



*But the Almighty Lord hath struck him,
and hath delivered him into the hands
of a woman.*

—THE VULGATE, JUDITH, XVI. 7

MY COMPANY WAS CHARMING.

Opposite me by the massive Renaissance fireplace sat Venus; she was not a casual woman of the half-world, who under this pseudonym wages war against the enemy sex, like Mademoiselle Cleopatra, but the real, true goddess of love.

She sat in an armchair and had kindled a crackling fire, whose reflection ran in red flames over her pale face with its white eyes, and from time to time over her feet when she sought to warm them.

Her head was wonderful in spite of the dead stony eyes; it was all I could see of her. She had wrapped her marble-like body in a huge fur, and rolled herself up trembling like a cat.

"I don't understand it," I exclaimed, "It isn't really cold any longer. For two weeks past we have had perfect spring weather. You must be nervous."

"Much obliged for your spring," she replied with a low stony voice, and immediately afterwards sneezed divinely, twice in succession. "I really can't stand it here much longer, and I am beginning to understand—"

"What, dear lady?"

"I am beginning to believe the unbelievable and to understand the un-understandable. All of a sudden I understand the Germanic virtue of woman, and German philosophy, and I am no longer surprised that you of the North do not know how to love, haven't even an idea of what love is."

"But, madame," I replied flaring up, "I surely haven't given you any reason."

"Oh, you—" The divinity sneezed for the third time, and shrugged her shoulders with inimitable grace. "That's why I have always been nice to you, and even come to see you now and then, although I catch a cold everytime, in spite of all my furs. Do you remember the first time we met?"

"How could I forget it," I said. "You wore your abundant hair in brown curls, and you had brown eyes and a red mouth, but I recognized you immediately by the outline of your face and its marble-like pallor—you always wore a violet-blue velvet jacket edged with squirrel-skin."

"You were really in love with the costume, and awfully docile."

"You have taught me what love is. Your serene form of worship let me forget two thousand years."

"And my faithfulness to you was without equal!"

"Well, as far as faithfulness goes—"

"Ungrateful!"

"I will not reproach you with anything. You are a divine woman, but nevertheless a woman, and like every woman cruel in love."

"What you call cruel," the goddess of love replied eagerly, "is simply the element of passion and of natural love, which is woman's nature and makes her give herself where she loves, and makes her love everything, that pleases her."

"Can there be any greater cruelty for a lover than the unfaithfulness of the woman he loves?"

"Indeed!" she replied. "We are faithful as long as we love, but you demand faithfulness of a woman without love, and the giving of herself without enjoyment. Who is cruel there—woman or man? You of the North in general take love too soberly and seriously. You talk of duties where there should be only a question of pleasure."

"That is why our emotions are honorable and virtuous, and our relations permanent."

"And yet a restless, always unsatisfied craving for the nudity of paganism," she interrupted, "but that love, which is the highest joy,

which is divine simplicity itself, is not for you moderns, you children of reflection. It works only evil in you. *As soon as you wish to be natural, you become common.* To you nature seems something hostile; you have made devils out of the smiling gods of Greece, and out of me a demon. You can only exorcise and curse me, or slay yourselves in bacchantic madness before my altar. And if ever one of you has had the courage to kiss my red mouth, he makes a barefoot pilgrimage to Rome in penitential robes and expects flowers to grow from his withered staff, while under my feet roses, violets, and myrtles spring up every hour, but their fragrance does not agree with you. Stay among your northern fogs and Christian incense; let us pagans remain under the débris, beneath the lava; do not disinter us. Pompeii was not built for you, nor our villas, our baths, our temples. You do not require gods. We are chilled in your world."

The beautiful marble woman coughed, and drew the dark sables still closer about her shoulders.

"Much obliged for the classical lesson," I replied, "but you cannot deny, that man and woman are mortal enemies, in your serene sunlit world as well as in our foggy one. In love there is union into a single being for a short time only, capable of only one thought, one sensation, one will, in order to be then further disunited. And you know this better than I; whichever of the two fails to subjugate will soon feel the feet of the other on his neck—"

"And as a rule the man that of the woman," cried Madame Venus with proud mockery, "which you know better than I."

"Of course, and that is why I don't have any illusions."

"You mean you are now my slave without illusions, and for that reason you shall feel the weight of my foot without mercy."

"Madame!"

