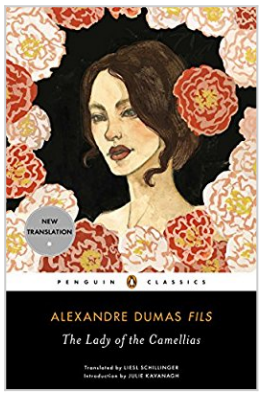

The Lady of the Camellias (Penguin Classics)

By Alexandre Dumas fils

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The landmark novel that inspired Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, in a sparkling new translation

"One of the greatest love stories of all time," according to Henry James, and the inspiration for Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, the Oscar-winning musical *Moulin Rouge!*, and numerous ballets, stage plays (starring Lillian Gish, Eleonora Duse, Tallulah Bankhead, and Sarah Bernhardt, and films (starring Greta Garbo, Robert Taylor, Rudolph Valentino, Isabelle Huppert, and Colin Firth), *The Lady of the Camellias* itself was inspired by the real-life nineteenth-century courtesan Marie Duplessis, the lover of the novel's author, Alexander Dumas *fils.*

Known to all as "the Lady of the Camellias" because she is never seen without her favorite flowers, Marguerite Gautier, the most beautiful, brazen, and expensive courtesan in all of Paris. But despite having many lovers, she has never really loved—until she meets Armand Duval, young, handsome, and hopelessly in love with her.

"Marguerite and Armand are the kind of bright, self-destructive young things we still read about in magazines, watch on-screen, or brush up against today."
—Liesl Schillinger, from the Note on the Translation

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Editorial Review

Review
“One of the greatest love stories of the world.” —**Henry James**

“Liesl Schillinger’s translation is notable for the fact that it succeeds in dusting off and invigorating the text without slipping into the contemporary idiom. This story, which sounded a little dated in the previous translations, can now be read with an urgency that seems wholly modern.” —***The New York Review of Books***

“Wonderful . . . A swiftly moving tempest of a tale . . . Schillinger’s deft translation brings new life to this classic tragedy. . . . Sometimes translation muffles or veils a text, but Schillinger’s version seems to strip this one right down to its fundamental urgency.” —***Opera News***

“Anyone who has read an outdated English translation of this novel; seen the opera it inspired—*La Traviata,* by Verdi; or watched the film it inspired—*Camille,* starring Greta Garbo, might have missed the audacity, obstinacy, sensuality, and recklessness of its characters. . . . Marguerite and Armand are the kind of bright, self-destructive young things we still read about in magazines, watch onscreen, or brush up against today.” —**Liesl Schillinger**, from the Note on the Translation

About the Author
Alexandre Dumas *fils* (1824–1895) was the son of the famous novelist Alexandre Dumas. He published many novels, and after the success of the dramatic version of *The Lady of the Camellias,* he became equally prolific as a playwright.

Liesl Schillinger is a journalist and literary critic who writes regularly for the *New York Times Book Review* and spent many years on the editorial staff of the *New Yorker*. She lives in New York.

Julie Kavanagh is an award-winning biographer whose latest book is about the courtesan Marie Duplessis, who inspired *The Lady of the Camellias*. She has been London editor of both *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker.* She lives in London.

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Introduction

The germ of *The Lady of the Camellias* was a long, impassioned poem by the twenty-three-year-old Alexandre Dumas *fils*. In 1847, after traveling in Spain and North Africa, Dumas had returned to Paris in time to see posters displayed throughout the city for a sale of great interest to him. For four days, from Wednesday, February 24, to Saturday, February 27, the entire contents of 11 boulevard de la Madeleine were to be auctioned—inlaid rosewood antiques, Sèvres vases and Saxe porcelain, bronze figurines, paintings, drawings, a library of French classics, a wardrobe of cashmere, ball gowns, and furs, as well as caskets of exquisite jewels. These were the possessions of Marie Duplessis, the famous young courtesan, who had died of tuberculosis on February 3. She, too, was twenty-three, and had been Dumas’s mistress eighteen months

earlier.

