Gaston de Latour

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CHAPTER VIII

An Empty House

Beauty and ugliness: no! one could never persuade one's self that these were "coincident" or "indifferent" in this Paris of the Renaissance—this garden of all the trees of which according to Bruno's doctrine, Bruno's new religion, one might freely eat. Art, certainly fine art, with which just then Paris was so industriously occupied, had and must have its preferences, its distinctions, was indeed at its height of dainty conscience now, as was borne in upon Gaston one day, when, to renew old acquaintance, he made his way through the quiet monastic neighbourhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés to the abode of Jasmin de Villebon, as poetic, as "aesthetic" as ever, and at present a very ornamental court official advancing rapidly in the royal favour.

In that choice place, a little hôtel or town-house, of which his father's death had left this youthful mirror of French fashion the master, one had a favourable opportunity for estimating what we now call aesthetic culture was come to under the last of the Valois. It was a Gothic house of the later fifteenth century, when, in anticipation of the exotic elegance of that Medicean taste which would ere long supplant it altogether, the national architecture was already losing its medieval precision, and therewith its strength. To the trained eyes of that day, eyes, we may suspect, in collusion with certain inward tendencies towards relaxation of the moral fibre, it was delightful to see the severe structural lines give way till they vanished, or figured as but graceful pencillings on a quiet surface jealous of all emphatic relief. The column lost its capital and roved softly into the arch, rippling now for ornament rather than support, above the pleasant windows which betrayed, through their fine-grained glass, the fastidious comfort that reigned within. Above, towards a roof still acutely pitched against the rain, the
patterned slates, wont to protect a loosely plastered wall, did duty now as ornament. Year by year the snow, the clinging icicles were reducing the little heads of baked clay below the sill, enlarged from old Roman coin or cameo, into veritable likeness of the antique. Beneath them the ashlar was planed into something like a marble surface, to remind one of the real marble of Italy, and attracting the hand to test its pearly smoothness, while lower still about the doorway, inserted like gems in a homely setting, was real artists’ work on plinths of porphyry or jasper. Borrowing from Bramante, from Raffaello, the “arabesque” pilasters which divided the continuous window of the ground-floor no longer prison-like and medieval, the Northern builder had associated them to the actual neighbourhood, and the thistles and field-flowers, interlaced in emphatic love-knots, were sympathetic with a natural flush of purple here or there in the precious stone. It was à la mode indeed,—the taste of the year,—this highly conscious Italianised manner; and yet (triumph of the élite, of “those who know,” in every age, even when dealing with the modes, the fashions, they have not invented for themselves!) everywhere the individuality, the will of the owner showed through.

The owner after all was absent. An unexpected summons to courtly duty (as polite servants and a silken-corded letter explain), a royal invitation that was like a command, had caused him to break his engagement, as nothing else on earth could have done. Would Gaston make himself at home for awhile, eat, and drink of the choice wine set ready, amuse himself with the books, the pictures, say! the toys? It looked comfortable enough with the fragrant wood fires on this sunless though summer day; and if the owner was absent, all around seemed eloquent concerning him, leading Gaston on his side, as he lingered there, agreeably entertained hour after hour, to all sorts of casuistic considerations concerning the man and his abode, applicable generally, in truth, to the mood of that age as reflected in the mirror of all-accomplished Paris.

An age great in portrait-painting, it found after all its aptest self-expression, its own veritable likeness, in a dwelling like this. In such places, that sensuous and highly coloured life described by Brantôme, still in rapid movement on his animated pages, might seem to have passed over from action to art, to have composed itself for the eye as a thing to be seen, a sort of “still life,” with an exclusive view to spectacular effect. It was a world in which all there was had been emphasised in forms of sensation and told as ornament, as visible luxury or refinement besetting one everywhere: plain, white light was no more. For they took pains, those people, and made their work, as they understood it, complete. If the one thing the philosophic Bruno could not
away with was indolence, the life expressed here was certainly not an indolent life, however trifling to one or another its business might seem. In this age of scholars and of artists, some of the most perfect fruits of art had been here assorted with a perfect scholarship—a scholarship that could think for the whole and each several part with equal solicitude. The very flowers, the dishes set ready for a small company, had been made accomplices in this intention. The exhibition of every-day life as a fine art now happily solving the last minutest difficulties of the material it had to deal with, was complete. As Gaston passed from stair to stair, these walls seemed to shut him off more and more, as by some mutual repulsion, from the crude world outside. Here at least it might seem that all select things whatsoever, all that would really pass with the select few as in any sense productions of fine art, were strictly congruous with one another, begetting by mere juxtaposition something like the unity of a common atmosphere.

