THE LADY OF THE SALON

I

"Je vous ai recommandé cent fois la vertu; mais n'allez pas attacher a ce mot une foule d'idées puériles et ridicules. Je ne reconnais dans une femme d'autre sagesse que celle qui convient à un honnête homme." MADAME DE PUYSIEUX, *Conseils à Une Amie.*

TOWARDS the end of the reign of Henry the Fourth of France, the Marquise de Rambôuillet built for herself a new hôtel in the Rue St. Thomas-du-Lovre, and placed her staircase in a corner of the building instead of in the middle where all the world had supposed a staircase must be. The social significance of this innovation was quickly seized and applied by other ladies. When the Queen Mother built the Luxembourg she sent her architects to look at the Hôtel Rambôuillet. Perhaps the famous influence of that house upon French life and letters would have been the same with a central staircase, but the genius that exerted the one expressed itself not less significantly in the abolition of the other. The central staircase had cut the house in two, with an enormous drawing-room

on one side and an enormous bedroom on the other. No one had conceived a less naïve distribution. Mme. de Rambôuillet took the first step towards the humanisation of the hôtel. Many more remained to be taken, but they followed inevitably from hers. Having recovered from the staircase the central section of her house, she could arrange the whole floor in a suite of communicating rooms, throwing them together or separating them at will by a system of folding-doors symmetrically arranged. In working out her main idea she added some highly agreeable details, loftier ceilings, larger windows and a livelier scheme of decoration. Before her day no one had thought of painting walls with any other colour than red or tan; she invented her famous blue room. So much of the tradition of the donjon and its furniture remained that the chief mobile feature of the blue room was the great bed in its alcove which the lady occupied to receive her guests,—the *lit paré* of a hundred contes of the middle age.

Throughout the reign of Louis the Fourteenth, this theory of the house prevailed, modified of course by the temperament of that monarch. Rooms grew larger and larger; it was impossible to heat them in winter. Furniture grew more and more monumental; it was impossible to be at ease in one's chair. In

all this, the changing aspect of the lady was implied. She no longer sat upon the grass with jolly Queen Margaret. She was indeed even after the Renaissance accepted and understood as an object of art, but the art of the grand monarch was architecture, for which the lady was an uncongenial and even refractory medium. She became portentous. Her dress was magnificent, stiff, ponderous, inhuman. The portraiture of the time shows her heroic size, her hard Olympian physiognomy. The passions she inspired were formidable and unwieldy, systematically developed and expressed, in a word, baroque.

There is hardly a more striking instance in the lady's history of the reaction between her and her physical surroundings than the complete change in domestic architecture and art that marked the opening of the regency and of an age of feminism, at the beginning of the lady's great century. The dowager Duchess de Bourbon built in 1722 an hôtel which embodied the new spirit, and the eighteenth century was launched. Pierre Patti, an architect of the reign of Louis the Fifteenth understood the matter very well. "Nothing does us so much honour as the invention of the art of distributing apartments. Before us the one consideration was the exterior and magnificence;

the interiors were vast and inconvenient. There were drawing-rooms two stories high and spacious reception-rooms. . . . All these were placed end to end without detachment. Houses were solely for publicity, not for private comfort. All the pleasant arrangements that we admire to-day in the new hôtels, the artful detachment of rooms, the concealed staircases so convenient for hiding an intrigue or avoiding importunate visitors, those contrivances that lighten the labour of servants and make our houses delightful and enchanted dwellings, all these are the invention of our day." With the smaller and more personal room, there came naturally a different theory of decoration. The ponderous disappeared. The timbers which used to be allowed their decorative value were hidden by ceilings and panels. The colossal was replaced by the little. The statues, the columns, the great canvases made way for china figurines, for carven garlands and for mirrors. If the gentlemen of France breathed more freely when Louis the Fourteenth was dead, the lady's emancipation needs a stronger figure. She was herself again; powers had been accumulating for her as money accumulates for an heir during his minority; her great century was before her; and the first outward result of her action was to diminish the scale. Her

furniture was not henceforward to make her look dwarfed; she was tired of the rôle of an ill-executed caryatid. The grandiose and the symmetrical had never become her; her ardent wish was to be surrounded with small objects and to get rid, as far as possible, of things with two sides alike.