At the public preview on February 23, it seemed that all Paris had crammed into Duplessis's apartment, while carriages arriving from the grand faubourgs blocked the boulevard in front of the house. "Every different world was there," reported Théophile Gautier. "The best and the worst elbowed each other in the palace of this deceased queen." When Dumas joined the throng, he watched well-known courtesans being eyed by grandes dames, who were using the sale as a pretext to study these elegant women with whom they would never otherwise have allowed themselves to mingle. As he moved through familiar rooms still haunted by Duplessis's presence, he observed the prurience of people fingering her belongings and regarding every item as a trophy of prostitution. He learned that Duplessis had died in misery, the bailiffs having seized almost everything except her bed, and that night he poured his memories and impressions into an elegy he called "MD." Like all the verses collected in his book of juvenilia, *Sins of Youth*, it is a poor imitation of the French romantics and shows why Dumas *fils* had no success as a poet. And yet the eye for detail that characterizes his best writing is there, and so is his instinct for pity.

Visiting his father the following day, Dumas broke the news of Duplessis's death, reminding him that she was the girl who had once taken Dumas *père* by surprise by giving him a passionate kiss in a box of the Théâtre-Français. He talked about the poem he had written, and how going back to the apartment with all its associations had made him realize what a wonderful book could be made from her life and suffering.

"Well then," said Dumas *père*, "you should do it."

Since the publication of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexandre Dumas *père*, an irrepressible life force, had become a national treasure, while his son, despite the advantage of his name, was struggling to emerge from his father's immense shadow. Both had the same strapping physique, fine mustache, and features inherited from their ancestor, a Haitian slave girl—dark, crinkly hair, velvety brown eyes, and a creole tint to their skin. Dumas *fils* had turned into a typical Parisien flâneur and dandy, squandering his money on what today would be called designer clothes. He describes the look in his novella *Diane de Lys*: "Cane from Verdier, tie-pin from Janinch, watch and chain from Maclé, shirt, cravat and gloves from Boivin, suits from Staub or d'Humann." His debts in his early twenties amounted to fifty thousand francs, and he was always borrowing from his father, and relying on him to pull strings. Jovial and famously generous, Dumas *père* did his best to oblige, badgering his publishers to accept his son's "magnificent volume of poetry" by offering to write the preface. He urged his son to become his partner and collaborator, claiming this could bring him forty to fifty thousand francs a year, but Dumas *fils* was determined to forge his own writing career. "I was athirst for fame," he once confessed. *Sins of Youth*, published later the year of Duplessis's death, sold only fourteen copies, and *Adventures of Four Women and a Parrot*, a high-spirited but unreadably long and rambling novel, made no impact either.

Father and son were constant companions, both relishing the louche pleasures of bohemian Paris and the liberties offered by society women prepared to compromise their respectability for a handsome young poet or illustrious novelist. Dumas *père*'s boyish exuberance made up for their difference in age, and his enjoyment of his son's biting wit was matched by Dumas *fils*'s admiration of his father's erudition and renown. This bond, though, was recent. For the first seven years of his childhood, Dumas *fils*'s only family had been his mother, a dressmaker, who gave birth to him at the age of thirty. A clerk without a cent, Dumas *père* could hardly support himself, let alone a mistress and a child, but he installed them both in a little apartment in Passy, and appeared from time to time. In 1831, following the success of his first play, Dumas *père* took responsibility for both his son and an illegitimate daughter from an earlier relationship. He wanted Alexandre to have the best possible education, and sent him to boarding school when he was just seven, and then to the Pension Saint-Victor, a daunting institution whose alumni included several famous men of letters. It was there that Dumas *fils* was forced to endure six years of humiliation and victimization. His schoolfellows,

mostly the sons of rich, aristocratic families, taunted him for being a bastard, covered his exercise books with obscene drawings of his "mother," and brought him close to nervous collapse. Privately he scorned these boys as ridiculous versions of their fathers, destined for the same tedious, bureaucratic careers. But the experience marked him for life, and he re-created every harrowing detail in his powerful late novel *L'Affaire Clemenceau*. He wondered what the source could be of this compulsion to persecute, and whether his Caribbean blood had made him more sensitive to cruelty by carrying memories of tortures inflicted on men of a different color. These school years were the starting point for Dumas *fils*'s relentless crusades against social prejudice and injustice. "His great father, *le père prodigue*, had been all for self," said the English writer Edmund Gosse. "Alexandre would be all for others."

