in record time, I see.

VALENTINA

You notice? Do you think my looks improved?

COUNTESS

Valentina, we must be going.

VALENTINA

Olivier, come to my new apartment and give us your opinions about the decor?

OLIVIER

No. Thank you, I am expecting a visitor.

VALENTINA

You are...unfriendly, M'sieur de Jalin. Are you dropping my acquaintance?

OLIVIER

I believe I must be.

I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. An old friend, M'sieur Hyppolyte Richond is visiting from Africa with his wife and son.

HYPPOLYTE RICHOND appears

TRANSLATOR

The Spirit of Modern France! Industrializing the backwards nation; utilizing its long forgotten resources!

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VALENTINA

Algiers? Wife and? M'sieur Richond you say?

OLIVIER

Yes.

VALENTINA

I believe we are acquainted. Pray...invite M'sieur Richond to meet M'sieur de Nanjac, a fellow Algerian at tea tomorrow. Give him this, from myself and the Countess, I beg you. I hope that you will accompany him.

TRANSLATOR

Martin! Get Richond in there –they must confront one another and pretend no recognition!

MARTIN

I'm on a break.

VALENTINA

Excuse me, I have so much to do at my apartment. Good day, Olivier.

TRANSLATOR

You think the serving class take breaks in 1883? Get up! Get Up!

As VALENTINA and the CONTESSA go out. OLIVIER greets HIPPOLYTE.

SCENE 3

HIPPOLYTE

Olivier! My old friend.

OLIVIER

Let me look at you. You *are* well! Hyppolyte Richond! Glad to be home? Is business good?

HYPOLYTE

Never better. The 3rd Republic must be carpeted!

OLIVIER

For all the scandals to be swept from sight.

HIPPOLYTE

Indeed. Who was the lady who just left?

OLIVIER

The Contesse de Vernieres.

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HIPPOLYTE

No, the younger one.

OLIVIER

OH. You don't want to know her. Or, maybe you do. (*he affects mysterious and seductive tone*)" Madame de Zantis".

HIPPOLYTE

Valentina de Zantis?

OLIVIER

You know her?

HIPPOLYTE

Not personally.

OLIVIER

She's invited you to attend her salon tomorrow.

HYPOLLYTE

Her estranged husband... owns a factory on my land.

OLIVIER

The husband exists! I guessed it was a false name to excuse her "experience".

HIPPOLYTE

She uses her mother's name since she left him. Are you friendly with her?

OLIVIER

No, no. Now I'm in my thirties I've given up women like that. I hate to see the old Countess with her –she's the widow of my former business partner who had the good taste to die just as British Egypt made cotton unprofitable.

HIPPOLYTE

Ah. You wrote that your hands are now clean of industry. You got out in time?

OLIVIER

Yes, but the Countess wouldn't listen to reason. She pitied the labourers, saved their jobs and lost everything but her addiction to luxury... now she prays her niece will save her by making a wealthy marriage, but she lives with a desperate display of extravagance that scares off respectable people. It's unbearable. As a guest in her house you're painfully aware the Countess is stony broke and that you are drinking down her last centimes; the very furniture is mortgaged to pay for the candles, the cocktails and the decks of cards.

HIPPOLYTE

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You make a gay life sound grim. Do you pity these abandoned wives?

OLIVIER

Yes. But I admire a wife who's faithful.

HIPPOLYTE

Are there any? Adultery continues to be all the rage in France, I hear.

OLIVIER

Ah! You remind me of something I must do with another man's wife.

HIPPOLYTE

Olivier! More escapades?

OLIVIER (*He calls his Servant.*)

Martin!

TRANSLATOR

Oops—Sir, Martin has stepped out to see his sister, who is unemployed and very ill.

OLIVIER

Take this letter to the Count de Lornan; If he's not home, give it to the Countess.
Exit Translator, with a wink.

HIPPOLYTE

If you're aiming at the wife, why address the letter to the husband?

OLIVIER

So that she's isn't compromised by a letter addressed to her by a bachelor.

HIPPOLYTE

But suppose the husband opens and reads it?

OLIVIER

The husband is away delivering a shipment of arms to our boys in the Sudan.

HIPPOLYTE

Oh—I heard the British are building up again? War, do you think?

TRANSLATOR [*clears his throat*]

Focus, Gentlemen, please.