The lady's history has in all times been reflected and symbolised by that of her garden. The legend that associates our first mother with a natural garden and Demeter with the fruits of the earth has a meaning that deepens rather than fades as the woman becomes a lady and gardening becomes a fine art. In both the lady and the garden something primarily useful is maintained unproductively for its æsthetic value alone. In each case protoplasm is moulded and coloured by art like so much wax or plaster. The two creations are always felt to be akin; the lady is at her best in the garden, and the garden is incomplete without the lady. It represents the social process that has made her possible; the exclusion of hurtful influences, the repression and modification of natural forces, the pleasant sense of refinement that comes of spending money and labour in the production of the palpably useless. The age that produces an incontestably new type of lady is as proud of it as the gardener can be of a

new double or scented variety. The eighteenth century saw many startling vicissitudes of gardening, and the ladies it produced were comparable only with the black tulip and the blue rose. Art could do no more.

The great garden of the seventeenth century was a man's garden, logical, disciplined, derived in all its details from one controlling principle, planned on an enormous scale. Every gentleman's lawn exhibited a miniature Versailles. The politics and the finance of the reign were mirrored in its gardens. Le Notre and Colbert were but different manifestations of the same genius. Their works had the same duty to fulfil toward their common master, to praise him and magnify him forever. It is true that Louis wavered for a moment between Le Notre's plan and that of Dufresney. Dufresney had designed for the Abbé Pajot a natural garden (as the seventeenth century conceived the natural) without a straight line in it.

But the King after due consideration gave a pension to Dufresney and adopted the plan of Le Notre. He perceived that the natural garden would be a contradiction of the spirit of his reign. Among his subjects it had a certain brief vogue and then died out in France. When it revived there after nearly a cen-

tury it came in congenial company with the rights of man and the maternal nourishment of infants, Anglomania and the hankering after a bicameral constitution. But across the channel it was immediately adopted and was the starting point of what we know as the English garden. In the meantime the ideas of Le Notre prevailed in France. It was an age of long reigns. The new hôtels of the early eighteenth century preserved his formalities, his uncompromising pursuit of a principle. It was bound in the long run to go down before Rousseau and the return to nature, but it began by lending itself to the first aims of the simple life. It was easy to arrange a bit of *bergerie* in a corner of a symmetrical garden by installing a terra-cotta shepherd and shepherdess and clipping the box-trees into sheep. Retarded somewhat by such adaptations, the revolution nevertheless came at last. Men's politics expressed themselves in their gardens; some were called English and some were called Chinese, though in fact they looked very much alike. The main thing was to get rid of symmetry, which was identified with the old régime.

The lady's own personal appearance in the eighteenth century is set before us by exceptionally full documents. It is true that a certain allowance must be made in studying the

portrait of the lady in any age. It is well known that she exerts a strong and characteristic influence on every functionary who exists to supply her special wants, so that a ladies' doctor is readily distinguishable from other doctors, and the cashier in a ladies' bank from other cashiers. In a much greater degree is the professional painter of ladies' portraits distinguishable from other portrait painters. It is only the painters primarily of men, like Velasquez and Rembrandt, who give us the ladies of their time in their frank and engaging ugliness. But if the painter of ladies cannot be trusted to tell us exactly how his sitters really looked, he tells us something far more important. We know à priori that as far as flesh and blood and eyes and teeth go, they looked like their counterparts in any age. What the painter tells is something we could not have learned from any other source, and what the lady's painter always tells, how, namely, the sitter wished to look. Where the man's talent is great, it would perhaps be more just to say that his canvas shows how he wishes the sitter looked; but his ideal and the sitter's are generally the same. Her dress and her jewels are sure to be faithfully presented; if the length of her legs and the curve of her lips are theoretical, and indeed appear to be nearly uniform at any given

period, we are told the truth at one remove, we are put in possession of the ideal of a society.