By May 1847, renting a room in an inn near his father's house in Saint Germain-en-Laye, Dumas *fils* had started work on the novel he was modeling on Marie Duplessis. The auction had given him his opening, and he began tinkering with facts, bringing the date forward to the middle of March and changing the address from boulevard de la Madeleine to 9 rue d'Antin (Duplessis had recently moved from No. 22). Writing in the first person, the narrator who makes his way through the crowded rooms is not the anguished Alexandre of "MD" but an urbane connoisseur appraising the superb belongings of the woman whose identity he has discovered to be that of the courtesan Marguerite Gautier. And yet he is recognizably Dumas the moralist, prepared to interrupt the story in order to deliver a lecture. The boudoir's gold and silver bottles bearing the initials and coronets of Marguerite's various lovers prompt a digression about a middle-aged prostitute who has corrupted her own daughter and arranged the abortion that leads to her death. Dumas then recalls the arrest he saw of a weeping girl clasping her baby, a scene that, like many others he had witnessed, overwhelmed him with pity, and led to what he called his "boundless compassion" for fallen women.

Indulgence toward courtesans in poetry and fiction was nothing new. It was a legacy of romanticism, and a favorite subject of his father's contemporaries Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and Alfred de Musset, all of whom Dumas *fils* knew. Drawing on this tradition, he made Marguerite Gautier a descendant of Hugo's redeemed courtesan Marion Delorme, who gives up her wealthy protectors for an impoverished young man. From an earlier literary precedent, the eighteenth-century classic *Manon Lescaut*, he borrowed his plot device, beginning with the end of the story and having the narrator learn its details from the lovesick hero. Unlike Dumas *père*, a man George Sand described as "carrying within himself a world of incidents, heroes, traitors, magicians, and adventures," Dumas *fils* was no inventor. To be successful, and to make a work his own, he needed to describe, clearly and poignantly, what he had seen. The most vibrant parts of *The Lady of the Camellias* are the observations, scenes, and conversations he simply reported—something his father understood. "I find my subjects in my dreams," Dumas *père* wrote, "my son takes his from real life. I work with my eyes shut, he with his open. I draw, he photographs."

On returning to Paris in 1844 after a spell of living in Marseille, Dumas *fils* often saw and admired a lovely girl he knew to be Marie Duplessis. In "À Propos de la Dame aux Camélias," his 1868 preface to the novel, he recalls:

She was tall, very thin, with black hair and a pink and white complexion. Her head was small; she had long enameled eyes, like a Japanese woman's, but they were sparkling and alert. Her lips were redder than cherries, her teeth were the prettiest in the world; she looked like a little figurine made of Dresden china.

He had noticed her at the fashionable cafés and restaurants of the boulevard des Italiens; in her little blue horse-drawn carriage heading for the bois de Boulogne; at first nights at the theater or opera, where she sat with her signature bouquet of camellias, box of sweets, and opera glasses resting on the velvet ledge. There was nothing overtly seductive about her appearance; on the contrary, her favorite accessory was a cashmere shawl, which discreetly covered her shoulders and décolletage. One night at the Variétés theater, Dumas *fils* again caught sight of Duplessis sitting in her box, as he describes in notes he wrote as background for the

actors in his play:

She was alone there, or rather, she was the only person one could see . . . exchanging smiles and glances with three or four of our neighbours, leaning back, from time to time, to chat with an invisible occupant, who was no other than the aged Russian Count S—. Marie Duplessis was making signs to a fat woman with a freckled face and a flashy costume who was in one of the boxes of the higher tier opposite to her. This good lady, sitting beside a pale young woman who seemed restless and ill at ease, and whom she had presumably undertaken to "launch" in the world of gallantry, was a certain Clemence Pr-t, a milliner, whose establishment was in an apartment in the boulevard de la Madeleine, in the house adjoining that in which Marie Duplessis occupied the mezzanine floor.

In the stalls beside Dumas *fils* was his friend Eugène Déjazet, the son of the great actress Virginie Déjazet, and a fellow young roué. Well acquainted with the *entremetteuse* Clémence Prat, Déjazet volunteered to ask Prat to arrange a meeting with Duplessis. The elderly aristocrat in the box was Count Gustav von Stackelberg, a retired diplomat and Duplessis's protector, who left the theater with her before the performance was over. The two young men then joined Prat and persuaded her to take them to boulevard de la Madeleine. The novel continues to chronicle exactly what happened next. They have dinner with Duplessis, who drinks too much champagne and becomes more raucous as the night wears on, distressing Dumas *fils* with bawdy language that sullies his idealistic image of her. She has been coughing incessantly, and when seized by a particularly violent fit, gets up from the table and runs into her dressing room. "Of those who were at supper I was the only one to be concerned," Dumas *fils* recalled in his notes to the actors. His immediate impulse was to follow her. In a candlelit room he saw Duplessis lying deathly pale on a chaise longue, struggling to catch her breath. Beside her was a silver bowl she was using as a spittoon, its water marbled with blood. Their subsequent conversation is reproduced in the novel, almost word for word.

