

PHANTOMS: A CRUEL STUDY

*To Monsieur le Marquis de Cherville,
Homage and Respectful Sympathy¹*

I

For three years, I had for a mistress the wife of my best friend. Yes, the best. I would search my past in vain for an individual who was more attentively faithful and more spontaneously devoted to me. Several times, in the grave crises of my life, I had appealed to his affection, and he had generously offered me his aid, his time and his purse. I had always simply exploited his good will and congratulated myself on it. He had replaced the lost affections of my youth and watched over my dying mother. If I underwent an ordeal, or a chagrin, he wept with me—even more than me, for nature protected me against the effects of facile compassion.

It is freely and voluntarily that I render him that homage. Who, after all, could constrain me to do it? I intend to prove, by inclining before that venerated memory, that I am not blinded by any egotism, that I possess an elevated notion of the just and the unjust, of good and evil. Others, in my place, might strive ingeniously to circumvent opinion by means of a different conduct, or employ a more dissimulated language; I scorn those hypocrisies because I disdain everything that is petty. I say what I think, I report exactly things exactly as they are, without lingering over the objections the certain minds falsified by conventional doctrines might think they ought to address to me.

Similarly, I reject any appreciation that would tend to represent me as capable of or susceptible to timidity. If I praise my dear and regretted friend Félicien to the skies, it is not because my soul has been solicited by repentance or bruised by remorse. I am not yielding to the belated whim—fatally sterile, in any case—of covering up the extent of my sin by means of sentimental demonstrations. It is perfectly evident that in consenting to take Henriette as my mistress I committed the greatest of crimes, the most cowardly of treasons.

Nor am I thinking of bringing in extenuating circumstances based on the physical charms and mental seductions of my accomplice. Henriette was a very ordinary woman, bad rather than good, vain, well brought-up and plump.

I hesitate to draw a severe portrait of her, for most of the time, the judgments of men regarding women are only those of servants without employment, but I have imposed the task upon myself for my personal satisfaction and for the instruction of my fellows. I cannot neglect it, and it is necessary, in spite of my reluctance, to tell the truth about Félicien's wife.

She was, I repeat, a sturdy, ordinary individual, not pretty, with a mediocre education, stuffed with old-fashioned prejudices and bourgeois errors, having gleaned from poorly chosen and poorly understood reading the formulae of an outmoded sentimentality. She had doubtless aspired since youth to a romantic ideal, a confused ideal but invariably placed outside the precisely delimited circle of duties that religion had taught her. To the extent that she lost her footing in her banal dreams, she believed in good faith that she was taking flight for some promised land, some planet of a new beauty.

Poor woman! How many times have I heard her express the belief, typical of young dressmakers led astray by romanticism, that she was of a superior nature, of a privileged race, of a rare species, and that she would die misunderstood!

Oh, her girlish dreams! Did she fatigue my ears enough with them? She was not born to associate her life with that of a grave, pensive individual always curbed over captivating problems, that of a man

¹ The writer Gaspard de Cherville (1819-1898), one of Alexandre Dumas' numerous collaborators and the author of many volumes about hunting and animals.

devoid of ideals and passion, who took for a guide in life one knew not what dubious light that he confessed himself having only glimpsed. She, created for amour and passion, suffered from being thus abandoned, neglected for chimeras. And so on, and so on.

I never paid the slightest attention to such nonsense. Women who take passion for a guide resemble navigators who count on flashes of lightning to find their route instead of seeking it in the stars; they are certainly mistaken, but at least they require some energy in the soul and an appreciable dose of heroism in the spirit. Any passion supposes grandeur, even in the humblest individualities. Now, Henriette lacked a true vocation for premiere roles, just as she had lacked the courage for action. Her sentimentalism offered reminiscences of serial novels and reflections of romance.