One of the briefest ways to describe the ideal of a lady's appearance in the eighteenth century is to say that the pastel was invented to express it. Nothing could so conclusively stamp it a woman's century as the rise and prevalence of this medium, itself the invention of a woman. The soft bloom of the lady's cheek, the gentle brilliance of her eyes, the light luxuriance of her hair, the tender colours and graceful fabrics of her dress, the characteristic sentiment of her whole appearance are recalled to us at once by the mere mention of the pastel. It carries with it a whole theory of manners, of love and life. To prove the degree to which it affects the imagination, it is necessary only to study one of Gainesborough's or Romney's ladies skilfully copied in pastel and to note the inexplicable oddity of the transformation. It is true that the whole thing was manfully launched by Watteau in oils. That singular genius doubtless contributed more than any one man to determine the lady's idea of herself until she fell under the even more strongly suggestive influence of Rousseau. But the pastel raised Watteau's view of life to the second power. What he contrived by a miracle to do with oils could be done quite naturally with

pastels. The transition under the Regency from the positiveness of the last reign to the sentimentalism of the next is embodied in them. The Goncourts with their agreeable rhetoric of over-statement have expressed this change in a passage that cannot be forgotten:

"But already," they say, "in the midst of the deities of the Regency appeared a type more delicate, more expressive. A beauty quite different from the beauties of the Palais-Royal begins to make itself felt in that little lady, whose bust-portrait by Rosalba hangs in the Louvre. How charming is the firm and slender grace of this figure! The delicate complexion recalls the fairness of Saxe porcelain, the black eyes light up the whole face; the nose is fine, the mouth small, the neck slender and long. There is no show of dress, no operatic properties; nothing but a bouquet at the breast and a garland of natural flowers interwoven with the loose curls of her hair. It is a new grace making her appearance, who seems, even with the little grimacing monkey held against her by her slender fingers, to proclaim the irregular features and charms that were to fascinate the century. Little by little, woman's beauty becomes animated and refined. It is no longer physical, material, brutal. She escapes from the absolutism of the line; she steps out so to

speak from the type in which she was imprisoned and flashes with the light of liberty. She acquires lightness, animation, the spiritual liveliness which the beholder finds in her face, either in fancy or because it is there. She discovers the soul and the secret of modern beauty, —expression. Her depths, her reflexions, her smile come as you gaze at her, her eye speaks. Irony lies at the corner of her mouth and on her half-opened lips. Intelligence passes over her face and transfigures it,—palpitating, trembling, breathing intelligence brings into play all those invisible fibres that transform a face by expression, giving it a thousand shades of caprice, working upon it with the finest modulations, conferring upon it all sorts of delicacies. The intelligence of the eighteenth century models the woman's face upon the masque of the comedy of Marivaux, so mobile, so finely shaded, so delicate and so prettily animated by all the coquetry of the heart, of charm and of taste."

Early in the century the ideal lady was brunette and striking; under Louis the Sixteenth she was blond and appealing. The Louis Quinze lady painted her lips and cheeks, not with the hard conventional crimson of the Regency, but delicately and with character. The Chevalier d'Elbée, who wished to raise a

fund to pension the wives and widows of officers, proposed a tax on rouge for the purpose. His pamphlet states that more than 2,000,000 pots were sold annually in France at six francs the pot. Towards the end of the century when the lady became sentimental the use of rouge diminished greatly. She returned to nature, and that there should be no mistake about her intention, she sometimes had herself bled to secure the pale, transparent cheek of naïve sensibility.