Duplessis was touched to see tears in the eyes of this intense young man as he sat beside her and kissed her hand; such tenderness and concern for her health was something her self-regarding suitors had rarely shown. She wanted to keep him in her life as a platonic friend, the relationship a courtesan values more than any other. But "Adet," as she called him (the French pronunciation of his initials), was already smitten, and craved the role of *amant de coeur*, which translates literally as "lover of the heart." As he was too young, too poor, and too possessive to be able to share her, their affair did not last long. Dumas *fils* claimed it had begun in September 1844 and ended with the letter he wrote at midnight on August 30, 1845, the dates every biographer and Dumas scholar have taken as fact. However, the evidence of a simple rental bill and the appearance of a new young lover make it highly unlikely that they were together for a year. If this attempt to extend the relationship is apocryphal, it is also perfectly understandable, if only as an admission of the profound influence Duplessis had on Dumas *fils*'s career. "It's to her that I owe my first success."

Written in less than a month, *The Lady of the Camellias* was published by the reputable firm of Cadot in 1848. According to Alfred Vandam, an English journalist living in Paris, its frankness and topicality made it the talk of the town. "It was in everyone's hands, and the press kept whetting the curiosity of those who had not read it with personal anecdotes of the heroine." The theater critic Jules Janin, who would write a memoir of Duplessis as a preface to the 1851 edition, was astonished at how much of her life was in it. "People were anxious to know the name of the heroine, her position in society, how much money she had left, the ornaments she had worn, and who her lovers had been. The public, who desire to know everything, and who in the end do know everything, gradually learned all those details, and having read the book, wished to read it again; it naturally came to pass that, the truth being known, the interest of the story was enhanced." The reason the novel was reprinted only once by Cadot was that its publication had coincided with a year of revolution in Paris. Bloody February had brought barricades into the streets, resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy, and left the country in economic crisis. Rioting had doomed popular entertainment, and Dumas *père*'s Théâtre Historique, which Dumas *fils* hoped would mount his stage adaptation of the story, had gone

bankrupt by 1849. Pursued by creditors, Dumas *père*, now bankrupt himself, fled to Brussels. The son went back to being a jobbing writer, and his play of *The Lady of the Camellias* was put in a drawer.

Then came the change of regime on December 2, 1851, when Louis-Napoléon was made President of the Second Republic. Prior to that, Dumas *fils* had tried in vain to get a theater to stage his play. Finally the Vaudeville accepted it, but the censor immediately imposed a ban. This was lifted three days after the new president's appointment, and from its first night on February 2, 1852, *The Lady of the Camellias* was a theatrical sensation. Until then no dramatist had dared to put on stage a courtesan whose life had not been either distanced by history or poetized by legend. Young Dumas had not only brought the public into the world of Duplessis; he had also portrayed it exactly as he had known it, using the clothes, decor, and dialogue of modern life. "A drama of facile love has been turned into a literary event," exclaimed Jules Janin.

It was to turn into very much more than that. The pathos of the story and immediacy of its setting inspired Giuseppe Verdi to create his opera *La Traviata* in 1853 (the year the play, retitled *Camille* for an American audience, became a Broadway hit). In Verdi's hands the work is transfigured, acquiring a rapturousness, psychological subtlety, and tragic grandeur that music can convey far more powerfully than words. The opera's premiere in Venice on March 3 was a failure, but it soon became the popular hit it has remained for 160 years, the role of the heroine, Violetta, sung by every great international diva. The story of the Lady of the Camellias became a cultural phenomenon throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Marguerite Gautier has been pictured by artists and photographers from Aubrey Beardsley to Cecil Beaton, and portrayed on stage by Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, and Isabelle Adjani, in ballets by Margot Fonteyn and Sylvie Guillem, and in films by Greta Garbo and Isabelle Huppert.