OLIVIER

In actual fact, he can market his mortars to his hearts content, safe in the certain knowledge that his beautiful, blonde and shapely wife is a faithful Penelope.

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HIPPOLYTE

In a city where you 're on the loose?

(Madame de Lornan appears standing at the window of her house, waiting.)

OLIVIER

Yes! Madame de Lornan is impervious to my blandishments. I met her visiting the Maucroix Chateau; my friend Henri de Maucroix has been pestering me for years to go during shooting season.... One look at her: stylish, educated, poetic, passionate—and I extended my stay to three weeks. Autumn...it's a dangerous season for romance—you have this poignant feeling, as if it's your last chance for true love...Her husband is away, I lay siege and where do I get with the lovely Charlotte?-- precisely, nowhere. Back in Paris, she invites me over to meet her husband who proves to be an excellent man. At once my passion for his wife, which I had thought would drive me insane, disappears, "phut". He leaves town, I lose contact. Suddenly, she writes me a note accusing me of having played her maliciously, of leaving her high and dry. She demands an explanation and commands me to visit her—

TRANSLATOR

At two o'clock today.

HIPPOLYTE

That's now!

Translator knocks on the door of Mme de Lornan's house.

OLIVIER

Hence, my letter. I have told her the truth:

At Madame Lornan's

Madame de Lornan with Translator as messenger, reads Olivier's letter.

CHARLOTTE

He does not love me enough, or rather, he admires me too much to lead me from my wifely path of loyalty and virtue....he hopes we might cultivate a weak affection in to a strong friendship...Thank you, sir for this message. Assure M'sieur de Jalin that I will seek no further rendezvous.

You are a friend of M'sieur Dumas, I believe?

TRANSLATOR

Indeed, Madame de Lornan.

CHARLOTTE

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Then please take him my best regards and tell him that no one understands a woman's heart so well as he.

TRANSLATOR

And is there a reply for M'sieur de Jalin

CHARLOTTE

Tell him I love him more for his goodness than ever I did for his badness.

The Translator bows and departs. Charlotte sits.

At the House of Olivier de Jalin

HIPPOLYTE

Oh honourable Olivier.

OLIVIER

I 'm changing my ways, Hyppolyte. I don't want a dirty love any more. To visit a man's house, shake his hand, call him friend, eat his food, seduce his wife all in the name of love and conquest--

HIPPOLYTE

-- Is repugnant, shameful, and disgraceful.

OLIVIER

--And such love doesn't last! How soon lovers fall in one another's estimation. Instead of a Raphael painting in a golden frame, you're left with a veiled shadow, restless, trembling, consumed with remorse...

Madame de Lornan continues:

CHARLOTTE

...pursued by terror, dressed in black to avoid recognition, lurking about in crazy and compromising hackney coaches for a few moments together without recognition...no more. No more.

(Charlotte weeps, gnashing her teeth in frustration and regret. Light goes out on her.)

OLIVIER

No more.

HIPPOLYTE

What's changed you? Are you in love?

OLIVIER

Yes, I think I am. The lady is presently out of town at a spa, and I--.

He stops himself.

HIPPOLYTE

Olivier!

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OLIVIER

How can I describe her?

HIPPOLYTE

She's young, unmarried?

OLIVIER

A widow, almost thirty,

HIPPOLYTE

Beautiful?

OLIVIER

Exquisite; good taste, knows how to live, a lady of property and social standing, or so she seems. There.

HIPPOLYTE [doubtful]

This is love?

OLIVIER

I don't know, but I'm enjoying it. Like a traveler on a long awaited trip; I'm going by carriage instead of by rail; it's more comfortable and I can stop wherever I want.

HIPPOLYTE

But it takes longer to get there.

OLIVIER

True; we've been going six months and we've not arrived yet.

HIPPOLYTE

Will you marry the lady?

Servant, MARTIN, enters with Translator as Olivier struggles to answer.

TRANSLATOR

Go on, go on—the Baroness must be introduced in the first Act, indeed they must ALL call on Olivier-- I don't want to hear about your sister-- get on the job!

MARTIN

A lady to see M'sieur.

OLIVIER

Ask her in.

SUSANNE appears.

TRANSLATOR for HIPPOLYTE

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Is this THE lady?

TRANSLATOR for OLIVIER

It is! Leave by the--

HIPPOLYTE

I'll leave by the side door. I dine at the Café Anglais, will you join me?

OLIVIER

Yes!

