Gaston de Latour

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CHAPTER III

Modernity

The besieging armies disappeared like the snow, leaving city and suburb in all the hardened soilure of war and winter, which only the torrents of spring would carry away. And the spring came suddenly: it was pleasant, after that long confinement, to walk afar securely, through its early fervours. Gaston, too, went forth, on his way home, not alone. Three chosen companions went with him, pledged to the old manor for months to come; its lonely ancient master welcoming readily the tread of youth about him. "The Triumvirate":—so their comrades had been pleased to call the three; that term (delightful touch of classic colour on one's own trite but withal pedantic age) being then familiar, as the designation of three conspicuous agents on the political scene of the generation just departing. Only, these young Latinists went back for the associations of the word to its Roman original, to the three gallants of the distant time, rather than to those native French heroes—Montmorenci, Saint-André, Guise—too close to them to seem really heroic. Mark Antony, knight of Venus, of Cleopatra: shifty Lepidus: bloody, yellow-haired Augustus, so worldly and so fine: you might find their mimic semblance, more clearly than any suggestion of that triad of French adventurers, in the unfolding manhood of Jasmin, Amadée, and Camille.

They had detached themselves by an irresistible natural effectiveness from the surface of that youthful scholastic world around the episcopal throne of Chartres, carrying its various aptitudes as if to a perfect triple flower; restless Amadée de l'Autrec, who was to be a soldier, dazzled early into dangerous, rebellious paths by the iron ideal of the warriors of "the religion," and even now fitting his blond prettiness to airs of Huguenot austerity; Camille Pontdormi, who meant to be a lawyer in an age in which certain legists had asserted an audacity of genius after a manner very captivating to youth with
any appetite for predominance over its fellows—already winsomely starched a little amid his courtly finery of garb, and manner, and phrase; Jasmin de Villebon, who hardly knew what he meant, or wished, to be except perhaps a poet—himself, certainly, a poem for any competent reader. Vain,—yes! a little, and mad, said his companions, of course, with his clinging, exigent, lover's ways. It was he who had led the others on this visit to Gaston de Latour. Threads to be cut short, one by one, before his eyes, the three would cross and re-cross, gaily, pathetically, in the tapestry of Gaston's years, and, divided far asunder afterwards, seemed at this moment, moving there before him in the confidential talk he could not always share, inseparably linked together, like some complicated pictorial arabesque, under the common light of their youth, and of the morning, and of their sympathetic understanding of the visible world.

So they made their way, under the rows of miraculous white thorn-blossom, and through the green billows, at peace just then, though the war still blazed or smouldered along the southern banks of the Loire and far beyond, and it was with a delightful sense of peril, of prowess attested in the facing of it, that they passed from time to time half-ruined or deserted farm-buildings where the remnants of the armies might yet be lingering. It was Jasmin, poetic Jasmin, who, in giving Gaston the book he now carried ever ready to hand, had done him perhaps the best of services, for it had proved the key to a new world of seemingly boundless intellectual resources, and yet with a special closeness to visible or sensuous things: the scent and colour of the field-flowers, the amorous business of the birds, the flush and reflegree of the black earth itself in that fervent springtide, which was therefore unique in Gaston's memory. It was his own intellectual springtide; as people look back to a physical spring, which for once in ten or fifteen years, for once in a lifetime, was all that spring could be.

The book was none other than Pierre de Ronsard's "Odes," with Mignonnelallons voir si la rose, and "The Skylark" and the lines to April—itself verily like nothing so much as a jonquil, in its golden-green binding and yellow edges and perfume of the place where it had lain—sweet, but with something of the sickness of all spring flowers since the days of Proserpine. Just eighteen years old, and the work of the poet's own youth, it took possession of Gaston with the ready intimacy of one's equal in age, fresh at every point; and he experienced what it is the function of contemporary poetry to effect anew for sensitive youth in each succeeding generation. The truant and irregular poetry of his own nature, all in solution there, found an external and authorised mouth-piece, ranging itself rightfully, as the latest achievement of
human soul in this matter, along with the consecrated poetic voices of the past.