Watteau dressed the lady in the famous garment which to this day carries his name, a great robe, almost formless, with short full sleeves, falling behind in a great double pleat or with merely gathered fulness and trailing about the wearer. This robe enabled the lady to reconcile the two opposing motives of woman's dress, conventional stiffness and natural lines. For beneath the robe she wore a corset and the petticoat that was presently to swell into a revival of the farthingale. Thus her body was severely outlined beneath the robe, while the robe itself, loose-fitting, floating, constantly detaching itself from strict relation to the contours of the wearer, made her dress romantic. This robe endured with modifications until the fall of the monarchy. As the inflations of the farthingale proceeded, the skirt of the robe parted in front, revealing the *falbala,* a triangle of highly-

ornamented petticoat. Presently the robe itself was pressed into the service of the farthingale and gathered on either side into the paniers which are perhaps the best known mode of the age. Early in the century the lady's hair was dressed low and she wore a little lace cap with strings. Later her coiffure became portentous. The names of Legros and Leonard are less celebrated only than that of John Law. The whole history of the century was reflected in the lady's head-dress which became a rebus. Everyone has read of the *coiffure à la circonstance* which mourned the death of Louis XV with a cypress behind and a cornucopia resting on a sheaf of wheat before; of the *bonnet à la Belle-Poule* which exhibited a frigate under full sail in honour of a naval engagement with the English; of the *coiffure à la Mappemonde,* which displayed on the wearer's head the five divisions of the known globe; and of the *bonnet au Parc Anglais,* with shrubberies and lawns, rivulets, shepherdesses and sheep, and of the *coiffure à l'Inoculation* which represented small-pox by a serpent, medical science by a club, and the result of their encounter by a rising sun and an olive-tree in fruit.

A few years before the Revolution, all this changed. The paniers were let down, the farthingale was abandoned, high heels were cut

off, the hair was dressed meagrely with a garland of flowers, muslin replaced silk, the dress was made simply, *à la Jean Jacques Rousseau, à la Bergere,* or *à la Paysanne.* Under all these disguises the lady remained the same, self-conscious, intelligent, striving to express herself or at any rate to express something. Of all the motives that lead mankind to wear clothes hers was the most artificial. She dressed neither for warmth, nor for decency, nor in the interests of beauty. Her motive was simply that of the actor,—she dressed for her part.

II

THE difference between the status of the lady at Athens in the fifth century before Christ and her status in France in the eighteenth century of our era is so profound that other social changes seem comparatively negligible. The status of property had undergone relatively little change. With some modifications of terminology, labour was exploited as of old. The functions of the gentleman were approximately what they had always been. Adam Smith's analysis of the economic composition of society revealed practically the same constituent elements and motives as Plato's. The lady alone of all classes of society had suc-

ceeded in breaking her tabu and, while leaving her economic basis untouched, in altering her social relations in several fundamental directions. She retained what she had originally and added provinces on every side. At Athens she was allowed the dignities belonging to the head of the household on condition of entire fidelity to her husband. In France she even strengthened her position in the house while no longer fulfilling the condition. She had of old been a lady as distinguished from a courtesan; in the eighteenth century the distinction had disappeared except as between amateurs and professionals. Her private security had of old been connected,—indissolubly as men supposed—with her abstinence from public activity; in the later period she strengthened her hand at home by the importance she gained abroad. But since her economic position was unchanged, since men were still officially in control and what she enjoyed was won by favour, it was necessary that all the changes in her position should be wrought by the connivance of men. Her very great ability could not proceed directly to its goal, but must begin by recommending her to men. She was therefore seated in the fork of a perpetual dilemma; to gain her ends, whether in politics or in millinery or in letters, she must cultivate her powers, but how

far could she cultivate them without giving offence to men? No one but a Puritan will imagine that to be the mistress of a king or a minister or a savant—to be Madame de Pompadour or Madame de Boufflers or Mlle. de Lespinasse—was a matter simply of *beaux yeux*. Such women and hundreds more of the same type were possessed of talents so great that if they had been men they would have been men of distinction. Being women, they had not only to be agreeable in a positive sense, but they had to draw a veil over what might displease if seen too clearly,—over the unremitting intellectual labour which alone enabled them to achieve their ends. They were permitted to undertake great responsibilities provided they preserved an air of being unfit for them, and to present every other evidence of genius provided they dissembled the capacity to take infinite pains.