Exit Hyppolyte; enter SUSANNE . Olivier strides to her and covers her in kisses.

SCENE 4

OLIVIER

Is it really you?

SUSANNE

Yes.

OLIVIER

Susanne, I thought you were dead! I've been beside myself—

SUSANNE

Dead? I've never been better!

OLIVIER

When did you get back from Baden?

SUSANNE

A week ago.

OLIVIER

A... week.

SUSANNE

Yes.

OLIVIER

And you haven't come by till now? Has something happened?

SUSANNE

Perhaps so. I've been in the country. Nobody knows I'm back. But.. my dear, can we talk?

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OLIVIER
Of course.

SUSANNE
Oh la! It's a very simple answer I need to a very simple question. I have to ask it forgive me. Will you marry me?

OLIVIER
You?

SUSANNE
Don't look too astonished: it's rude.

OLIVIER
Marry you? Why?

SUSANNE
You won't?

Pause. Olivier struggles with suspicion. She continues:
Well, my friend, let us talk no more about it.

Pause

OLIVIER
W— Ah-- Please continue.

SUSANNE
New news: I am leaving Paris.

OLIVIER
Will you be gone long?

SUSANNE
Yes.

OLIVIER
And you're going—

SUSANNE

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Far away. You seem surprised, Olivier, yet I have committed no crime, this is very natural and very simple. People travel every day; it is for their benefit that railways and steamers have been invented.

OLIVIER

True. What about us?

SUSANNE

Us? You, you mean.

OLIVIER

If you like. What about me?

SUSANNE

You 'll stay here.

OLIVIER

Ah.

SUSANNE

Unless you want to leave--

OLIVIER

-- with you?

SUSANNE

Oh. No.

OLIVIER

Then it's over?

SUSANNE

What?

OLIVIER

We don't love each other any more?

SUSANNE

Did we ever?

OLIVIER

I thought so.

SUSANNE

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I did my best to love you. I did. Yes. You know, I didn't go to Baden for a holiday, I went because I needed some time to think, about "us".. I thought, "absence tests one's true feelings". I thought, "perhaps Olivier is dear to me". I went because I wanted to find out if I missed you, if I could exist without you...If you could survive without me...

OLIVIER

And?

SUSANNE

Well...you didn't follow me. Your letters weren't very interesting... To make a long story short, after a couple of weeks I found I was indifferent to you.

OLIVIER

Touché.

SUSANNE

I'm sorry. I thought it was better to come to the point right away rather than play the silly game of avoiding you and hoping you would break things off first. So, here I am!—suggesting that we transform a weak affection into a strong friendship. What's funny?

OLIVIER [*incredulous*]

I wrote the same thing, those exact words, about an hour ago.

SUSANNE

To me?

OLIVIER

....No.

SUSANNE

Ah, to the beautiful Charlotte de Lornan?

OLIVIER

I don't know who—

SUSANNE

Oh please Olivier, you're so transparent! "What about "us"! I know you went to see her every day last winter when you were supposed to be courting me. I followed you one day, when you said you had to "meet a party of male friends" . Yes! I saw you enter a certain house on the Avenue Frontenac. gave the porter a twenty and found out you visited "Madame de Lornan" every day. Aha!

OLIVIER

Aha?

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SUSANNE

I realized I didn't love you. I tried my utmost to feel jealous, but I just couldn't do it.

OLIVIER

Why didn't you confront me?

SUSANNE

Pride, of course. I would have had to demand you choose between us; as she was the novelty you'd have picked her-- and then my self esteem would have suffered. No. I was too wise to confront you!

OLIVIER

Susanne, it's true I was besieging Charlotte de Lornan. But I swear to you, she has never been, and now because I have changed, never will be, more than my friend.

SUSANNE

Wonderful! And all *I* ask is your friendship.

OLIVIER

But...If you're going far away, it will be difficult for me to be a very...active friend.

SUSANNE

When I say friendship, I mean an earnest, sincere friendship where we look out for one another's interests and protect each other's backs.

OLIVIER

For example?

SUSANNE

Well... if the need arises, we'll be discrete about what we've been to one another. Perhaps the opportunity to prove this friendship will never arise, perhaps it will. Do you promise?

OLIVIER

I do.

SUSANNE

And I do.

Servant enters.

MARTIN

Will M'sieur receive M'sieur de Nanjac?

OLIVIER

Not right now Martin. Ask him to wait.