Her heart had experienced nothing, her mind would have been, I firmly believe, incapable of conceiving anything outside the fabulous inventions, poetic monstrosities, heresies and fictions with which her mind had been stuffed since childhood. The imprint of that intellectual disorder was evident here and there in the platitudes of her conversation, sometime as stupidly melancholy as a ray of moonlight on the dormant water of a canal, sometimes spiced with the worldly slang—a kind of inverted pedantry—whose expressions apply an informality to all subjects and which serves as the superiority of inferior beings.

Henriette was not pretty and she suffered from it. A woman can have—exceptionally—enough intelligence to cause it to be forgotten that she is ugly, but she can never have enough to make herself forget it. The sentiment that Henriette had of her inferiority, by comparison with numerous other women prettier, younger or more gracious, was profound to the extent of spoiling all her impressions. For instance, she had never been able to believe that her husband could love her, that he could have married her by virtue of a sincere determined attachment, an exclusive desire of possession, and that he had not acted since before their union with the hidden agenda, outrageously wounding for her, of completing his domesticity with the presence of a tranquil, vulgar, insignificant wife to whom no one would deign to pay court, and on whom no approach, even by chance, would be able to compromise the conjugal honor.

That suspicion was absurd, but it did not enter my role to undeceive Henriette by repeating to her the confidences with which Félicien had honored my friendship at the time of his marriage. Then, I had seen dear Félicien happy, confident and, in advance, like the wolf in the fable, forging a felicity that made him weep with tenderness. He loved Henriette honestly, but I fear that, after a few months of communal life, he had had reason to lament, in discovering the negligibility, the sickening stupidity of the creature to whom he had devoted his life, his fortune and his most noble ambitions.

It must have astonished him to the point of alarm—him, the prestigious analyst who had consigned his marvelous studies of the human mind to books in which posterity would seek the summary of physiological and psychological science—to the point of horror, that he had committed an error so redoubtable, that he had associated with his thought that petty schoolgirl with a narrow mind, a paltry soul, limited ambitions and slow and stupid desires.

How could he, impeccably clear-sighted, have deceived himself to that extent? Worthy and proud, as was his custom, he did not breathe a word of that terrible misadventure, even to me, his best friend. If I had an intuition of it, it is because I saw him, for several weeks, somber, discouraged and idle, weary of all work, as if under the depression of mourning.

Then, a transfiguration took place; Félicien returned to his labor with a new determination. I thought I understood that, disdainful of a deceptive dream, scandalized by having gone temporarily astray, having neglected for subaltern enjoyments the source of his primary voluptuousness, deceived and forever cured by the deceptive proof into which his heart had fallen, he was setting forth again, definitively free this time, toward the superior, pure, starry regions in which, far from the pettiness and hypocrisies that are sufficient for the crowd, his great mind was going to float again, shaking its dust-stained wings, facing the sun, like an eagle in flight.

Henriette had no suspicion of that drama. She only observed in her husband a sudden distancing from her, a kind of impassive indifference that her coqueties could not disturb. I suppose that from then on, vain as I know her to be, she sensed dully within her, with an angry resentment, the preoccupation of a vengeance.

Yes, it was entirely and uniquely by virtue of vengeance that she became my mistress. Félicien's chilly attitude imposed on Henriette's vanity the need for revenge. She would have hastened to listen to any flattering voice, sincere or not, so long as it was loud, disposed to repeat to her all the good things she thought about herself. The homages of her pride, which she was obliged to confuse for the necessities of the moment with her conscience, became insufficient for her. Having observed me, she did me the honor of thinking that I would not hesitate to accept my share of her infamy in exchange for the abandonment that she granted me of her person.

When she had made me party to that hideous project, I believe I was skillful in not discouraging her to begin with, and contented myself with smiling, reserving myself the delay necessary to the examination of the risks to be run. Shortly thereafter, I consented. Our fall was vulgar and brutal. The next day, the sentiment that dominated my mind was that of surprise—a double surprise; I was astonished to have become Henriette's lover, and astonished not to have done so much sooner.

