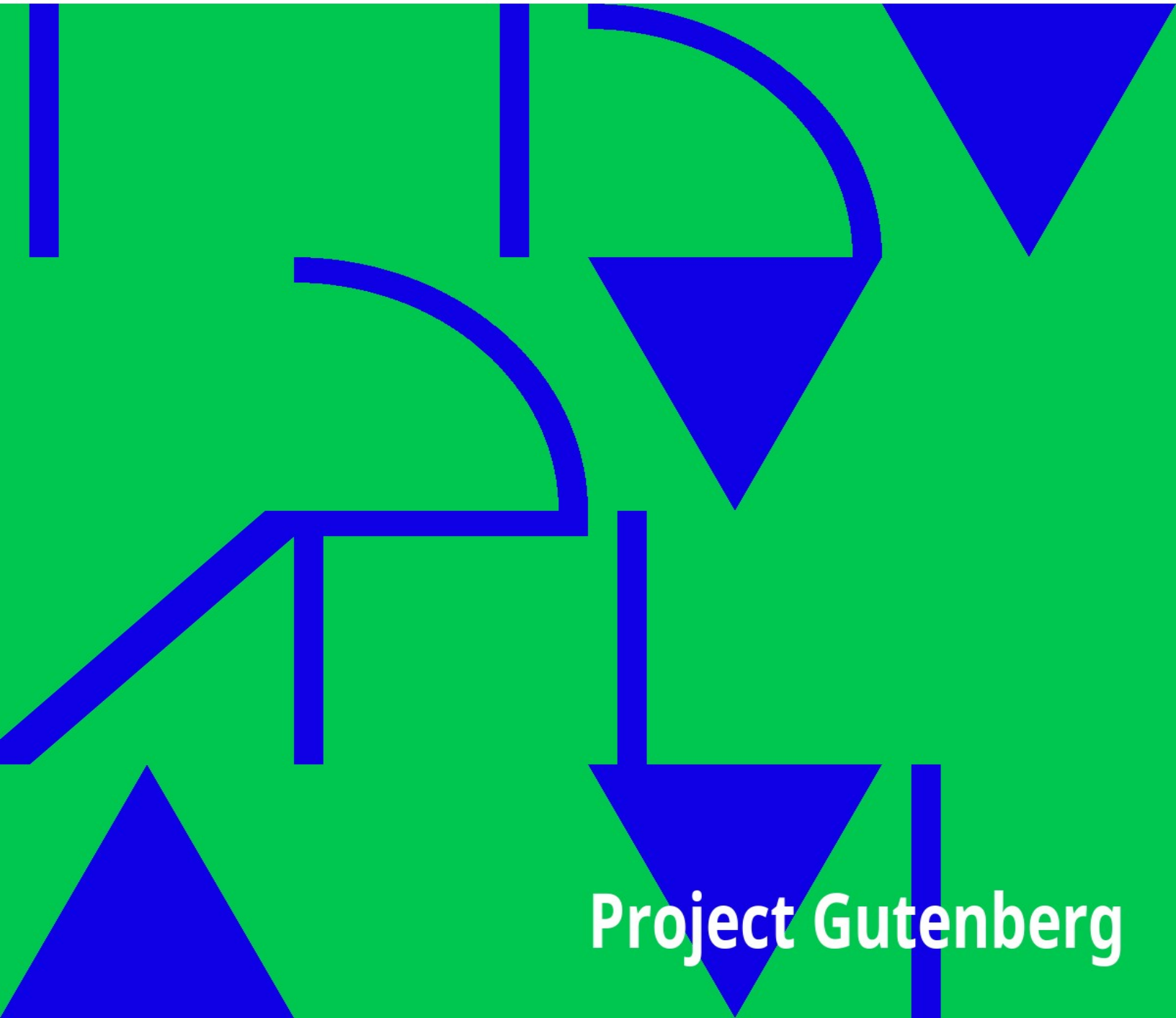
This is not a Story

Denis Diderot



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This Is Not a Story (written around 1772-published in 1798)

Original French title: Ceci n'est pas un conte

By Denis Diderot

Translation into English by Peter Phalen

This story is found in Grimm´s Correspondence, dated April 1773, but that version is incomplete. The history of Tanié and la Reymer is missing, as is the end of the history of Mademoiselle de La Chaux.