And as you may sometimes explain an enigma in the world of events by seeing or coming to know an actual person, to appreciate a personal influence, so here, breathing this atmosphere and amid the peculiar complexion of shadow and light in Jasmin's house, Gaston for the first time was able to define for himself something, a humour, a quality, a character, that was all about one in the Parisian life—something physiognomical, closely connected, therefore, as effect or cause with what must be moral in its operation.

In fact, the portraits, what purported to be the life-likeness of those who would be at home here, reigned in this room, and that as from a throne. At first, indeed, they might have seemed but extraordinary conditions of the atmosphere about them; or, less fancifully, only members of an ornamental scheme, in their places on the panelled walls, so congruous were they in their ebony and green and gold with the wholly inanimate objects around. It was to second thoughts that they explained this atmosphere, by referring one to the original secret of its composition in certain strong personal predilections. Amid all their exotic Italian tendencies, these people had had a measure of old Gallic or Gothic energy within them, forcing their peculiar tastes, their peculiar standard of distinction, as law upon others. To harmonise the living face with its lifeless entourage, to make atmosphere, is, we know, the triumph of pictorial art. Here, such sifted atmosphere as Leonardo or Titian could weave for his portraits, had overflowed the frame and become a common medium, for visitors to this privileged place to move in as freely as they would. How these pictured people saw or liked to see things, had determined a new visual faculty, if it were not rather an endemic infection of the eye;
which helped to explain certain visible peculiarities of the living world beyond these enchanted walls, and might be for Gaston a guide to some further refinements of selection therein. Here, certainly, the impulse had worked consistently with itself. Jealous, exclusive, of whatever was not significant of its own humour, there had been, as this place clearly witnessed on nearer survey, all sorts of shrewd rejections, in what seemed at first sight to be a very catholic aesthetic taste, and within the circuit of its influence, the concord of things disparate, the resultant harmony of effect was entire.