Poetry!—Hitherto it had seemed hopelessly chained to the bookshelf, like something in a dead language, "dead, and shut up in reliquaries of books," or like those relics "one may only see through a little pane of glass," as one of its recent liberators had said. Sure, apparently, of its own "niche in the temple of Fame," the recognised poetry of literature had had the pretension to defy or discredit, as depraved and irredeemably vulgar, the poetic motions in the living genius of to-day. Yet the genius of to-day, extant and forcible, the wakeful soul of present time consciously in possession, would assert its poetic along with all its other rights; and in regard to the curiosity, the intellectual interest, of Gaston, for instance, it had of course the advantage of being close at hand, as with the effectiveness of a personal presence. Studious youth, indeed, put on its mettle, though it may make a docile profession of faith regarding the witchery, the thaumaturgic powers, of Virgil, or may we say of Shakespeare, is yet often actually of listless mood enough over books that certainly stirred the past profoundly. How faint and dim, after all, the sorrows of Dido, of Juliet, the travail of Aeneas, beside quite recent things felt or done—stories which, floating to us on the light current of to-day's conversation, leave the soul in a flutter! At best, poetry of the past could move one with no more directness than the beautiful faces of antiquity which are not here for us to see and unaffectedly love them. Gaston's demand (his youth only conforming to pattern therein) was for a poetry, as veritable, as intimately near, as corporeal, as the new faces of the hour, the flowers of the actual season. The poetry of mere literature, like the dead body, could not bleed, while there was a heart, a poetic heart, in the living world, which beat, bled, spoke with irresistible power. Elderly people, Virgil in hand, might assert professionally that the contemporary age, an age, of course, of little people and things, deteriorate since the days of their own youth, must necessarily be unfit for poetic uses. But then youth, too, had its perpetual part to play, protesting that, after all said, the sun in the air, and in its own veins, was still found to be hot, still begetting, upon both alike, flowers and fruit; nay! visibly new flowers, and fruit richer than ever. Privately, in fact, Gaston had conceived of a poetry more thaumaturgic than could be anything of earlier standing than himself. The age renews itself; and in immediate derivation from it a novel poetry also grows superb and large, to fill a certain mental situation made ready in advance. Yes! the acknowledged, and, so to call it, legitimate, poetry of literature was but a thing he might sip at, like some sophisticated rarity in the way of wine, for example, pleasing the
acquired taste. It was another sort of poetry, unexpressed, perhaps inexpressible, certainly hitherto not made known in books, that must drink up and absorb him, like the joyful air,—him, and the earth, with its deeds, its blossoms, and faces.

In such condition of mind, how deeply, delightfully, must the poetry of Ronsard and his fellows have moved him, when he became aware, as from age to age inquisitive youth by good luck does become aware, of the literature of his own day, confirming—more than confirming—anticipation! Here was a poetry which boldly assumed the dress, the words, the habits, the very trick, of contemporary life, and turned them into gold. It took possession of the lily in one’s hand, and projecting it into a visionary distance, shed upon the body of the flower the soul of its beauty. Things were become at once more deeply sensuous and more deeply ideal. As at the touch of a wizard, something more came into the rose than its own natural blush. Occupied so closely with the visible, this new poetry had so profound an intuition of what can only be felt, and maintained that mood in speaking of such objects as wine, fruit, the plume in the cap, the ring on the finger. And still that was no dubious or generalised form it gave to flower or bird, but the exact pressure of the jay at the window: you could count the petals, of the exact natural number: no expression could be too faithful to the precise texture of things; words, too, must embroider, be twisted and spun, like silk or golden hair. Here were real people, in their real, delightful attire, and you understood how they moved. The visible was more visible than ever before, just because soul had come to the surface. The juice in the flowers, when Ronsard named them, was like wine or blood, so coloured were things. Though the grey things also, the cool things, all the fresher for the contrast—with a freshness, again, that seemed to touch and cool the soul—found their account there: the clangorous passage of the birds at night foretokening rain, the moan of the wind at the door, the wind’s self made visible over the yielding corn.