"Don't you know me yet? Yes, I am *cruel*—since you take so much delight in that word—and am I not entitled to be so? Man is the one who desires, woman the one who is desired. This is woman's entire but decisive advantage. Through his passion nature has given man into woman's hands, and the woman who does not know how to make him her subject, her slave, her toy, and how to betray him with a smile in the end is not wise."

"Exactly your principles," I interrupted angrily.

"They are based on the experience of thousands of years," she replied ironically, while her white fingers played over the dark fur. "The more devoted a woman shows herself, the sooner the man sobers down and becomes domineering. The more cruelly she treats him and the more faithless she is, the worse she uses him, the more wantonly she plays with him, the less pity she shows him, by so much the more will she increase his desire, be loved, worshipped by him. So it has always been, since the time of Helen and Delilah, down to Catherine the Second and Lola Montez."

"I cannot deny," I said, "that nothing will attract a man more than the picture of a beautiful, passionate, cruel, and despotic woman who wantonly changes her favorites without scruple in accordance with her whim—"

"And in addition wears furs," exclaimed the divinity.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I know your predilection."

"Do you know," I interrupted, "that, since we last saw each other, you have grown very coquettish."

"In what way, may I ask?"

"In that there is no way of accentuating your white body to greater advantage than by these dark furs, and that—"

The divinity laughed.

"You are dreaming," she cried, "wake up!" and she clasped my arm with her marble-white hand. "Do wake up," she repeated raucously with the low register of her voice. I opened my eyes with difficulty.

I saw the hand which shook me, and suddenly it was brown as bronze; the voice was the thick alcoholic voice of my cossack servant who stood before me at his full height of nearly six feet.

"Do get up," continued the good fellow, "it is really disgraceful."

"What is disgraceful?"

"To fall asleep in your clothes and with a book besides." He snuffed the candles which had burned down, and picked up the volume which had fallen from my hand, "with a book by"—he looked at the title page—"by Hegel. Besides it is high time you were starting for Mr. Severin's who is expecting us for tea."

"A curious dream," said Severin when I had finished. He supported his arms on his knees, resting his face in his delicate, finely veined hands, and fell to pondering.

I knew that he wouldn't move for a long time, hardly even breathe. This actually happened, but I didn't consider his behavior as in any way remarkable. I had been on terms of close friendship with him for nearly three years, and gotten used to his peculiarities. For it cannot be denied that he was peculiar, although he wasn't quite the dangerous madman that the neighborhood, or indeed the entire district of Kolomea, considered him to be. I found his personality not only interesting—and that is why many also regarded me a bit mad—but to a degree sympathetic.

For a Galician nobleman and landowner, and considering his age—he was hardly over thirty—he displayed surprising sobriety, a certain seriousness, even pedantry. He lived according to a minutely elaborated, half-philosophical, half-practical system, like clockwork; not this alone, but also by the thermometer, barometer, ærometer, hydrometer, Hippocrates, Hufeland, Plato, Kant, Knigge, and Lord Chesterfield. But at times he had violent attacks of sudden passion, and gave the impression of being about to run with his head right through a wall. At such times everyone preferred to get out of his way.

While he remained silent, the fire sang in the chimney and the large venerable samovar sang; and the ancient chair in which I sat rocking to and fro smoking my cigar, and the cricket in the old walls sang too. I let my eyes glide over the curious apparatus, skeletons of animals, stuffed birds, globes, plaster-casts, with which his room was heaped full, until by chance my glance remained fixed on a picture which I had seen often enough before. But today, under the reflected red glow of the fire, it made an indescribable impression on me.

It was a large oil painting, done in the robust full-bodied manner of the Belgian school. Its subject was strange enough.

A beautiful woman with a radiant smile upon her face, with abundant hair tied into a classical knot, on which white powder lay like a soft hoarfrost, was resting on an ottoman, supported on her left arm. She was nude in her dark furs. Her right hand played with a lash,

while her bare foot rested carelessly on a man, lying before her like a slave, like a dog. In the sharply outlined, but well-formed linaments of this man lay brooding melancholy and passionate devotion; he looked up to her with the ecstatic burning eye of a martyr. This man, the footstool for her feet, was Severin, but beardless, and, it seemed, some ten years younger.

Venus in Furs, I cried, pointing to the picture. "That is the way I saw her in my dream."

"I, too," said Severin, "only I dreamed my dream with open eyes."