M. A.-A. Barbier (Dictionary of the Anonymous) suggested that Diderot´s memory must have failed him when he attributed translations of "Hume´s First Essays on Metaphysics" [p. 321] and the Essays on Human Understanding [p. 328] to Mademoiselle de La Chaux. But this was certainly not the case. Diderot was only giving the works of Hume as translated by Mademoiselle de La Chaux a more general title. The Political Discourses make up the second part of the Essays. Mademoiselle de La Chaux wrote the first translation of this part (Of Commerce; Of Luxury; Of Money, Amsterdam, 1752, 1753, in-12; Paris and Lyon, in-12). It includes only seven of Hume´s seventeen discourses along with some commentary by the translator. Abbot Le Blanc and later Mauvillon did not publish their versions of the same piece until 1754. Mademoiselle de La Chaux´s translation of Hume´s Writings on Economics was included in the

XVth tome of the Collections from the Leading Economists. She died in 1755.

This Is Not A Story

When one tells a story it is for a listener; and however short the story is, it is highly unlikely that the teller is not occasionally interrupted by his audience. So I have introduced into the narration that will be read, and which is not a story, or which is a bad one if you have doubts about that, a character that might approximate the role of the reader; and I begin.

* * * * *

And you conclude right there?

—That a subject this interesting must make us dizzy, be the talk of the town for a month, be phrased and rephrased until flavorless, produce a thousand arguments, at least twenty leaflets, and around a hundred bits of verse in favor or against. In spite of all the finesse, learning, and pure grit of the author, given that his work has not lead to any violence it is mediocre. Very mediocre.

—But it seems to me that we owe him a rather agreeable evening, and that this reading has brought…

—What? A litany of worn-out vignettes fired from left and right, saying just one single thing known for all eternity, that man and woman are extraordinarily unfortunate beasts.

—Nevertheless the epidemic has won you over, and you have contributed just like any other.

—Whether or not it be to one´s taste, it is only good taste to strike the tone given. When meeting company, we customarily tidy up appearances at the door of the apartment for whomever we are seeing; we pretend to be funny when we are sad; sad, when we would have liked to be funny. We do not want to appear out of place anywhere; so the literary hack politicizes, the political pundit talks metaphysics, the metaphysician moralizes, the moralist talks finance, the financier, letters or logic. Rather than listen or keep quiet, each ramble on about what they are ignorant of, and everyone bores each other with silly vanity or politeness.

—You are in a bad mood.

—I usually am.

—And I think it is appropriate for me to reserve my vignette for a better time.

—You mean you will wait for me to leave.

—It is not that.

—Or you are afraid that I might have less indulgence for you, face to face, than I would for your average gentleman.

—It is not that.

—Be agreeable then and tell me what it is.

—That my vignette will not prove any better than those that have annoyed you.

—Hmph. Tell it anyway.

—No. You have had enough.

—You know that of all the ways the others have enraged me, yours is the most unpleasant?

—And what is mine?

—That of being asked to do the thing you are dying to do. Well, my friend, I ask you, I pray you satisfy yourself.

—Satisfy myself?

—Begin, by God, begin.

—I will try to be short.

—That cannot hurt.

Here, a little out of spite, I coughed, I spat, I drew my handkerchief out slowly, I blew my nose, I opened my snuff box, I took out a pinch of snuff; and I heard my fellow man say between his teeth: `If the telling is short, the preliminaries are long…´ I had the urge to call a servant under the pretext of some errand. But I did not, and I said:

* * * * *

It must be admitted that there are very good men, and very bad women.

—One sees that every day, and sometimes without leaving the house. Go on?

—Go on? I knew an Alsatian beauty. Beautiful enough to make old men come running and stop younger ones in their tracks.

—I also knew her. Her name was Madame Reymer.