Thus it was Gaston understood the poetry of Ronsard, generously expanding it to the full measure of its intention. That poetry, too, lost its thaumaturgic power in turn and became mere literature in exchange for life, partly in the natural revolution of poetic taste, partly for its faults. Faults and all however Gaston loyally accepted it; those faults—the lapse of grace into affectation, of learning into pedantry, of exotic fineness into a trick—counting with him as but the proof of faith to its own dominant positions. They were but characteristics, as such needing no apology with the initiated, or welcome even, as savouring of the master’s peculiarities of perfection. He listened, he looked round freely, but always now with the ear, the eye, of his favourite
poet. It had been a lesson, a doctrine, the communication of an art,—the art of placing the pleasantly aesthetic, the welcome, elements of life at an advantage in one's view of it till they seemed to occupy the entire surface; and he was sincerely grateful for an undeniable good service.

And yet the gifted poet seemed but to have spoken what was already in Gaston's own mind, what he had longed to say, had been just going to say: so near it came, that it had the charm of a discovery of one's own. Perhaps that was because the poet told one so much about himself, making so free a display of what though personal was very contagious, of his love-secrets especially, how love and nothing else filled his mind. He was in truth but "love's secretary," noting from hour to hour its minutely changing fortunes. Yes! that was the reason why visible, audible, sensible things glowed so brightly, why there was such luxury in sounds, words, rhythms, of the new light come on the world, of that wonderful freshness. With a masterly appliance of what was near and familiar, or, again, in the way of bold innovation, he found new words for perennially new things, and the novel accent awakened long-sleeping associations. Never before had words, single words, meant so much. What expansion, what liberty of heart, in speech: how associable to music, to singing, the written lines! He sang of the lark, and it was the lark's voluble self. The physical beauty of humanity lent itself to every object, animate or inanimate, to the very hours and lapses and changes of time itself. An almost burdensome fulness of expression haunted the gestures, the very dress, the personal ornaments, of the people on the highway. Even Jacques Bonhomme at his labour, or idling for an hour, borrowed from his love, homely as it was, a touch of dignity or grace, and some secret of utterance, which made one think of Italy or Greece. The voice of the shepherd calling, the chatter of the shepherdess turning her spindle, seemed to answer, or wait for answer—to be fragments of love's ideal and eternal communing.

It was the power of "modernity," as renewed in every successive age for genial youth, protesting, defiant of all sanction in these matters, that the true "classic" must be of the present, the force and patience of present time. He had felt after the thing, and here it was,—the one irresistible poetry there had ever been, with the magic word spoken in due time, transforming his own age and the world about him, presenting its every-day touch, the very trick one knew it by, as an additional grace, asserting the latent poetic rights of the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent. Poetry need no longer mask itself in the habit of a by-gone day: Gaston could but pity the people of by-gone days for not being above-ground to read. Here was a discovery, a new faculty, a
privileged apprehension, to be conveyed in turn to one and another, to be propagated for the imaginative regeneration of the world. It was a manner, a habit of thought, which would invade ordinary life, and mould that to its intention. In truth, all the world was already aware, and delighted. The "school" was soon to pay the penalty of that immediate acceptance, that intimate fitness to the mind of its own time, by sudden and profound neglect, as a thing preternaturally tarnished and tame, like magic youth, or magic beauty, turned in a moment by magic's own last word into withered age. But then, to the liveliest spirits of that time it had seemed nothing less than "impeccable," after the manner of the great sacred products of the past, though in a living tongue. Nay! to Gaston for one, the power of the old classic poetry itself was explained by the reflex action of the new, and might seem to justify its pretensions at last.