Certainly, poor Henriette might have been better favored by fortune. With a little patience, with the slightest discernment, it would not have been difficult for her to encounter a handsome, rich and elegant young man capable of loving her nobly and making her happy. For, after all, if I do not have the excuse of having yielded to the charm of an irresistibly beautiful woman. Henriette could not explain her enticement and fall by the omnipotence of my prestige.

I am of medium height, short rather than tall. I have a coarse ruddy face, thick lips, ears as big as veal cutlets, eyes as red and damp as cherries in brandy, a bristly and untidy beard and thinning hair—and in addition to all, very young with a bad stomach. The habit I adopted since early youth of smoking a pipe—little clay pipes, black and very short; they are the best—gives all my garments an unbearably stuffy odor. Mentally, I know myself to be authoritarian, abrupt, obstinate, intolerant of the slightest contradiction and little disposed to suffer feminine caprices, even if the caprices are charming and the woman adorable.

And yet, our adulterous commerce was prolonged for three years; it would still be going on if circumstances permitted and if I could still, without offending convention, approach Henriette.

Now, did we love one another?

Did amour ever exist between us, even for a day, an hour, or even a minute? That is not the point that concerns me, but I want to pause upon it.

I admit that it troubles me. For my part, I believe that I never loved Henriette and, the day after our rupture—an entirely accidental rupture, since it was not occasioned by her or by me—I'm certain that I did not experience any regret for that lost mistress. If, for three years, I had not ceased to maintain regular relations with her, I put my constancy down to the great facility of the liaison. I did not deceive her, but that was probably out of laziness, indifference or even economy. Amour in Paris has become a colossal enterprise, which has its docks and its counters and in which, after having loved solidly, at a premium, one arrives at loving at the closing price, and even loving at a discount. Henriette cost me nothing, or almost nothing: cabs and bouquets from time to time. All things considered, there was no amour on my side; I believe I can affirm that.

As for Henriette...no, I shall not be conceited. She was vicious, perverse; she thought herself abandoned. She took me because I was there, without preference, hastily, by virtue of a gluttonous rage to behave badly. O mystery! Were we, then, subject solely to the attraction of our vices? Were we brought together by a mutual criminal curiosity, a common taste for treason, baseness and villainy? Had we no other goal and motive than the satisfaction of our worst instincts?

One question.

How is it, then—I ask of moralists—that our criminal, hateful union, dishonoring for the mistress and lover alike, gave us such sensualities, such profound intoxications that we could not have obtained any more troubling if it had been legitimate? If we did not love one another, if we were two cowardly and bestial creatures rushing to the lure of who known what unspeakable and ridiculous spasmodic convulsions, why did the combination of our two perversities hurl us into an unforgettable exaltation of the mind and the senses: an exaltation that we savored so infinitely, so delightfully, that it is impossible to

imagine what more genuinely divine joy might be reserved for the august communion of two quivering chastities?

Oh, I congratulate myself on having thrown down that challenge to all religious morality as to all natural morality, dogmas, philosophies, theories and systems of thought! These enunciated facts permit me to affirm in total security that one is perfectly free if one wishes, and finds pleasure therein, to argue about the ideal, but one can only rely with certainty on the material.

Perhaps I will come back to this, for the problem is immense; it is as interesting as the sum of consideration due to God. (I shall explain the importance of that word in due course.) For the moment, I do not want to venture into it further; that would lack logic, since I cannot find any response therein to the question posed: Did Henriette and I love one another amorously?

Once again, I doubt it.

What is certain is that, since our separation, she has not taken another lover.

Poor woman! She must lack energy, then, even in curiosity. The rule is that a woman takes a first lover to see, and the others to look. Henriette must have thought that she ought to limit herself to her one excursion. However, I have not, so far as I know, sensibly enlarged the gray horizons within which her banal nature moves...