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TRANSLATOR

Say, No! The flower of France, the lion of the battlefield, the Patriot does not wait!

Martin hesitates, terrified.

SUSANNE [*continues silently*]

You 're acquainted with M'sieur de Nanjac?

OLIVIER [*continues silently*]

No...he's come about a disagreement, he's the Second proposed by M'sieur Latour...

[*continues audibly*]

Martin, go! Susanne, please—

SUSANNE

How strange, how strange! Can I leave through this side door?

OLIVIER

You know this M'sieur de Nanjac?

SUSANNE

Slightly. (*off his look*) What?

OLIVIER

You know, it takes me a while, but eventually, light dawns--!

SUSANNE [*a complete reversal*]

You 're dreaming!

OLIVIER

Then stay and let him discover you unchaperoned in my house.

SUSANNE

I have no difficulty with M'sieur de Nanjac or anyone else seeing me here.

OLIVIER

You don't mean it.

SUSANNE

I insist; it is always better to conduct one's affairs in the open.

MARTIN

M'sieur Raymond de Nanjac.

SCENE 5

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Raymond enters. He is astonished and dismayed to see Susanne.

OLIVIER

Pardon me, sir, for keeping you waiting.

SUSANNE

Don't you recognize me, M'sieur de Nanjac?

RAYMOND

I-I was not certain it was you, Baroness d'Ange, excuse me.
He bows over her hand.

SUSANNE

When did you return from Baden?

RAYMOND

Two days ago. I had intended to call on you today, but was prevented by...by some important business with M'sieur de Jalin.

SUSANNE

I shall be happy to see you sir, whenever your schedule permits.
Adieu, my dear Olivier. Don't forget your promise.

*Olivier bows to her in acknowledgement. Exit Susanne.
Raymond is agitated.*

OLIVIER

At your service, sir. Please, take a seat.

RAYMOND

I thank you sir, but this should not take long. On behalf of M'sieur de Latour—

OLIVIER *[interrupting]*

Excuse me; have you known M'sieur de Latour for long?

RAYMOND

I am acquainted with M'sieur de Latour; I take him by the hand and call him friend. Are you implying that he's unworthy of my friendship?

OLIVIER

By no means sir! Please carry on.

RAYMOND

On behalf of M'sieur Henri de Latour, as his Second, I am commissioned to call upon you as the Second of one M'sieur de Maucroix; that is to call you out, sir.

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OLIVIER

Please explain.

RAYMOND

The night before last I accompanied M'sieur Latour to a soirée hosted by the Contesse de Vernieres. My friend Latour played piquet with a fellow called Georges de Maucroix —

OLIVIER

--My friend--

RAYMOND

--Maucroix had a poor hand, I think. He had already passed three or four times on a stake of twenty-five hundred louis. It was up to M'sieur de Latour to raise, but because he had already lost heavily earlier in the evening, he asked M'sieur de Maucroix to accept his word as a gentleman as his stake. At once, Maucroix threw in his hand. Sensing that both his honour and his credit were insulted by this action, M'sieur de Latour demanded an explanation, which Maucroix refused, saying a lady's drawing room was no place for such a discussion and giving your name and address, sir. Therefore —

OLIVIER

Therefore you have come to discuss the matter?

OLIVIER

Er, yes. Or, rather, to demand--

OLIVIER

--An explanation as to Maucroix's behaviour?

RAYMOND

Correct.

OLIVIER

There is no explanation; Georges had no intention of insulting M'sieur de Latour. He simply passed his hand, as every player has a right to do if his cards are bad.

RAYMOND

And yet, had M'sieur de Latour's cash been on the table, **he would have played!**

OLIVIER

That is a matter for speculation. The *fact* is, George passed his hand so as not to lose in a single fall what he had spent the whole game winning. Had *I* been in M'sieur de Latour's place, I should not have taken it amiss.

RAYMOND

He should have made his decision before M'sieur de Latour began his turn.

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OLIVIER

He was thinking it through.

RAYMOND

He was thinking how to publicly insult M'sieur de Latour.

OLIVIER

No, no... M'sieur de Maucroix came to see me this morning sincerely perturbed by the miscommunication. He described what I have told you: he merely wished to foreclose on the game, because of his hand, sir, and not because of another player with or without hard cash.

RAYMOND

Perhaps a civilian would swallow that, but in the military, a man's credit is his honour.