From the poem fancy wandered to the poet, and curious youth would fain see the writer in person—what a poet was like, with anxious surmises, this way and that, as to the degree in which the precious mental particles might be expected to have wrought up the outward presence to their own high quality. A creature of the eye, Gaston, in this case at least, the intellectual hold on him being what it was, had no fear of disillusion. His poetic readings had borrowed an additional relish from the genial, companionable manner of his life at this time, taking him into the remotest corners of the vast level land, and its outer ring of blue uplands, amid which, as he rode one day with "the three," towards perfectly new prospects, he had chanced on some tangible rumour of the great poet's present abode. The hill they had mounted at leisure, in talk with a village priest, dropped suddenly upon a vague tract of wood and pasture with a dark ridge beyond, towards the south-west. The black notch, which broke its outline against the mellow space of evening light, was the steeple of the priory of Croix-val, of which reverend body Pierre de Ronsard, although a layman, was, by special favour of King Charles, Superior.

Though a formal peace was come, though the primary movers of war had taken hands or kissed each other, and were exchanging suspicious courtesies, yet the unquiet temper of war was still abroad everywhere with an after-crop of miserable incidents. The captainless national and mercenary soldiers were become in large numbers thieves or beggars, and the peasant's hand sank back to the tame labour of the plough reluctantly. Relieved a little by the sentimental humour of the hour, lending, as Ronsard prompted, a poetic and always amorous interest to everything around him, poor Gaston's very human soul was vexed nevertheless at the spectacle of the increased hardness of human
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life, with certain misgivings from time to time at the contrast of his own luxurious tranquillity. The homeless woman suckling her babe at the roadside, the grey-beard hasting before the storm, the tattered fortune-teller who, when he shook his head at her proposal to “read his hand,” assured him (perhaps with some insight into his character) “You do that”—you shake your head negatively—“too much”:—these, and the like, might count as fitting human accidents in an impassioned landscape picture. And his new imaginative culture had taught him to value “surprises” in nature itself, the quaint charm of the mistletoe in the wood, of the blossom before the leaf, the cry of passing birds at night: nay! the most familiar details of nature also, its daily routine of light and darkness, beset him now with a kind of troubled and troubling eloquence. The rain, the first streak of dawn, the very sullenness of the sky, had a power only to be described by saying that they seemed to be moral facts.

On his way at last to gaze on the abode of the new hero or demi-god of poetry, Gaston perceives increasingly as another excellence of his verse, how truthful it was, how close to the minute fact of the scene around. There are pleasant wines which, expressing the peculiar quality of their native soil, lose their special pleasantness away from home. The physiognomy of the scene had changed: the plain of La Beauce had ruffled itself into low green hills and gently winding valleys, with clear, quick water and fanciful patches of heath and woodland. Here and there a secular oak tree maintained a solitude around it. It was the district of the “little Loir”—the Vendomois; and here in its own country, the new poetry, notwithstanding its classic elegance, might seem a native wild flower, modest enough.

Gaston then came riding with his companions towards evening along the road which had suddenly abandoned its day-long straightness for wanton curves and ascents; and there, as an owl on the wing cried softly, beyond the tops of the spreading poplars was the west front, silver-grey and quiet, inexpressibly quiet, with worn, late gothic “flamings” from top to bottom, as full of reverie to Gaston’s thinking as the enchanted castle in a story-book. The village lay thinly scattered around the wide, grass-grown space. Below was the high espaliered garden-wall, and within it, visible through the open doors, a gaunt figure, hook-nosed, like a wizard, at work with the spade, too busily to turn and look. Or was it that he did not hear at all the question repeated thrice:—Could one see His Reverence the Prior, at least in the Convent Church? “You see him!” was the answer, as a face, all nerve, distressed nerve, turned upon them not unkindly, the vanity of the great man being aware and pleasantly tickled. The unexpected incident had quickened
a prematurely aged pulse, and in reward for their good service the young
travellers were bidden carry their equipment, not to the village inn, but to the
guest-chamber of the half-empty priory. The eminent man of letters, who had
been always an enthusiastic gardener, though busy just now, not with choice
flowers, but with salutary kitchen-stuff, working indeed with much effort to
counteract the gout, was ready enough in his solitude to make the most of
chance visitors, especially youthful ones. A bell clanged. He laid aside the
spade, and casting an eye at the whirling weather-vanes announced that it
would snow. There had been no “sunset.” They had travelled away impercep-
tibly from genial afternoon into a world of ashen evening.