Dumas *fils* would have been astounded by the longevity of the play he had dashed off in eight days. When he wrote the preface to a new edition in 1868, he declared that the story was already "ancient history." No courtesan existed with the heart and selfless nature of Marguerite, and the profession had become a business exchange: "I'm beautiful, you're rich, give me what you have and I'll give you what I have. You don't have money? Well, good-bye." But the real reason for Dumas *fils*'s disillusion and cynicism was personal. A destructive two-year affair with a bored young married woman, a beautiful Russian countess he named the Lady of the Pearls, had annihilated his belief in romantic love. Lydia Nesselrode was the inspiration for another long, anguished, but much superior poem, "Saint Cloud"; for the excellent novella *Diana de Lys;* for an overlong, self-pitying novel, *The Lady of the Pearls*; and for the dismayingly melodramatic reworking of *Diana de Lys* as a play. But unlike Duplessis, this lady was a toxic muse, her duplicity, lies, and callous abandonment of Dumas *fils* resulting in an embittered edge to his writing and a misogynistic attitude toward women.

There was also the fact that Dumas *fils* felt out of tune with his age. The sparkling *Belle Hélène* spirit of the Second Empire was anathema to him; a fierce moralist, he had decided to use his plays to pillory the license and laxity of the era. His 1855 play *Le Demi-Monde* (his own coinage) hardly seems the work of the same writer. A bitter satire, it is a portrait not of the bohemian world the term has come to define, but of a spurious society halfway between respectability and immorality. For Henry James, its grim realism and barbed dialogue made it a model for the drama of the time, "a singularly perfect and interesting work." Now, though, with its layers of lies, infamies, and deceit, its unconvincing plot twists, and a protagonist who is Dumas *fils* at his most priggish and cynical, *Le Demi-Monde* is as tiresomely pessimistic as it is outdated.

Dumas *fils*'s uncompromising ethics had made him sternly censorious of his father, whom he had come to blame for the dissipation of his youth: "I naturally did what I saw you do, and lived as you had taught me to live." Determined to distance himself from his father's excesses—the profligate spending, the affairs with actresses scarcely out of their teens, the births of two more "natural" children—he vented his anger about the

stigma of illegitimacy in prefaces to his plays. (In one particularly extreme polemic he calls for new legislative measures on paternity, which would mean a five- to ten-year prison sentence for a young man who abandons the mother of his child.) And yet his own conduct was hardly exemplary. His daughter Colette was born four years before his marriage to Nadejda (Nadine) Naryschkine, another bored, beautiful Russian child bride, a friend and confidante of Lydia Nesselrode's. With her "tigress claws" and pathologically jealous nature, Nadine did not have the submissive nature that Dumas *fils* demanded in a wife, and their marriage was far from tranquil. This, combined with self-doubts and despair about human conduct, brought him close to suicide in the early 1860s. "I am completely worn out in body and in mind, heart and spirit," he wrote to George Sand, who would introduce him to her physician, Henri Favre, a mystic and a pioneer of psychoanalysis.

Although Favre was able to fortify Dumas *fils*'s wavering spirits, he had a disastrous influence on his work, fanning his moral fervor and encouraging him to write tediously verbose prefaces and pamphlets. Throughout the 1870s the plays became no more than homilies, their characters either voice pieces for the author or hallucinatory abstractions of vice and virtue. "His terrible knowledge suggested a kind of uniform," remarked Henry James. "It was almost like an irruption of the police." Dumas *fils* had lost touch with his public, and he knew it. In an 1879 preface to the ill-received *L'Étrangère*, he writes: "As a dramatist grows older he loses in clarity and suppleness, in the power to bring his stage alive, what he gains in his knowledge of the human heart. . . . A moment comes when he finds himself pushing the study of character and the analysis of feeling too far. He frequently becomes heavy, obscure, solemn, portentous, and, not to beat about the bush, a bore."

Two plays staged at the Comédie-Française, *Denise* (1885) and *Francillon* (1887), signaled a return to form and a reengagement with people, not symbolist types. But despite the barren years, Dumas *fils* remained his country's most successful dramatist, who won, by his 1875 election to the Académie Française, the official recognition and public respect denied his father. In today's France, however, this is no longer the case. It is Dumas *père* who is the literary giant, while his son has become the one-book author that he has always been elsewhere. His best novel, the compelling *L'Affaire Clemenceau*, whose sultry, scandalous heroine is modeled on his first infatuation, Louise Pradier, remains out of print. Only *The Lady of the Camellias* is to be found on the shelves of most bookshops and lending libraries, the other novels and plays available as badly scanned Internet editions in French.