OLIVIER

--Excuse me sir, but I wasn't aware that M'sieur de Latour was a military man.

RAYMOND

No. But I am.

OLIVIER

Excuse me. You are not involved in the altercation, and neither am I.

RAYMOND

When I agreed to represent M'sieur de Latour, I made this affair my own.

OLIVIER

You 're mistaken in so doing, sir. The purpose of a second is as much to seek conciliation as it is to guard the honour of his principal. Human life; *life*-- should be of sufficient value that we permit our friends to duel *only* if there 's no *possible* chance of settling their argument. Believe me, sir, there are not two sorts of honour, military and civilian. No matter what the uniform, underneath the same heart beats.

Pause

If you prefer, we can meet some other time to discuss this further. To speak frankly, you seem disputative, M'sieur de Nanjac. Although this is the first time that I have had the honour of making your acquaintance, we have been talking more like adversaries in need of seconds ourselves than as seconds charged with the reconciliation of our friends.

TRANSLATOR

Bravo! Bellissimo!

RAYMOND

M'sieur de Jalin... I am ashamed. A personal matter has quite....sir, I beg your pardon ; as proof of my regret, I ...

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OLIVIER

M'sieur de Nanjac, please don't apologize.

RAYMOND

The fact is, M'sieur--; may I speak frankly to you ?

OLIVIER

Please. Count on me to be frank in return.

RAYMOND

Ah. You are a good man. I trust you. Dear God...

I have been living like a bear in Africa, fighting the natives. I thought I had maintained a civil touch, but...

OLIVIER

Indeed you have.

Pause. Raymond shakes his head.

RAYMOND

Perhaps, if I had stayed in Paris, we might have been friends?

OLIVIER

I hope we will become so.

RAYMOND

M'sieur—

OLIVIER

--Please, call me Olivier--

RAYMOND

Olivier. The lady who was here when I arrived--

OLIVIER

The Baroness d'Ange.

RAYMOND

Is she a respectable lady?

OLIVIER

Yes.

RAYMOND

What is she to you?

OLIVIER

A friend.

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RAYMOND

Nothing more than a friend?

OLIVIER

Nothing more than a friend.

RAYMOND

Thank you.

Pause. Wearily:

Might I ask a further question?

OLIVIER

What was she doing at my house? A friend can call upon a friend in these enlightened times without risking her reputation, surely?

RAYMOND

True, true! Thank you. I owe you an explanation.

I am an officer, as you know, from Africa. I was wounded at In Salah fighting the Tuareg. I am on leave and I am considering changing my life. You see, the doctors sent me to Baden where I met Madame d'Ange, who ...made an impression on me. Damn it, I 'm madly in love with her; I followed her to Paris but lost track of her. She is always cool...distant. Gives me no encouragement. She's younger than I, wealthy and so very beautiful. I have tortured myself with jealousies...is she involved with someone else? Suddenly, I come face to face with her, in your house; my fears, my suspicions, my anger...

OLIVIER

Madame d'Ange knew you were here. If she'd thought her reputation was at risk, she could easily have left by that side door without you seeing her. Instead, she stayed because she wanted to say hello.

RAYMOND

Were it not for your reasonable language and your courteous, patient explanations... Olivier: I might have done real damage today. You'd think I am still in Africa!

OLIVIER

The battlegrounds are different here, but the wars still rage. We fight for position, for influence, for business alliance; our advance troops are reputation and our cavalry is annual dividend.

The Translator clears his throat.

But this is something it doesn't do to talk about.

RAYMOND

Then I should be at home here.

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OLIVIER

Will you be “at home” tomorrow afternoon? I will draw up a brief account of our conversation for you to give M’sieur de Latour.

RAYMOND

I ‘ll insist that there is no occasion to duel.

OLIVIER

Good, then all is settled. I have your address on your card, I think...

RAYMOND

Until tomorrow.

OLIVIER

Oh, M’sieur de Nanjac--

RAYMOND

Raymond, please.

OLIVIER

I understand you’re planning to give a talk for the Contesse? It will be a pleasure to meet you under different circumstances and to hear of your experiences in the savage parts of our Empire.

RAYMOND

Capital! The Countess invited you?

OLIVIER

One is always invited there; the niece needs a husband.

RAYMOND

Ah, Oh. *[laughing]* Oh!

OLIVIER

Good day, my dear Raymond.

RAYMOND

Good day!