The enemies of the lay Prior, satirists literary and religious, falsely made
a priest of him, a priest who should have sacrificed a goat to pagan Bacchus.
And in truth the poet, for a time a soldier, and all his life a zealous courtier,
had always been capable, as a poet should be, of long-sustained meditation,
adapting himself easily enough to the habits of the “religious,” following
attentively the choir-services in their church, of which he was a generous
benefactor, and to which he presently proceeded for vespers and matins.
Gaston and “the three” sat among the Brethren, tempting curious eyes, in the
stalls of the half-lighted choir, while in purple cope and jaunty biretta the lay
Prior “assisted,” his confidentiaire, or priestly substitute, officiating at the
altar. The long, sad, Lenten office over, an invitation to supper followed, for
Ronsard still loved, in his fitful retirements at one or another of his numerous
benefices, to give way to the chance recreation of flattering company, and
these gay lads’ enthusiasm for his person was obvious. And as for himself, the
great poet, with his bodily graces and airs of court, had always possessed the
gift of pleasing those who encountered him.

The snow was falling now in big, slow flakes, and a great fire blazed under
the chimney, with its cipher and enigmatic motto, as they sat down to the
leek-soup, the hard eggs, and the salad grown and gathered by their host’s
own hands. The long stone passages through which they passed from church,
with the narrow brown doors of the monks’ dormitories one after another
along the white-washed wall, made the coquetries of the Prior’s own distant
apartment all the more reassuring. You remembered that from his ninth year
he had been the pet of princesses, the favourite of kings. Upon the cabinets,
 chests, book-cases, around, were ranged the souvenirs received from various
royal persons, including three kings of France, the fair Queen of Scots,
Elizabeth of England. The conversation therefore fell to, and was kept going
by, the precious contents of the place where they were sitting, the books
printed and bound as they have never been before—books which meant
assiduous study, the theory of poetry, with Ronsard, accompanying its practice—delicate things of art which beauty had handled or might handle, the pictured faces on the walls, in their frames of reeded ebony or jewelled filigree. There was the Minerva, decreed him at a conference of the elegant, pedantic Jeux Floraux, which had proclaimed Pierre de Ronsard “Prince of Poets.” The massive silver image Ronsard had promptly offered to his patron King Charles; but in vain, for, though so greatly in want of ready money that he melted down church ornaments and exacted “black” contributions from the clergy, one of the things in which Charles had ever been sincere was a reverence for literature.

So there it stood, doing duty for Our Lady, with gothic crown and a fresh sprig of consecrated box, bringing the odd, enigmatic physiognomy, preferred by the art of that day, within the sphere of religious devotion. The King's manuscript, declining, in verse as good as Ronsard's, the honour not meant for him, might be read attached to the pedestal. The ladies of his own verse, Marie, Cassandra, and the rest, idols one after another of a somewhat artificial and for the most part unrequited love, from the Angevine maiden—La petite pucelle Angevine—who had vexed his young soul by her inability to yield him more than a faint Platonic affection, down to Helen, to whom he had been content to propose no other, gazed, more impassibly than ever, from the walls.

They might have been sisters, those many successive loves, or one and the same lady over and over again, in slightly varied humour and attire—at the different intervals perhaps of some rather lengthy, mimetic masque of love, to which the theatrical dress of that day was appropriate. The mannered Italian or Italianised artists, including the much-prized, native Janet, with his favourite water-green backgrounds, aware of the poet's predilection, had given to one and all alike the same brown eyes and tender eyelids and golden hair and somewhat ambered paleness, varying only the curious artifices of the dress—knots and nets and golden spider-work and clear flat stones. Dangerous guests in that simple, cloistral place, Sibyls of the Renaissance on a mission from Italy to France, to Gaston one and all seemed under the burden of some weighty message concerning a world unknown to him which the stealthy lines of cheek and brow contrived to express, while the lips and eyes only smiled, not quite honestly. It had been a learned love, with undissembled “hatred of the vulgar.” Three royal Margarets, much-praised pearls of three successive generations (to the curious in these objects purity is far from being the only measure of value) asserted charms a thought more frank, or French, though still gracefully pedantic, with their quaintly
kerchiefed books—books of what?—in their pale hands. Among the ladies, on the pictured wall as in life, were the poet's male companions, stirring memories of a more material sort, though their common interest had been poetry—memories of that Bohemia which even a "Prince" of court poets had frequented when he was young, of his cruder youthful vanities. In some cases the date of death was inscribed below.

