

AMOUR ASTRAL

I. The Heartsickness of a Student of Occultism

In his library, even more sumptuous in its works of art than its books, Enogat de Sothermès, was dreaming, his eyes gazing into infinity.

The grayness of a dismal dusk inundated the vast room, gradually drowning the corners in which the gleams persisted of the bronze of a statuette, the enamel of a porcelain vase, the pewter of a tankard, the ivory of a netsuke or the lacquer of a casket, putting the finishing touches to the symphony of colors played by the exotic bindings in their ebony bookcases. There was a melancholy in the air that evening, and our dreamer was subject to its emprise when his *valet de chambre* came in and announced:

“Monsieur le docteur Callidulus!”

Almost immediately, a fat man appeared, with a cheerful expression and a twinkle in his eye, who exclaimed from the threshold, following the custom of the mages of old: “As above...”

“...So below,” Enogat concluded, swiftly, hastening to meet his visitor. And without transition: “Oh, dear master, how timely your arrival is!”

“I’m delighted to hear it. Do you desire to elucidate some grave question?”

“Exactly! And I have more need than ever of your enlightenment...”

So saying, Enogat pushed a vast Louis XIII armchair toward the doctor; and, having sat down on a Medieval stool, he commenced: “Don’t you think, dear master, that the *feminine* education of women is greatly neglected nowadays?”

“Ahem! I won’t say no,” murmured Callidulus, taken by surprise.

“Personally, I affirm it. No one understands the true social role of woman. Certain gracious and tender qualities are praised in her, and certain domestic virtues, but the development and refinement of her sense of the Beautiful is neglected...”

“That observation reveals your spirituality,” the doctor put in, amiably.

“Even in the aristocracy,” Enogat went on, “people are only preoccupied with forming bourgeois wives, irreproachable waltzers, or, sometimes, exhibitors at the Salon. By virtue of that culpable negligence, an intelligence of delicate culture cannot find in society milieu a complementary individual, a sister-soul.”

“Have things really reached that point?”

“That very point, dear master. If only that refined intelligence, that *aristie*,¹ could find a suitable companion elsewhere...alas, since the Revolution, the world of gallantry, completely degenerated, no longer produces anything presentable.”

Callidulus shook his head, ingenuously. “On that terrain, I’m short of documents, I must confess...”

Leaning back slightly, raising his left hand, Enogat made a reassuring gesture.

“Don’t regret it. A courtesan is no more than a dressmaker’s dummy, and moreover, she reeks of the concierge’s daughter, no matter what adornment enlivens her. Don’t ask her to create herself a costume or to make the most of her planetary type. Don’t ask her, either, to radiate beauty; she has lost the secret of eurhythmic attitudes, and style is a closed book to her. Stupid enough to make a gander yawn, as pretentious as a reverend, she doesn’t know how to dress, to talk or to shut up. The more one tries to ornament her, the more her poor grimaces and original flaws stand out.”

¹ *Aristie*—here misrendered in the original, but given correctly later in the chapter—which has no obvious English equivalent, is a term derived from Classical philology, where it refers to a series of exploits accomplished by a hero in an altered state of consciousness, which makes his name worthy of being sung. Enogat cheapens the concept in his perverted definition, although the real significance forms a backcloth of sorts to the central thread of the plot.

“However, I’ve read in fashionable novels...”

“Oh, novels! Which? Those of Monsieur Bourget, Monsieur Zola or Monsieur Prévost? Novels! There are editors who dictate them all, and that’s why they care so little about exactitude in matters of psychology. The time of great courtesans is past, long past! Even Cora Pearl is dead. There’s no longer anything but *grisettes*, and worse! The throne on which the likes of Ninon de Lenclos, Montespan, Gabrielle d’Estrées and the Imperia reigned is still awaiting a queen of wit and beauty; I doubt that the white and subtle majesty in question can be, I don’t say discovered, but even glimpsed, even among our most superb socialites.”

“I would have thought that there were still a few characters to be found in that milieu,” Callidulus objected, whose optimism was frightful.

“Eh? What scepter could a woman hold, pray, who allows herself to be enslaved by her dressmaker and her upholsterer?”

The fat man with the twinkle in his eye breathed out softly. “Well, if that’s the way it is...but why, damn it, Sothermès, my friend, are you telling me all this?”

“One moment...I’m getting to that,” Enogat replied, earnestly. “I need, first, to demonstrate to you that there probably no longer exists a single woman capable of giving the illusion of amour.”

“Obviously, we’re attributing to that word its meaning of transcendent spirituality.”