The education the lady received in her youth before she took the matter in hand herself was not of a sort to raise the presumption of pedantry against her. The convent was the only school and its graduates could not always read and write. The four younger daughters of Louis XV could not when they were "finished" at Fontevrault. Thirty years later the little girl who became Madame Roland received a favour-

able impression at the school of the Congregation, which was one of the best of its day. The sister in charge of instruction was an object of jealousy because of her superior attainments which consisted of a beautiful handwriting, skill with the needle, a knowledge of orthography and some acquaintance with history. Thirty-four pupils from six years old to eighteen occupied a single room and were divided into two classes. The ethical side of the children's training was open to criticism as well as the pedagogical. Little penitents were sent alone to pray in the crypt where the dead nuns were buried. A child of five who had committed a theft was sentenced to be hanged. A block and tackle were fixed to the ceiling, the felon was placed in a clothes-basket and hoisted up, while the nuns sang the *De Profundis.* Another child cried "Are you dead?" "Not yet," replied the victim. Thirty years later when one child was the wife of a maréchal of France and the other a duchess, they used smilingly to repeat the formula in greeting each other in society. But some little girls acquired under such discipline the habit of nervous terrors which was lifelong. To balance their severities, the good sisters allowed the most surprising privileges. Many convents received ladies from the world as transient

guests and these inmates brought the world with them. Madame de Genlis, shortly after her marriage, sojourned in a convent while her husband was absent on military duty. She enjoyed herself thoroughly. The abbess used to invite men to dinner in her apartment; at the carnival, Madame de Genlis was allowed to give in the convent-parlour two balls a week attended by nuns and school girls; when these amusements were insufficient she would sometimes rise at midnight, run about the corridor in the costume of the devil and wake the nuns in their cells. When she found a sister very sound asleep she would paint her cheeks and affix a *mouche* or two. The little girls were often allowed free access to the lady-boarders and listened with round eyes to their tales of life in the world.

The hygiene of the early eighteenth century was primitive everywhere, and the convent was not a leader in reform. Bathing was discouraged. The children sometimes slept in their clothes, either for fear of the cold or to be able to lie a few minutes longer in the morning. They were required to rise early, and yet they had no food until nine o'clock, although the last meal had been taken at not later than six the night before. There was apparently no ventilation in either school-room or dormitory,

and no systematic open-air exercise. The corset was an article of faith, and very careful convents required the pupil to sleep in it lest the good work of the day among her organs be undone at night.

If a little girl were not sent to the convent but educated at home she was not likely to fare very much better. If her parents were thoughtless, she grew up as best she might; if they were thoughtful, they were pretty sure to have a theory of education of which the child was to be the living vindication. No subject was more congenial to the theorists of the eighteenth century; every one had a plan for the regeneration of society, and every one began soundly enough with the training of the child. Stéphanie-Félicité Ducrest de Saint-Aubin, who was later as Madame de Genlis an authority on education, learned to read at the age of five from the teacher of the village school of Saint-Aubin. From her mother's maids she learned a little catechism and plenty of ghost-stories. At the age of seven she had a governess and music-mistress, a girl of sixteen who knew nothing. The curriculum included the catechism, the harpsichord and an abridgment of Buffier's history. After a few days, Buffier was found dull and was replaced by Mademoiselle Scudery's novel of *Clélie*. Now Monsieur de Saint-

Aubin, her father, was a scholar and a student of natural science. He was devoted to his little girl and might have given her a first-rate education. But his hobby was to make her a *"femme forte,"* and the means he adopted was to teach her to handle spiders and frogs and to keep pet mice, with a view to putting her on good terms with creatures so often misunderstood. Her mother was a poet. Her contribution to the child's mental development was to cause her to learn and act parts in comic opera and in the tragedies of Voltaire. She was also dressed in boy's clothes and taught to fence. It was not until after her marriage that she bravely and successfully undertook her own education. Apart from the bizarreries of her experience it was the general lot. The cultivated women who organized and dominated a highly intellectual society had no education. Madame du Deffand learned nothing at her convent; Madame Geoffrin never mastered the art of spelling. The most obvious inference is somewhat damaging to education. Is not the great mental energy of these women, their good judgment, their sound taste, their indefatigable love of letters, evidence of the advantage enjoyed by minds unjaded by routine?