One there was among them, the youngest, of whose genial fame to come this experienced judge of men and books, two years before "Saint Bartholomew's," had been confident,—a crowned boy, King Charles himself. Here, perhaps, was the one entirely disinterested sentiment of the poet's life, wholly independent of a long list of benefits, or benefices; for the younger had turned winsomely, appealingly, to the elder who, forty years of age, feeling chilly at the thought, had no son. And of one only of those companions did the memory bring a passing cloud. It was long ago, on a journey, that he had first spoken, accidentally, with Joachim Du Bellay, whose friendship had been the great intellectual fortune of his life. For a moment one saw the encounter at the way-side inn, in the broad, gay morning, a quarter of a century since; and there was the face;—deceased at thirty-five. Pensive, plaintive, refined by sickness, of exceeding delicacy, it must from the first have been best suited to the greyness of an hour like this.—Tomorrow, where will be the snow?

The leader in that great poetic battle of the Pleiad, their host himself, (he explained the famous device, and named the seven chief stars in the constellation,) was depicted appropriately, in veritable armour, with antique Roman cuirass of minutely inlaid gold and flowered mantle, the crisp, ceremonial laurel-wreath of the Roman conqueror lying on the audacious, over-developed brows, above the great hooked nose of practical enterprise. In spite of his pretension to the Epicurean conquest of a kingly indifference of mind, the portrait of twenty years ago betrayed, not less than the living face with its roving, astonished eyes, the haggard soul of a haggard generation, whose eagerly-sought refinements had been after all little more than a theatrical make-believe—an age of wild people, of insane impulse, of homicidal mania. The sweet-souled singer had no more than others attained real calm in it. Even in youth nervous distress had been the chief facial characteristic. Triumphant, however, in his battle for Greek beauty—for the naturalisation of Greek beauty in the brown cloud-lands of the North—he might have been thinking, contemptuously, of barking little Saint-Gelais, or of Monsieur Marot's pack-thread poems. He, for his part, had always held that poetry must be woven of delicate silk, of fine linen, or at least of good home-spun worsted.
To Gaston, yielding himself to its influence, for a moment the scene around seemed unreal. An exotic, embalming air, escaped from some old Greek or Roman pleasure-place, had turned the poet's workroom into a strange kind of private sanctuary, amid these rude conventual buildings, with the March wind aloud in the chimneys. Notwithstanding, what with the long day's ride, the keen evening, they had done justice to the monastic fare, the "little" wine of the country, the cream, the onions,—fine Camille, and dainty Jasmin! and the poet turned to talk upon gardening, concerning which he could tell them a thing or two—of early salads, and those special apples the king loved to receive from him, mille-fleur pippins, painted with a thousand tiny streaks of red, yellow, and green. A dish of them now came to table, with a bottle, at the right moment, from the darkest corner of the cellar. And then, in nasal voice, well-trained to Latin intonation, giving a quite medieval amplitude to the poet's sonorities of rhythm and vocabulary, the Sub-prior was bidden to sing, after the notation of Goudimel, the "Elegy of the Rose"; while the author girded cheerily at the clerkly man's assumed ignorance of such compositions.

It was but a half-gaiety, in truth, that awoke in the poet even now, with the singing and the good wine, as the notes echoed windily along the passages. On his forty-sixth year the unaffected melancholy of his later life was already gathering. The dead!—he was coming to be on their side. The fact came home to Gaston that this evocator of "the eternally youthful" was visibly old before his time; his work being done, or centered now for the most part on amendments, not invariably happy, of his earlier verse. The little panelled drawers were full of them. The poet pulled out one, and as it stood open for a moment there lay the first book of the Franciade, in silken cover, white and gold, ready for the king's hands, but never to be finished.