But Enogat, without paying any heed to the doctor’s words, folded his arms and, entirely given over to his discourse, continued, with a vibrant conviction:

“And why? Because none of them any longer has the intuition of the principles of Eroticism. Once, remarkably endowed individuals were able, without special study, to apply its complex laws, but those creatures belonged to the category of great intuitives; they were the artistes of amour. For the crowd, a method and an initiation are absolutely necessary. Oh, we require the advent of the august thinker with the ability to trace that method and establish an initiation!”

“The fact is that that new Orpheus would render humanity a signal service,” underlined Callidulus, benevolently.

“By not making the modern woman an artiste of amour, with a doctorate in Eroticism, the antagonism of the sexes has been created. And that antagonism is the sole source of the mysterious malady of which modern societies, exhausted and neurasthenic, are dying. What women are worth, my dear master, fatherlands are worth!”

“It’s necessary not to exaggerate that axiom, however, for...”

“Pardon me! A country in which women no longer know how to love or to make themselves loved is a country that is sliding toward ruin, because all the baseness of instinct can be unleashed there frenetically. Well, go search, in our society, bastardized by democracy, for a Phryné who is simultaneously a Hypatia and a Laïs, who, beneath her golden chignon, has the melodious genius of a Sappho of Mytilene, who could cry, without lying, ‘I have something here!’ while indicating, not her strong-box but her head or her heart!”

“That’s agreed. Furthermore, it’s certain that materialism, on the one hand, and clerical obscurantism, on the other, have spoiled everything...”

“Absolutely everything, dear master, and now we’re in accord! You understand now what perplexity is mine, when I confess to you that my bachelor life, in spite of me, is beginning to drive me mad.”

“What, my dear friend, that’s it?”

“That’s it. For three weeks I’ve been living in a strange languor...”

“Perhaps it’s purely physiological,” said the fat man with the cheerful expression, winking. “Well, you’re about to turn thirty-five, a delicate age for intellectuals. Men also have their menopausees.”

“No, the malady from which I’m suffering has deeper roots,” sighed Sothermès.

“Don’t allow yourself to be cajoled by melancholy; that would be to attract to your *self*, as you know, the baleful influence of Saturn.”

“I’d like nothing better than to react,” said Enogat, stifling a second sigh. “But how, alas? It’s necessary, at all costs, that I find a companion worthy of me. Without a soul-sister, is life anything but a glacial penitence?”

He stifled a third sigh. The doctor looked at him fixedly, and murmured, half seriously and half in jest, while the increasing shadows blurred their pallor, as in a painting by Carrière: “In short, Sothemès, it’s a Fay that you desire?”

“You’ve guessed it, my master.

“Damn! It’s just that the Fays are beginning to need persuasion.”

Feverishly, Enogat exclaimed: “Let’s create one!”

Callidulus fixed his interlocutor with his piercing gaze again.

Becoming impassive again, however, Enogat continued: “Yes, let’s create one. The alchemists of the Middle Ages fabricated homunculi; why shouldn’t we, who’ve pored over the hermetic books of Nicolas Flamel and Cyliani,² attempt to create a woman? Come on, master, is it really so crazy?”

“Not at all. At least that one would be the woman of your desires. Truly, my friend, you’ve imagined such a project?”

Enogat emphasized his reply with a forceful affirmative gesture.

“So be it,” said the other, his hands clasping the twisted arms of his chair.

And for a moment, the two men looked at once another in silence.

The issue of an insolently rich family, brought up among the refinements of an unusual luxury, Enogat de Sothemès had, from an early age, organized his life in accordance with the *Carpamus dulcia* of Persius,³ elevating egotism to the level of a religion. Master of his fortune at twenty-five, he had hastened to banish all those whose aspect or conversation displeased him, and to create himself a tower, not of ivory but chryselephantine. Everything that modern industry has invented of the comfortable, everything that the art of stylistic epochs presents of decorative marvels or curiosities, was brought together in that residence, reminiscent in more than one way of the palace of the Temple under the Vendômes. And like the dilettante lords of the great century, Enogat had a court and gave fêtes. No one was admitted there without sponsors; furthermore, all postulants had to have given proof of artistry; exception was only made in favor of painters and sculptors of sovereign originality.

For Enogat, *aristie* consisted of not being ignorant of any the little-known works of the past or present, of possessing a multitude of details and anecdotes regarding their authors, of frequenting the exhibitions, concerts and theatrical performances of the most daring innovators and the most guileful tricksters—in sum, in keeping up to date with all novelties of the intellectual or artistic order. He had read, from the Homerides to Jean Moréas, from Panyasis to Raoul Ponchon, From Hecataeus of Miletus to Élémir Bourges, poets and prose writers of whom more than one rare writer only knows the name. He ferreted through anthologies, and his eyes had scanned the majority of typical philosophies and so many histories and memoirs that it was almost frightening.