"Indeed?"

"It is a tiresome story."

"Your picture apparently suggested my dream," I continued. "But do tell me what it means. I can imagine that it played a role in your life, and perhaps a very decisive one. But the details I can only get from you."

"Look at its counterpart," replied my strange friend, without heeding my question.

The counterpart was an excellent copy of Titian's well-known "Venus with the Mirror" in the Dresden Gallery.

"And what is the significance?"

Severin rose and pointed with his finger at the fur with which Titian garbed his goddess of love.

"It, too, is a 'Venus in Furs,'" he said with a slight smile. "I don't believe that the old Venetian had any secondary intention. He simply painted the portrait of some aristocratic Mesalina, and was tactful enough to let Cupid hold the mirror in which she tests her majestic allure with cold satisfaction. He looks as though his task were becoming burdensome enough. The picture is painted flattery. Later an 'expert' in the Rococo period baptized the lady with the name of Venus. The furs of the despot in which Titian's fair model wrapped herself, probably more for fear of a cold than out of modesty, have become a symbol of the tyranny and cruelty that constitute woman's essence and her beauty.

"But enough of that. The picture, as it now exists, is a bitter satire on our love. Venus in this abstract North, in this icy Christian world, has to creep into huge black furs so as not to catch cold—"

Severin laughed, and lighted a fresh cigarette.

Just then the door opened and an attractive, stoutish, blonde girl entered. She had wise, kindly eyes, was dressed in black silk, and brought us cold meat and eggs with our tea. Severin took one of the latter, and decapitated it with his knife. "Didn't I tell you that I want them soft-boiled?" he cried with a violence that made the young woman tremble.

"But my dear Sevtschu—" she said timidly.

"Sevtschu, nothing," he yelled, "you are to obey, obey, do you understand?" and he tore the *kantchuk*¹ which was hanging beside the weapons from its hook.

The woman fled from the chamber quickly and timidly like a doe.

"Just wait, I'll get you yet," he called after her.

"But Severin," I said placing my hand on his arm, "how can you treat a pretty young woman thus?"

"Look at the woman," he replied, blinking humorously with his eyes. "Had I flattered her, she would have cast the noose around my neck, but now, when I bring her up with the *kantchuk*, she adores me."

"Nonsense!"

"Nonsense, nothing, that is the way you have to break in women."

"Well, if you like it, live like a pasha in your harem, but don't lay down theories for me—"

"Why not," he said animatedly. "Goethe's 'you must be hammer or anvil' is absolutely appropriate to the relation between man and woman. Didn't Lady Venus in your dream prove that to you? Woman's power lies in man's passion, and she knows how to use it, if man doesn't understand himself. He has only one choice: to be the *tyrant* over or the *slave* of woman. As soon as he gives in, his neck is under the yoke, and the lash will soon fall upon him."

"Strange maxims!"

"Not maxims, but experiences," he replied, nodding his head, "*I have actually felt the lash*. I am cured. Do you care to know how?"

He rose, and got a small manuscript from his massive desk, and put it in front of me.

"You have already asked about the picture. I have long owed you an explanation. Here—read!"

Severin sat down by the chimney with his back toward me, and seemed to dream with open eyes. Silence had fallen again, and again the fire sang in the chimney, and the samovar and the cricket in the old walls. I opened the manuscript and read:

CONFESSIONS OF A SUPERSENSUAL MAN

The margin of the manuscript bore as motto a variation of the well-known lines from *Faust*:

Thou supersensual sensual woer
A woman leads you by the nose.

—MEPHISTOPHELES

I turned the title-page and read: "What follows has been compiled from my diary of that period, because it is impossible ever frankly to write of one's past, but in this way everything retains its fresh colors, the colors of the present."

Gogol, the Russian Molière, says—where? Well, somewhere—"the real comic muse is the one under whose laughing mask tears roll down."

A wonderful saying.

So I have a very curious feeling as I am writing all this down. The atmosphere seems filled with a stimulating fragrance of flowers, which overcomes me and gives me a headache. The smoke of the fireplace curls and condenses into figures, small gray-bearded kokolds that mockingly point their finger at me. Chubby-cheeked cupids ride on the arms of my chair and on my knees. I have to smile involuntarily, even laugh aloud, as I am writing down my adventures. Yet I am not writing with ordinary ink, but with red blood that drips from my heart. All its wounds long scarred over have opened and it throbs and hurts, and now and then a tear falls on the paper.