Gaston, as he turned from a stolen reading of the opening verse, in jerky, feverish, gouty manuscript, to the writer, let out his soul perhaps. The poet's face struck fire too, and seeming to detect on a sudden the legible document of something by no means conventional below the young man's well-controlled manner and expression, he became as if paternally anxious for his intellectual furtherance, and in particular for the addition of "manly power" to a "grace" of mind, obviously there already in due sufficiency. Would he presently carry a letter with recommendation of himself to Monsieur Michel de Montaigne? Linked they were, in the common friendship of the late Etienne de la Boetie yonder! Monsieur Michel could tell him much of the great ones—of the Greek and Latin masters of style. Let his study be in them! With what justice, by the way, had those Latin poets dealt with winter, and
wintry charms, in their bland Italy! And just then, at the striking of a ricketty
great bell of the Middle Age, in the hands of a cowled brother, came the
emblazoned grace-cup, with which the Prior de Ronsard had enriched his
“house,” and the guests withdrew.

“Yesterday’s snow” was nowhere, a surprising sunlight everywhere;
through which, after gratefully bidding adieu to the great poet, almost on
their knees for a blessing, our adventurers returned home. Gaston, intently
pondering as he lingered behind the others, was aware that this new poetry,
which seemed to have transformed his whole nature into half-sensuous
imagination, was the product not of one or more individual writers, but
(though it might be in the way of a response to their challenge) a general
direction of men’s minds, a delightful “fashion” of the time. He almost
anticipated our modern idea, or platitude, of the Zeitgeist.—Social instinct
was involved in the matter, and loyalty to an intellectual movement. As its
leader had been himself the first to suggest, the actual authorship belonged
not so much to a star as to a constellation, like that hazy Pleiad he had
pointed out in the sky, or like the swarm of larks abroad this morning over
the corn, led by a common instinct, a large element in which was sympathetic
trust in the instinct of others. Here, truly, was a doctrine to propagate, a secret
open to every one who would learn, towards a new management of life,—nay!
a new religion, or at least a new worship, maintaining and visibly setting forth
a single overpowering apprehension.

The worship of physical beauty,—a religion, the proper faculty of which
would be the bodily eye! Looked at in this way, some of the well-marked
characteristics of the poetry of the Pleiad assumed a hieratic, almost an
ecclesiastical air. That rigid correctness; that gracious unction, as of the
medieval Latin psalmody; that aspiring fervour; that jealousy of the profane
“vulgar”; the sense, flattering to one who was in the secret, that this thing,
even in its utmost triumph, could never be really popular:—why were these
so welcome to him but from the continuity of early mental habit? He might
renew the over-grown tonsure, and wait, devoutly, rapturously, in this goodly
sanctuary of earth and sky about him, for the manifestation, at the moment
of his own worthiness, of flawless humanity, in some undreamed-of depth
and perfection of the loveliness of bodily form.

And therewith came the consciousness, no longer of mere bad-
neighbourship between what was old and what was new in his life, but of
incompatibility between two rival claimants upon him, of two ideals. Might
that new religion, so to term it, be a religion not altogether of goodness, a
profane religion, in spite of its poetic fervours? There were “flowers of evil,”
among the rest. It came in part, avowedly, as a kind of consecration of evil, seeming to lend it the beauty of holiness. Rather, good and evil were distinctions inapplicable in proportion as these new interests made themselves felt. For a moment, amid casuistical questions as to one's indefeasible right to liberty of heart, he saw himself, somewhat wearily, very far gone from the choice, the dedication, of his boyhood. If he could but be rid of it altogether! Or, if it would but assert itself, speak, with irresistible decision and effect! Might there be perhaps, somewhere, in some penetrative mind in this age of novelties, some scheme of truth, some science of men and things, which could harmonise for him his earlier and later preferences, "the sacred and the profane loves," or, failing that, establish, to his pacification, the exclusive supremacy of the latter?