To tell the truth, he had not gone deeply into any text, and scarcely paused to meditate on the merest page; philosophers only interested him from the historical point of view, and historians from the literary point of view; he was naturally inclined to cephalgia. Studious in a rather peculiar fashion, studious with nonchalance, that “amateur” demanded of books motives for delectation, hours of cerebral intoxication, not themes of comparative study. Incurably eclectic, he supposed that a literate person ought not to be preoccupied with principles and causes, nor, in consequence, in creating an all-encompassing opinion. Rather than espousing some doctrine, it was far more important, in his view, to express intelligent opinions elegantly. He knew everything and he knew nothing. He was a perfect dilettante.

Enogat had exhausted all the mediocre enjoyments furnished by our society at the age of thirty. Libraries had been devoured, precious trinkets accumulated without counting them—and so many women! But of the emptied cups he only retained distaste, and from his reading, images and words. Blasé about everything, his lassitude no longer enjoyed anything of his desires. Like Arsène Houssaye, of cherished memory, he could sing:

² “Cyliani” is the pseudonym attached to a narrative text entitled *Hermes dévoilé* (1832; tr. as *Hermes Unveiled*), which exercised a considerable influence on a subsequent school of French neo-alchemists.

³ *Carpamus dulcia* means: “Let us pick sweet things”. The quotation from the satirist Persius continues, in translation: “For when we are dead we shall be but ashes and a story.”

*I've made the tour of things a hundred times.
Going from Moses to Zeno...*

However, although he was a feminist—or because he was a feminist—he could not add:

*I only love the intelligence of roses
And the wisdom of Ninon...*

We have seen what he thought of contemporary womanhood.

Now, in passing such a general judgment, the gentle Enogat could only be mistaken. An observer devoid of synthetic vision and rational argument, a critic devoid of psychology, he knew a few women, but not Woman. So, in spite of what he thought, he remained vulnerable to the schemes of a coquette. His fortune having permitted him to surround himself with a particular atmosphere, and his taste drawing him to stylish reading, he thought himself virile, energetic, aristocratic and the master of his senses; in truth, no one was more at the mercy of a sensation than that man of elegant weakness.

So, having past thirty, he had resolved to change his life. In his state of mind, seeking new sensations was limited to modifying his reading.

A great deal of noise was then being made about Occultism, which several sects claimed to be reviving; the novelty of that movement was bound to attract Enogat.

Lightly tinted with metaphysics by the glosses of socialists and bourgeois exegeses, the nostalgia for the Beyond, Mystery and the Invisible, and its relationship with human beings had not solicited him. Finally, after a great deal of reading, the only thing that still interested him was magic. With a childlike fever he had thrown himself upon that new toy; he consulted those unknown volumes, at first as fairy tales, and then as treasures of wisdom, and gradually, fascinated by that tinsel, he allowed himself to be intoxicated by their deceptive effluvia. A year later, he was no longer content with texts; he wanted to be an initiate.

Immediately, he made the acquaintance of a kabbalist of great renown and solicited from that “doctor of occult sciences” the favor of studying under his direction. The illustrious master skillfully took the neophyte under his wing and deigned to prepare him for the initiatory grades.

That formation was to last nearly three years, during which Enogat took a dozen lessons a month at a louis each. On the advice of his master, he joined an occultist study group, and very gently, like schoolboy “cramming” himself dutifully he had prepared for one of the examinations that the new Rosicrucians—the authentic ones—had just organized. Now he held a baccalaureate in the kabbalah. He was proud of that. If only that contentment had been sufficient...

That success proved the new adept’s excellent memory and nothing more. As denuded of mystical sentiment as of metaphysical intelligence, Enogat had only recalled from his occult reading the marvelous aspects, more interested by the fabrication of homunculi than the practices of spiritual embellishment. An initiate, as he understood it, was a hedonist in possession of all the means of enjoyment, and the culture of pride that constitutes initiate asceticism had only fortified him in that agreeable opinion.

Now, at that moment, sitting on a Medieval stool, his legs crossed and arms folded, gravely silent in the gloom, he looked at Callidulus.

Dr. Callidulus...my God, he was something else entirely. A mage! Well, yes, but who gave less the impression of a mage, even a modern one, than a country doctor scarcely rough-hewn, almost clumsy. Nevertheless, he had not had to scratch his head for long to discover one of those superficial intelligences which, unlike profound intelligences, are alert, sharp and redoubtably cunning. A doctor in medicine devoid of fortune and clients, he had succeeded in creating a prosperous situation for himself by setting himself up, by means of the pen and vocally, as a director of occult ideas.