Just as Flaubert, maddened by what Henry James called "the boom of the particular hit," expressed a wish to buy up all the existing copies of *Madame Bovary* and burn them, Dumas *fils* came to resent the public's unquenchable appetite for his best-loved work. In a preface he was asked to write in 1886 for a lavish, illustrated quarto edition of the novel, his exasperation is evident. In earlier prefaces, and in the notes he wrote as background for actors, he had recounted everything he knew of Duplessis, but now he insisted, "I have nothing more to say." And yet the youthful memories this grand old man retained were the ones he cherished most. He admitted as much in an unpublished letter of April 1887 to Duplessis's first biographer, Romain Vienne. "If anyone had told me when I galloped in the forest of Saint-Germain with Marie that I would one day write a scholarly homage to Victor Hugo I would have been astonished. But between you and me, I would happily surrender this glory to anyone who could give me back that day, my twenties, and the Lady!"

JULIE KAVANAGH

Suggestions for Further Reading

A Note on the Translation

Do you remember that luscious young celebrity—Daisy something—who was such a big deal when she was twenty? She didn't act, or sing, or dance, she wasn't an heiress, but she managed to get herself known, envied, and talked about by everyone who mattered. She was, you know . . . famous for being famous. Daisy always wore expensive clothes and jewelry made by the most in-demand designers; she showed up at every opening and velvet-rope party, usually on the arm of some phenomenally rich man she was dating who had brought her there in a flashy car. You don't remember? What a pity. Apparently, her fifteen minutes of fame are over.

But really, once, nearly everyone knew all about Daisy. She was dangerously pretty, dangerously thin, lived a little too fast, and by the time she was twenty-three, she'd been in and out of rehab several times, and . . . well, things ended badly . . . and quickly. You still don't remember? Maybe this will help: She lived in Paris; Marguerite was her name in French, and though *marguerite* means "daisy," she was better known for another flower—the camellia, white or red. She carried a bouquet of them with her wherever she went, which is why people liked to call her the Lady of the Camellias. That is, Alexandre Dumas *fils* did, in the novel he wrote about her, *La Dame aux Camélias.* It is about a woman he fell passionately in love with in 1842, when he was eighteen; a famous Parisian courtesan of the 1840s named Marie Duplessis. When Marie died in 1847, her grave was strewn thickly with camellias. But when young Dumas first caught sight of her, she was a vision of youthful beauty, dressed in a white muslin summer dress and a straw hat. In the novel, he resurrected her in that outfit for a romantic country scene between Marguerite (Marie) and her besotted, obsessive lover, a naive young lawyer named Armand, who of course is cast in the image of Dumas *fils* himself.

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You hold in your hands my translation of their tumultuous, doomed love affair. In my translation, I have endeavored to dust off the language of the excellent but antiquated previous English translations I have read, which make this timeless, relatable, and fiery story seem quainter, more distant, and more marmoreal than it is. It is important, while reading this novel, to understand that Marguerite and Armand are the kind of bright, self-destructive young things we still read about in magazines, watch on-screen, or brush up against today. Dumas *fils* had what we would call a "modern" sensibility, in the sense that he was unafraid to write quite baldly about behavior that would still be shocking today. While not explicit in a pornographic sense, his writing was not euphemistic, either. In a bedroom scene toward the end, when Marguerite and Armand briefly reconcile, Dumas *fils* writes with white-hot urgency that is searing to read even a century and a half after the author recorded it. Anyone who has read an outdated English translation of this novel, seen the opera it inspired (*La Traviata*, by Verdi), or watched the film it inspired (*Camille*, starring Greta Garbo) might have missed the audacity, obstinacy, sensuality, and recklessness of its characters.

In my translation, I have sought to preserve the immediacy and the frankness of the narration, as Armand relates it and as Dumas *fils* recorded it, so that its passion may come alive, while its author's idiom and settings are faithfully preserved and relayed. My goal was for twenty-first-century readers who encounter this tragic story of all-consuming love for the first time in these pages to receive the story's impact in all its dimensions, picturing it in the fully realized world of Dumas's nineteenth-century Paris, but feeling it as if it were happening in Paris, New York, or anywhere; and not centuries ago, but today . . . or even tomorrow.

LIESL SCHILLINGER

CHAPTER I

It is my opinion that you cannot create a convincing character until you have made a broad study of human nature, just as you cannot speak a foreign language until you have studied it thoroughly.