The days creep along sluggishly in the little Carpathian health-resort. You see no one, and no one sees you. It is boring enough to write idyls. I would have leisure here to supply a whole gallery of paintings, furnish a theater with new pieces for an entire season, a dozen virtuosos

with concertos, trios, and duos, but—what am I saying—the upshot of it all is that I don't do much more than to stretch the canvas, smooth the bow, line the scores. For I am—no false modesty, Friend Severin; you can lie to others, but you don't quite succeed any longer in lying to yourself—I am nothing but a dilettante, a dilettante in painting, in poetry, in music, and several other of the so-called unprofitable arts, which, however, at present secure for their masters the income of a cabinet minister, or even that of a minor potentate. Above all else I am a dilettante in life.

Up to the present I have lived as I have painted and written poetry. I never got far beyond the preparation, the plan, the first act, the first stanza. There are people like that who begin everything, and never finish anything. I am such a one.

But what am I saying?

To the business in hand.

I lie in my window, and the miserable little town, which fills me with despondency, really seems infinitely full of poetry. How wonderful the outlook upon the blue wall of high mountains interwoven with golden sunlight; mountain-torrents weave through them like ribbons of silver! How clear and blue the heavens into which snow-capped crags project; how green and fresh the forested slopes; the meadows on which small herds graze, down to the yellow billows of grain where reapers stand and bend over and rise up again.

The house in which I live stands in a sort of park, or forest, or wilderness, whatever one wants to call it, and is very solitary.

Its sole inhabitants are myself, a widow from Lemberg, and Madame Tartakovska, who runs the house, a little old woman, who grows older and smaller each day. There are also an old dog that limps on one leg, and a young cat that continually plays with a ball of yarn. This ball of yarn, I believe, belongs to the widow.

She is said to be really beautiful, this widow, still very young, twenty-four at the most, and very rich. She dwells in the first story, and I on the ground floor. She always keeps the green blinds drawn, and has a balcony entirely overgrown with green climbing-plants. I for my part down below have a comfortable, intimate arbor of honeysuckle, in which I read and write and paint and sing like

a bird among the twigs. I can look up on the balcony. Sometimes I actually do so, and then from time to time a white gown gleams between the dense green network.

Really the beautiful woman up there doesn't interest me very much, for I am in love with someone else, and terribly unhappy at that; far more unhappy than the Knight of Toggenburg or the Chevalier in Manon l'Escault, because the object of my adoration is of stone.

In the garden, in the tiny wilderness, there is a graceful little meadow on which a couple of deer graze peacefully. On this meadow is a stone statue of Venus, the original of which, I believe, is in Florence. This Venus is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in all my life.

That, however, does not signify much, for I have seen few beautiful women, or rather few women at all. In love too, I am a dilettante who never got beyond the preparation, the first act.

But why talk in superlatives, as if something that is beautiful could be surpassed?

It is sufficient to say that this Venus is beautiful. I love her passionately with a morbid intensity; madly as one can only love a woman who never responds to our love with anything but an eternally uniform, eternally calm, stony smile. I literally adore her.

I often lie reading under the leafy covering of a young birch when the sun broods over the forest. Often I visit that cold, cruel mistress of mine by night and lie on my knees before her, with the face pressed against the cold pedestal on which her feet rest, and my prayers go up to her.

The rising moon, which just now is waning, produces an indescribable effect. It seems to hover among the trees and submerges the meadow in its gleam of silver. The goddess stands as if transfigured, and seems to bathe in the soft moonlight.

Once when I was returning from my devotions by one of the walks leading to the house, I suddenly saw a woman's figure, white as stone, under the illumination of the moon and separated from me merely by a screen of trees. It seemed as if the beautiful woman of marble had taken pity on me, become alive, and followed me. I was seized by a nameless fear, my heart threatened to burst, and instead—

Well, I am a dilettante. As always, I broke down at the second stanza; rather, on the contrary, I did not break down, but ran away as fast as my legs would carry me.

What an accident! Through a Jew, dealing in photographs I secured a picture of my ideal. It is a small reproduction of Titian's "Venus with the Mirror." What a woman! I want to write a poem, but instead, I take the reproduction, and write on it: *Venus in Furs*.