Laborious and ardent, possessing the skill of a diplomat, with a sense of current affairs that a great reporter would have envied, that stout fatherly figure with the cheerful expression and the sly gaze, was a star in the small world of renovators of the kabbalah and other grimoires of that kind. But if he served the

cause with zeal, he understood above all how to make it serve his intimate welfare; that is why he left no stone unturned in taking advantage of his notoriety in an entirely material fashion, and no matter how far his high wisdom went, it never forgot to call in at the bank on the way. He was, in the meantime, most amiable man in the world, and the most expert at hiding his true sentiments under a mellifluous false bonhomie that captivated the cleverest.

Certainly, when Enogat had clearly expressed to him the desire to create a homunculus, the excellent doctor remained silent for a moment, his hands clutching his armchair. Soon, however, he offered to direct the “operation.”

“Although, Sothermès, my dear disciple, the endeavor presents great difficulties,” he insinuated, shaking his head. “It’s necessary not to hide that. And we mustn’t hide, either, the fact that we’re far from being the equals of the glorious alchemists of the Middle Ages. And yet...yes, with powerful conjurations and persistent efforts... In any case, my friend, your project appears to me to be of such superior interest that it’s necessary, at any price, to attempt its realization. I don’t know of any field of study more admirable, and then again, what a stimulus for our brethren!”

“You think so, master?”

“Oh, undoubtedly. The occultists of these sorry times imprison themselves too much in theory. Instead of applying themselves so much to recruiting adherents from the pen-pushers of the Town Hall and the idlers of the bourgeoisie, it would be better to devote themselves to experimentation, to restore honor to practical magic. A fine advance, when we have gathered together a few hundred affable cretins! Have we reconstituted Rosenkreutz’s Rosy Cross only to imitate the freemasons and open one more chapel to universal boorishness, or to form true adepts? History, in accord with tradition, cries out to us: ‘The doctrine is nothing without the works!’”

“You bear the seal of the true Magi,” said Sothermès. “Oh, Callidulus, dear Callidulus, if only all our brethren were like you!”

Callidulus braced his shoulders and, almost convinced, pronounced: “Our brethren are quite remarkable, but they lack faith. Too many erudites among our candidate hierophants! And then, dear friend—just between us—too many universitarians, deprived of the spirit that vivifies. What’s the point of our lectures? Are they just a Sorbonne for the usage of demoiselles? When one wants to conquer the great public, you see, one always expends oneself with students and no longer finds time to work with adepts. Now, without serious endeavors, we’ll disgrace esotericism and become magicians within the reach of socialites—a sad destiny, Sothermès. So I can’t congratulate you too much for wanting to undertake one of the projects extolled by our venerable masters. Are they reflections sister to mine that have inspired this project in you? Are they...but tell me, what are your special requirements of a homunculus?”

“I’m thinking less of an Egeria than a Theano. Without a companion, my home is becoming a tomb, and you’ll understand that I need an ideal companion, a creature of ethereal essence. I manifested to you just now my desire to live with a being superior to the humankind of our cycle; it’s a being superior to femininity that I should have said.”

Callidulus made a sign of assent.

“The idea is still beautiful; I can only bow to it. I understand your heartsickness, dear friend, and I observe with pleasure how you have already taken advantage of esoteric information, since you have discovered by yourself the only appropriate remedy: a spiritual union with a supraterrrestrial, and hence highly enlightened, feminine soul. When do you want to start work?”

“As soon as you please, dear master.”

Callidulus frowned, placed his index finger on his temple, and spelled out in a low voice: “Let’s see...the time to consult certain texts...”

Night had fallen completely; the conversation, somewhat special in that phantasmal atmosphere, did not lack character.

Two lamps brought in transformed the scene. There was a brief silence.

In a louder voice, the doctor asked: “Does six or seven days suit you?”

“Entirely at your orders. And believe that my gratitude...”

Callidulus having sketched a gesture of protest, Enogat, his eyes shining with a vague anxiety, went on: "The operation will take a long time, won't it?"

"At least nine weeks; that's what it normally requires; but those two months will seem short to you, in spite of your impatience, so busy will our days be, and submissive to the unexpected. Oh, don't hide it from yourself that a great many fatigues await us! Will you have the strength to go on to the end?"

"My determination will sustain me."

"One final word: this work will be very expensive, as you doubtless suspect?"

"Reasons of that kind won't deter me; let's march on boldly, without counting the cost. In any case, dear master, it will always be less ruinous and more agreeable, in every respect, than the conversation of a contemporary woman who squanders money without a care for the expense, a *demi-mondaine* merchant of smiles..."

Or an entire *mondaine!*" suggested Callidulus, getting to his feet.