Not having reached an age at which I consider myself qualified to invent a character, I content myself with simply describing one.

I therefore ask the reader to accept the truth of this story—all of whose characters, except for its heroine, are still living.

I should add that, in Paris, there are eyewitnesses to most of the facts I gather here, who would be able to confirm them should my own testimony be deemed insufficient. By a particular circumstance, I am the only one who can relate them all, as it was only I who was acquainted with the final details without which it would have been impossible to write an account that was both interesting and complete.

To return to my subject, let me tell you how these details came to my attention. On the twelfth day of the month of March, 1847, I saw in the rue Laffitte a large yellow sign announcing a sale of furniture and valuable curios. This sale was taking place after a death. The poster did not give the name of the deceased, but the sale was to take place on the rue d'Antin, No. 9, on the sixteenth, from noon to five o'clock.

Additionally, the sign specified, the apartment and its furnishings could be visited on the thirteenth and fourteenth.

I have always been fond of curios. I vowed not to miss this occasion, if only to look, not to buy.

The next day I presented myself at the rue d'Antin, No. 9.

It was early, but a good number of visitors were already in the apartment, even female visitors, who, though they were dressed in velvet and wrapped in cashmere shawls, and though they were awaited outside the doors by elegant coupés, gazed with astonishment and even admiration at the luxury that met their eyes.

Later I understood this admiration and astonishment, as, having myself begun to examine the offerings as well, I easily recognized that I was in the apartment of a kept woman. And if there is one thing society women long to see—and society women were on the premises—it is the private life of those Parisian women whose carriages splash theirs every day, who sit, like them and alongside them, in their boxes at the opera and at the Théâtre des Italiens, flaunting the insolent opulence of their beauty, their jewels, and their scandals.

The one in whose apartment I found myself was dead, so now even the most virtuous women could penetrate her bedroom. Death had purified the air surrounding this resplendent cloaca, and besides, the ladies could make excuse, if they needed to, that they had come to the sale without knowing whose home it was. They had seen some posters, and had wanted to check out the promised goods and make their selections ahead of time; nothing could be simpler. But that did not prevent them from seeking, in the midst of these marvels, traces of the life of this courtesan, about which they had, no doubt, heard so many strange accounts.

Unfortunately the mysteries had died with the goddess, and despite their best intentions these ladies were unable to find anything amid the objects on display after her death that hinted at what had been on offer while its tenant still breathed.

Nonetheless, of what remained, plenty was covetable. The furnishings were superb. Furniture of rosewood and marquetry, Sèvres vases and Chinese porcelain, Meissen statuettes, satin, velvet, and lace; nothing was lacking.

As I wandered the apartment I followed the curious noblewomen who had preceded me. They entered a room decorated with Persian wall hangings, and I, too, was about to enter, when the ladies left the room almost as quickly as they had entered it, smiling as if they were ashamed of this new wonder. This only increased my desire to enter. It was the dressing room, decked out with a multitude of toiletry articles, in which the breathtaking prodigality of the dead woman received its fullest expression.

Upon a large table that backed against the wall, its surface three feet wide and six feet long, glittered all the golden treasures of Aucoc and Odiot. It was a magnificent collection; not one of those thousand implements—so necessary to the beauty of a woman such as the one whose rooms we were visiting—was made of any metal other than gold or silver. However, it was clear that this collection could not have been obtained all at once; it had accumulated little by little, and the lover who had begun it was not the lover who had completed it.

Not being someone who can be shocked at the sight of the vanity table of a kept woman, I entertained myself by examining the intricacy of the objects, such as it was, and perceived that all these magnificently engraved utensils were marked with a variety of different monograms and crests.

I surveyed all these objects, each one of which represented a different prostitution of the poor girl, and told myself that God had been merciful to her, as he had not forced her to suffer the ordinary punishment of such a woman; he had permitted her to die in luxury and beauty, before old age set in, that first death of courtesans.

Really, what can be sadder to see than the old age of vice—above all, when it visits a woman? She retains no dignity and inspires no interest. That eternal regret, not of the wrong road taken, but of bad planning and ill-spent money, is one of the saddest things a person can hear. I knew a striking old courtesan who retained nothing of her past but a daughter who was almost as pretty as her mother had been—so her contemporaries said. That poor child, whose mother had never said, “You are my daughter,” except to order her to support her in her old age as she had supported the girl in her childhood—that poor creature was named Louise, and, in obeying her mother, served her without inclination, without passion, and without pleasure, as she would have performed any trade, had anyone thought to teach her one.