You are cold, while you yourself fan flames. By all means wrap yourself in your despotic furs, there is no one to whom they are more appropriate, cruel goddess of love and of beauty!

After a while I add a few verses from Goethe, which I recently found in his paralipomena to *Faust*.

TO AMOR

The pair of wings a fiction are,
The arrows, they are naught but claws,
The wreath conceals the little horns,
For without any doubt he is
Like all the gods of ancient Greece
Only a devil in disguise.

Then I put the picture before me on my table, supporting it with a book, and looked at it.

I was enraptured and at the same time filled with a strange fear by the cold coquetry with which this magnificent woman draped her charms in her furs of dark sable; by the severity and hardness which lay in this cold marble-like face.

Again I took my pen in hand, and wrote the following words:

"To love, to be loved, what happiness! And yet how the glamour of this pales in comparison with the tormenting bliss of worshipping a woman who makes a plaything out of us, of being the slave of a beautiful tyrant who treads us pitilessly underfoot. Even Samson, the hero, the giant, again put himself into the hands of Delilah, even after she had betrayed him, and again she betrayed him, and the Philistines bound him and put out his eyes which until the very

end he kept fixed, drunken with rage and love, upon the beautiful betrayer."

I was breakfasting in my honeysuckle arbor, and reading in the book of Judith. I envied the hero Holofernes because of the regal woman who cut off his head with a sword, and because of his beautiful sanguinary end.

"The almighty Lord hath struck him, and hath delivered him into the hands of a woman."

This sentence strangely impressed me.

How ungallant these Jews are, I thought. And their God might choose more becoming expressions when he speaks of the fair sex.

"The almighty Lord hath struck him, and hath delivered him into the hands of a woman," I repeated to myself. What shall I do, so that He may punish me?

Heaven preserve us! Here comes the housekeeper, who has again diminished somewhat in size overnight. And up there among the green twinings and garlandings the white gown gleams again. Is it Venus, or the widow?

This time it happens to be the widow, for Madame Tartakovska makes a courtesy, and asks me in her name for something to read. I run to my room, and gather together a couple of volumes.

Later I remember that my picture of Venus is in one of them, and now it and my effusions are in the hands of the white woman up there together. What will she say?

I hear her laugh.

Is she laughing at me?

It is full moon. It is already peering over the tops of the low hemlocks that fringe the park. A silvery exhalation fills the terrace, the groups of trees, all the landscape, as far as the eye can reach; in the distance it gradually fades away, like trembling waters.

I cannot resist. I feel a strange urge and call within me. I put on my clothes again and go out into the garden.

Some power draws me toward the meadow, toward her, who is my divinity and my beloved.

The night is cool. I feel a slight chill. The atmosphere is heavy with the odor of flowers and of the forest. It intoxicates.

What solemnity! What music round about! A nightingale sobs. The stars quiver very faintly in the pale-blue glamour. The meadow seems smooth, like a mirror, like a covering of ice on a pond.

The statue of Venus stands out august and luminous.

But—what has happened?

From the marble shoulders of the goddess a large dark fur flows down to her heels. I stand dumbfounded and stare at her in amazement; again an indescribable fear seizes hold of me and I take flight.

I hasten my steps, and notice that I have missed the main path. As I am about to turn aside into one of the green walks I see Venus sitting before me on a stone bench, not the beautiful woman of marble, but the goddess of love herself with warm blood and throbbing pulses. She has actually come to life for me, like the statue that began to breathe for her creator. Indeed, the miracle is only half completed. Her white hair seems still to be of stone, and her white gown shimmers like moonlight, or is it satin? From her shoulders the dark fur flows. But her lips are already reddening and her cheeks begin to take color. Two diabolical green rays out of her eyes fall upon me, and now she laughs.

Her laughter is very mysterious, very—I don't know. It cannot be described, it takes my breath away. I flee further, and after every few steps I have to pause to take breath. The mocking laughter pursues me through the dark leafy paths, across light open spaces, through the thicket where only single moonbeams can pierce. I can no longer find my way, I wander about utterly confused, with cold drops of perspiration on the forehead.

Finally I stand still, and engage in a short monologue.

It runs—well—one is either very polite to one's self or very rude.

I say to myself:

"Donkey!"

This word exercises a remarkable effect, like a magic formula, which sets me free and makes me master of myself.

I am perfectly quiet in a moment.

With considerable pleasure I repeat: "Donkey!"