

## *Don Juan in Paradise*

*The balance swung in the direction of the pig.*<sup>1</sup>  
Victor Hugo.

When he was summoned—after the formalities, much simplified for him, of the throes of death—before the Judge who, selecting the good grain from the chaff, opens the gates of Paradise to the elect and casting the damned into the eternal Gehenna, Don Juan, according to what is written in the book by Charles Baudelaire,<sup>2</sup> did not deign to show any emotion, and, still young and handsome, his lips retained the smile that had made the Elviras and the Annas weep.

At the sight of that adolescent, whose had had the immortality of grace on earth, the virgins of Heaven dreamed of a paradise that they did not know, and sighed charmed; they said prayers, speaking to one another in low voices, for no serious charge to be laid against the accused, in order that he might be admitted into the imperishable joy, the salary of the innocent or the repentant, and that they might have the pleasure of strolling in his company in the road of stars that we call the Milky Way, and making music with him on the days of concerts before the Throne.

But they soon had to renounce those pleasant hopes. Don Juan had scarcely responded, nonchalantly, to the initial questions of the judge, when a groaning multitude of maidens and wives ran into the supreme tribunal, with their hair in disarray, their clothing disturbed, tears of rage in their eyes, and bloody wounds in their hearts.

They were the victims of the implacable lover.

He had pretended to love them all! He had deceived, tortured and forgotten them all! He had chosen the most beautiful in order to make them the most unhappy. Blushing children who were troubled behind the shutters at the sound of footsteps in the street, wives who feigned slumber, turning toward the wall behind the bed, listening with a delectable fear to the lover's serenade rising up to the above the husband's snores, and nuns awakened in the peace of cloisters, had all followed him recklessly, without listening to the imminent pursuit of maledictions, stepping over in their flight the cadavers of fathers or husbands, wrenching a scapular from the neck in order to strangle the opposed sister whose cries might have sounded the alarm.

His irresistible covetousness had not spared any living beauty; victoriously, it had raised him up as far as the most illustrious, and lowered him to the humblest; he had stolen queens from the alcoves of sovereigns and peasants from rustic beds of straw. And all of them—all of them—after rapid kisses, pleading and holding out their arms in vain, he had rejected with a mocking gesture and scornful laughter.

O cruelty of long abandonments after excessively brief delights! Dragging their shame and their mourning, simultaneously full of remorse and regret for the sin, they had searched for him for so long from one city to another and one country to another, guided by the despair that he left behind him, as one follows the trail of an assassin by means of the drops of blood on the road.

Now, at the feet of the infallible arbiter, displaying, innumerable, the betrayed beauty of their golden or ebon hair, their blue or night-dark eyes, their rosy mouths, their snowy breasts and their lacerated hearts, they demanded justice in their furious dolor; and around Don Juan there was something like the assault of an angry and plaintive sea against a rock.

A murmur of horror, because of so many cruel abandonments, ran through the celestial audience; the fearful virgins folded their wings over their faces.

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<sup>1</sup> The line is from "Sultan Mourad" in *La Légende des siècles* (1862), the balance in question being the divine balance in which souls, taking on symbolic form, are weighed.

<sup>2</sup> The reference is to "Don Juan aux enfers" [Don Juan in Hell] in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

However, as the accused, still smiling, disdained to respond, an angel, the official advocate, made a speech in his defense.

He did not deny Don Juan's crime. The evidence of the victims was irrefutable. Yes, undoubtedly, his client had brought to harm the most charming of the daughters of the earth, and, having seduced them, had left them without a word of consolation, without a farewell tear. He could be excused, because of the charm of the women, for having desired them excessively, but nothing could acquit him of such much ingratitude after so much joy. He seemed, therefore, to have merited eternal punishment. Nevertheless, was the admission of extenuating circumstances impossible?

Was it certain that the torturer had not been tortured? As the poets of the world below said, he carried within him an infinite need for the ideal; was it his fault if the insufficiency of terrestrial femininity had never permitted him to be fully satisfied, if he had been obliged to search, from one amour to the next, relentlessly and in vain, for the reality of his dream? How many sad experiments! And how he had undoubtedly suffered!

The advocate did not want, in any fashion, to speak ill of the honorable witnesses, whose legitimate chagrin was worthy of all respect; but, exquisite as the plaintiffs were, passionate as their tenderness had been, had they the wherewithal to fulfill the prayers of a soul always starved of impossible intoxications? Thus, the man who had made so many victims was also a victim; as much as the desperate women, he had known despair; and doubtless the tribunal, employing some indulgence...