The continual sight of depravity, a precocious depravity, fed by continual ill health, had extinguished in the girl the knowledge of right and wrong that God had perhaps planted in her, but that nobody had bothered to nurture.

I will always remember that young girl who walked along the boulevards almost every day at the same time. Her mother always accompanied her, as assiduously as a true mother would have accompanied her true daughter. I was very young then, and ready to accept the easy morality of my times. I remember nonetheless that the sight of this scandalous surveillance filled me with contempt and disgust.

Add to this that no virgin’s face had ever conveyed such a feeling of innocence, such an expression of melancholy suffering. She resembled a statue of Resignation.

One day the face of this girl brightened. In spite of the program of debauchery that her mother had organized for her, it appeared that God had granted the sinner one happiness. And why, after all, would God, who had made her without strength, have left her with no consolation whatever for the painful burden of her life? One day she realized she was pregnant, and everything within her that remained pure and undefiled leapt for joy. The soul has strange refuges. Louise ran to her mother to announce the news that had made her so joyful. It is shameful to say this (however, we do not discuss immorality frivolously here; we relay a true fact, which we would perhaps do better to keep silent, if we did not believe that every now and then we must reveal the martyrs among those beings we condemn without understanding, whom we scorn without giving a chance to

defend themselves), it is shameful, we will say, but the mother told her daughter that they barely had enough for two people as it was, and could not support three; that children in such circumstances were useless, and that a pregnancy was just so much lost time.

The next day a midwife we know only as the friend of the mother came to see Louise, who remained in bed several days afterward, and emerged thereafter paler and weaker than before.

Three months later a man took pity on her and attempted to heal her morally and physically, but the last blow had been too violent, and Louise died from complications following her miscarriage.

Her mother still lives. How? God knows.

This story returned to my thoughts as I contemplated the silver toiletry articles, and I must have passed a significant period of time in my reflections, as there was no longer anyone in the apartment except for me and a guard who kept a watchful eye from the door, to be sure I didn't make off with anything.

I walked up to this stout soul, in whom I provoked such grave anxiety.

"Sir," I said to him, "could you tell me the name of the person who resided here?"

"Miss Marguerite Gautier."

I knew that girl by name and by sight.

"What!" I said to the guard. "Marguerite Gautier is dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did she die?"

"Three weeks ago, I believe."

"And why are they permitting people to visit the apartment?"

"The creditors thought it would increase the selling prices. If people get a sense of the quality of the cloth and the furniture ahead of time, you understand, it boosts sales."

"So she had debts?"

"Oh! Sir. Abundant debts."

"But the sale will definitely cover them?"

"And then some."

"Who will get the surplus, then?"

"Her family."

"Then she has family?"

"So it would seem."

“Thank you, sir.”

The guard, reassured of my good intentions, bowed to me, and I left.

“Poor girl!” I said to myself as I returned home. She must have died in a pitiable state, because in her crowd, you have friends only when things are going well. In spite of myself, I grieved for the fate of Marguerite Gautier.

This may seem ridiculous to many people, but I have an inexhaustible sympathy for the plight of courtesans, and I refuse to apologize for this indulgence.

Once as I was going to the police station to pick up a passport, I saw a girl being led away by two policemen down an adjoining road. I don’t know what the girl had done; all I can say is that she was shedding bitter tears while clutching a child a few months old, from whom her arrest would separate her. Since that day I have never been capable of despising a woman at first sight.

CHAPTER II

The sale was to take place on the sixteenth.

An interval of one day had been set between the open house and the sale, to give the drapers time to remove the hangings, curtains, and so on.

At that time I had recently returned from a trip. It was natural enough that nobody would have regarded the death of Marguerite as one of those juicy tidbits of news that friends make sure to tell anyone who returns to the capital of gossip. Marguerite was pretty, but the stir that such attention-getting women kick up in life fades quickly in death. They are suns that set just as they rose, without fanfare. Their deaths, when they die young, are discovered by all their lovers at the same time, because in Paris, nearly all the lovers of a well-known courtesan are intimately acquainted with one another. A few memories are shared about her, then everyone’s lives continue as before, without the incident provoking a single tear.

Users Review

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