Such elaborately balanced harmonies have, however, as we know, a certain hazard in their conditions, and are apt to be easily disturbed. After all, it was not quite true that all really beautiful things went well together. A book he picked up for its binding, one of many lying ready to hand, struck the jarring note. Not [Le Songe] of Polyphile with [brilliant French engravings,] not L'Heptaméron des nouvelles [of Marguerite of Navarre,] not [ ,] but a little volume printed at Lyons purporting to be the [“sentences”] of the virtuous emperor [Marcus Aurelius.] In all the disguises of the Euphuism of the day, it had come with all sorts of conscious and unconscious transmutation by the way, through the Spanish from a Latin forgery, and was but a faded product of an age of translations, adaptations, mistranslations. But from its faint pages did emerge for the first time to Gaston's consciousness, the image of the antique, strenuous emperor in his life-long contention towards the old Greek “sapience,” disinterested, brave, cold. Well! the atmosphere of that lofty conscience seemed absolutely unassimilable by the alembicated air Gaston was here breathing. To conceive of that at all, to keep the outline of it before him, all that was actually around him must be shut out even from the mental eye. And then certain products of pagan sculpture, nude fragments, arm or hand or torso or braided head, whose well-worn beauty he had scarcely noticed till this moment, amid the lively demand on his attention of the more directly sympathetic work of contemporary art, reinforced that dissonant note. Emphasised now by the suggestions of [the Thoughts], they presented an almost satiric contrast to everything else around them. Under that softly gilded light, set with much consideration as Giorgione might have set the jewel of his human flesh, and amid the rich apparel of the place, that delicately mellow old marble would not really blend. The shadowy ebony and green about it might have been the defiling earth from which it was but lately arisen after long burial. Creature of the fresh air, the fresh sun of Italy, of Greece, it shuddered amidst these tricky indoor splendours of the age of the Valois, and refused to be really, effectively associated with them, even by the graceful intervention of such recent imitators of the antique manner as Michel
Colombe or Germain Pilon. In contrast with Jean Goujon’s daintily clothed voluptuousness of form, the pagan marble might have been primitive humanity itself—naked yet unashamed, fresh from its Creator’s hand and unmistakably before the Fall. It seemed to protest that certain forms, certain refinements in the clothing of a later world were more suggestive of carnal thoughts than the unadorned uncovered flesh. And at least it started questions, some very irritant questions: Did this novel mode of receiving, of reflecting the visible aspects of life commit one to an intellectual scheme, a theory about it, the remoter practical alliances of which one could not precisely ascertain at present, but would inevitably be led to in due course? Was this odd grace no more than the superficial expression of an intellectual aristocracy “differenced” from the rest of the world by mere fashion and taste, or did it involve other differences from the vulgar, less innocent? Was it indeed their shame these people were seeking to hide under a fascinating exterior, which might conceivably become the vesture, the ritual of a new and a very profane religion? Or, did one’s own perhaps crude sense of incompatibility between things, certainly attractive apart, merely indicate that there was some higher level of culture in these matters one had not yet reached? For there might be a mental point of view already attained by some, from the height of which the opposition between the thoughts of Henri and Marguerite de Valois and the thoughts of Antoninus, between the sophisticated colour and form of contemporary art and the antique white sculpture, its white soul, must disappear. There was certainly something over-charged, something questioning and questionable, in the expression of these portraits which became almost caricature in the purely imaginary faces: an air which the very furniture of the period seemed mockingly to reflect. But again, was it only that art had reached its highest power of expression, and must soon become “mannered,” with an expressiveness really beyond anything there was to express? Meantime the artistic mode of the day, professedly derivative from the genial traditions of Italy, had put on the wan Transalpine complexion of Dürer’s Melancholia, the outlook of a mind exercised absorbingly, but by no means quite pleasurably, by with a bewildering variety of thoughts.

It might perhaps be that, after all, things as distinct from persons, such things as those one had so abundantly around one here, were come to be so much that the human being seemed suppressed and practically nowhere amid the works of his hands, amid the objects he had projected from himself. Could there be in this almost exclusive preoccupation with things, to which indeed a sincere care for art may at any time commit us, something of that disproportion of mind which is always akin to mental disease? The physiog-
nomist remarks certainly that the most characteristic pictured faces of that
day have an odd touch of lunacy about them. It was a habit of the time,
symptomatic of much else in it, partly through its minute love of art, partly
in cynic disillusion, to expend strong feelings on small objects. In that world
of Parisian fashion, fashion as you know having its very being in the felicitous
management of slight or unsubstantial things, there might well be no place
left at all for considerations beyond them—how, in a word, shadow matched
substance. Shadow and substance!—had not Bruno declared that shadow and
substance, the outside and what was within, great and little, were to the eye
of reason “seeing all things” indifferently “in God,” themselves “indifferent”
or “coincident”? Had one here in Jasmin’s dainty house, in visible present­
ment, only a slightly ironic form of that doctrine? It was the triumph of art
certainly, “in the end of days”—this transfiguration of the indirect, of the
secondary and accidental matters of existence, deftly extracting pleasure, a
refining pleasure, out of the useful, the barely necessary—though with this
consequence, at least in this instance, that the sheath became too visibly more
than the sword, or, say, the house than the master, than Jasmin himself, in
fact, touching if you found him out of spirits for a moment, enviable,
delightful company for half an hour, but surely of no consequence to any one
at all, and whom you scarcely missed while his evening suit in cloth of silver
and pearls, marvellously godronné, a “symphony in white,” lay ready there to
be looked at like the other high-priced objects around. Was the house then
empty after all? Was it not the essential man? His “effects” we say, with
unconscious irony, of a man’s goods—the French themselves of the bag or
box he has with him, and power thus passing away from man into his works,
it was as if he were already dead.