But the angelic advocate did not have the leisure to finish. The complaints of the thousand and three abandoned women drowned out his voice with a redoubling of imprecations; at the same time, the increasing murmur of the assembly testified that the author of so much harm ought not expect any mercy; and a glint of menace was visible in the eye of the judge, like a flash of lightning before a storm, which was already a condemnation.

Don Juan was doomed.

But then an old woman approached.

Sordid and ragged, the skin of her cheeks and her neck hanging down like her other rags, her hair in dirty gray clumps, like islets of wool in the hide of a dromedary, swelling under a greasy headscarf, her bloodless face stained here and there by violent patches, her eyes jaundiced, a viscous tear trebling in her nasal hair, her tongue protruding over her sagging lip, she was so old and hideous to behold, tottering as if she were running after a crutch, that all the angels turned away, with a cry of revulsion; a nasty aroma of a rag-picker's basket emanated from her—a basket in which old clothes were mingled with other rubbish, the stockings of paupers and the chemises of whores: a stink of dank dives that would have withered flowers or moistened cosmetics.

In the midst of the desolate beauties who were similar, half-naked, to blooming flowers, she was like a muddy puddle fallen among roses.

In a hoarse voice, with a spitting cough, she said:

“Although I shall soon be a centenarian, and foul as I am, the enraged demon of lust has never ceased to stimulate my blood or heat my marrow. In order to buy young kisses for my aging lips, I had to sell my furniture, my clothes and my jewels. Now, like beggar-women, I haunt the crossroads and the narrow streets of the old city, eating things found on rubbish heaps before the rag-pickers pass by, sleeping under projecting roofs or in cellars open to the sky of buildings under construction. But hunger doesn't exhaust me sufficiently. I don't feel chilled by the wind or the rain.

“The ancient covetousness, surviving, was like an ever-burning stove within me, and it was neither sous nor bread that I begged from nocturnal passers-by. O poor old woman, shaken like a rag in the wind by infernal desire! My hands, suddenly springing from a doorway, fell upon a shoulder, grabbed it, and held it hard. Alas, everyone fled me, snubbing me, hurling sniggers and insults at me, because of my ignoble face, my gray hair, my yellow eyes and my secular mouth, glimpsed in the darkness.

“No one wanted me, abject as I am—neither prowlers, nor thieves, nor drunkards for whom any kiss is good. Crouching behind some boundary-marker, my fists in my teeth, I wept tears of rage, or, standing up, I howled into the night like a mad beast. I was infamous, yes, but lamentable in that infamy, since,

after all, I have not ignited the fire that was devouring me, and while scornful of myself, I thought myself worthy of pity.

“One evening when, with my ears pricked and my eyes wide, I was on the lookout for the hazard hoped for in vain. I saw an adolescent coming, under the stars, more charming than all the dreams of womankind. The extent to which he was handsome you know, you who are listening to me, since that passer-by was the young man who is here, since it was Don Juan. At the sight of him, I wanted to flee, fearing the torture of an unrealizable desire, the most absurd of all. That a camp-follower, some evening, starved and famished of caresses, as I was myself, might put his arms around my neck, I might have dreamed without being insane, but that ephebe with the golden hair, worthy of the bed of a queen, with what disgust he would reject me!

“Yes, I wanted to flee. But he approached, retained me with a gesture, and looked at me for a long time, compassionately, while I contemplated him, without saying a word, ecstatic, like a damned soul catching a glimpse of paradise. What was he thinking? What did he divine? It seemed to me that tears veiled his eyes, softer than the stars. Finally, he took me by the hand—him! me! him, so delectably adorable, whom everyone adored, me, filthy, scorned by drunkards and thieves!—and, having drawn me toward the darkness, tenderly, his mouth approaching mine, he put his arms around me, with all the dear words, for a long, long time, as a young husband embraces his young wife.”

The menace was extinguished in the eyes of the judge, and the thousand and three amorous women lowered their plaintive heads, no longer daring to accuse the pitiless individual who had shown pity.

As Don Juan was absolved, the virgins of Heaven were able to stroll in his company along the road of stars that we call the Milky Way, and make music with him, on the days of concerts around the Throne.