Dead!—suggestive therefore of melancholy thoughts, depressing to a
creature of the senses—such thoughts as broke in upon Gaston from time to
time through his own years of eager preoccupation with the sensuous aspects
of life, the prosecution of the aesthetic interests discovered to him for the first
time to-day. His search for the lost child, if it had ever indeed existed, proving
hopeless, gradually ceased altogether at last, under the fascination of the
scenes across which it had impelled him; while his uncertainty as to the
mother’s death left him, though no priest, yet in a kind of priestly celibacy
after all, responsible, it might seem, only to himself, his own needs or tastes,
in the disposal of his time. Surely the near, the visible, the immediate, was
prevailing with him over what was distant and unseen, over remote hypothe­
sis or conjecture. That it had so prevailed was an opportunity, in that matter
of aesthetic culture, to make full use of which would be in accordance with
the opportunist doctrines of Bruno and Montaigne still fresh in his ear. Yet it was from a great distance, comparatively, that these voices came which had been about him here all day. Were they notes of birds flitting about the lonely towers of the neighbouring abbey, above the great trees of the Pré-aux-Clercs, or the calling rather of children at play, hungry children at play with something of an effort, solicitous, at moments agonised, as if turned suddenly upon some one passing out of ear-shot, parent or friend? It was as complaining voices, certainly, with a touch also of the significance of that cry Augustine heard one day in the neighbourhood of another great city, that they settled into Gaston's memory. They would be identified by some trick of association with similar sounds haunting ear or fancy through the years that followed, till they came to seem like an acoustic peculiarity of Paris itself—this haunted medieval Paris with those strange, later, dubious (no! certainly holy) Innocents of Saint Bartholomew's Eve still "green in earth" there. Querulous always, invasive and reproachful, they would divert all other sounds into their peculiar note, and were apt to reinforce the distress of every distressful moment. They grew as time went on to be the voices of grown boys sweeping by, resonant, sonorous, the voices of young men at last, masterful, deliberate, expressive, increasing firmly in due order to what the age of the lost or dead child would have grown to be. Piercing now the velvet walls about him, otherwise exclusive of everything but what belonged to the merest foreground of existence, they rendered this long unoccupied day in Jasmin's house a complete epitome of Gaston's subsequent years in Paris.

An opportunity, I said, for the furtherance of the aesthetic life:—and it was telling already, as Gaston became aware, surprised by a certain fineness new to himself in his own reflexion from a Venetian mirror, of lustrous depth and hardness, presumably faithful. Like Wilhelm Meister's approving mentor, the looking-glass assured him that his eyes [were more deep set, his forehead broader, his nose more delicate and his mouth much more pleasant]. If according to the Platonic doctrine people become like what they see, surely the omnipresence of fine art around one must re-touch, at least in the case of the sensitive, what is still mobile in a human countenance. The period, as artistic periods at all events do, had found its expression in a recognised facial type, and Gaston too was conforming to it. Did portraiture not merely reflect life but in part also determine it? The image might react on the original, refining it one degree further. Given that life was a matter of sensations, surely he too was making something of its "brief interval" between the cradle and the grave. Here was the perfected art of the day, and it was a miracle of dainty scruples, of discernment at least between physical beauty and all that
was not that: a practical condition quite at the opposite end of the scale from those rank, unweeded natural growths tolerated by Monsieur de Montaigne, promoted by the doctrines of Bruno. And he might "live up to" it. At least for a while it might take the place of conscience, and by way of proxy represent its larger, vaguer pretensions through the dimness of the world.

—To keep one animated and physically clean, quick and white, as it had certainly kept frail Jasmin de Villebon, who now, spite of all courtly softness burst suddenly into his dwelling with all the cheerful noise proper to youth, with a gaiety of step, a sincerity of voice putting to flight Gaston's late surmises as to hidden sin. His companions promptly retreated from the door, stood for a few moments in the moonlight, and shouted good-night with a laugh as pleasant as his own at the sight of his twinkling light above, and in the confusion of their departure Gaston too slipped forth; he would stay neither to test impressions nor taste the dainty supper; in effect, he had renewed old acquaintance. Yes! the house, the style, was the man.