—That is correct. A newcomer from Nancy by the name of Tanié fell madly in love with her. He was poor, one of those lost children chased from the house by harsh parents with a large family, thrown into the world with no idea what will become of them, knowing instinctually that there will never be a worse sort than the one they are fleeing from. Tanié was infatuated with Madame Raymer, consumed by a passion that gave him courage and ennobled all his actions in his eyes, so that he willingly performed those most disturbing and vile to soothe the misery of his soul. During the day he would work the docks; at evening he begged in the streets.

—It was wonderful, but it could not last.

—Tanié, sick of living on the brink, or rather of keeping a charming woman in poverty, ever haunted by rich men urging her to rid herself of that beggar Tanié…

—Which she would have done fifteen days or a month later.

—and to accept their riches, decided to leave her and set out in search of fortune abroad. He hunted around and won passage on one of the king´s ships. It came time to depart. He took leave of Madame Reymer. `My love,´ he said to her, `I can no longer exploit your affections. I have accepted the inevitable. I am leaving.´ `You

are leaving!´ `Yes…´ `And where are you going?´ `To the islands. You deserve something more, and I can no longer come between you and it.´

—Kindhearted Tanié!…

—`And what is to become of me?…´

—Traitor!…

—`You are surrounded by people who want to please you. I release you from your promises, I release you from your vows. Find the suitor that is most agreeable to you; accept him. I beg of you…´ `Oh Tanié! If you so desire…´

—No need to pantomime Madame Reymer. I get it…

—`As I leave, all I ask is that you not commit yourself to anything that might stand between us permanently. Promise me, my beautiful friend. Whatever country on earth I find myself in, you will know something terrible has befallen me if a year goes by without my bearing you witness of my tender attachment. Do not cry…´

—Women can cry on command.

—`…and do not fight against plans that are in the end inspired by the reproaches of my heart and from which they would not keep me.´ And just like that Tanié left for Saint-Domingue.

—And just in time, for Madame Reymer as for himself.

—How would you know?

—I know as well as anyone that when Tanié advised her to make a choice she made it.

—Well done!

—Continue your narration.

—Tanié had a strong will and an entrepreneurial spirit. He did not tarry in making himself known. He joined the sovereign council of the Cape. He distinguished himself by his wisdom and equity. He had no ambitions to great fortune; all he wanted was a quick and an honest one. Each year he sent a portion of it to Madame Reymer. He reached his goal… somewhere between nine and ten years; no, I do not believe he was absent any longer than that… to present his lover with a small wallet containing the product of his work and virtue… and lucky for Tanié, it was just at the moment when she had left the last of his successors.

—The last?

—Yes.

—So there were several?

—Assuredly.

—Go on, go on.

—But perhaps I have nothing left to tell you that you do not already know better than I.

—What does it matter? Go on anyway.

—Madame Reymer and Tanié occupied a rather pretty building on rue Sainte- Marguerite, at my doorstep. I took a great liking to Tanié and frequented his house, which was, if not opulent, at least luxurious.

—I can assure you, without having done Reymer´s accounting, that she had an income of over 15,000 pounds before Tanié returned.

—and she kept it from him?

—Yes.

—Why would she?

—She was greedy and predatory.

—I could see predatory, but greedy? A greedy courtesan?… These two lovers
had lived in perfect harmony for five or six years.

—Thanks to the shrewdness of the one and the unconditional confidence of the other.

—Ah. It is true that it would have been impossible for the shadow of a doubt to enter a soul as pure as Tanié´s. The one thing I did occasionally notice was that Madame Reymer quickly forgot her original poverty, was tormented by her love of wealth and splendor, was humiliated that so beautiful a woman had traveled on foot…

—That she had not gone by coach?

—And the spark of vice brought out the worst in her. You laugh?… It was then that M. de Maurepas[1] hatched the plan to build a market up north. The success of the enterprise demanded a lively and intelligent man. He had his eye on Tanié, to whom he had entrusted the direction of many important business ventures while he was at the Cape, which were always carried out to the satisfaction of the minister. Tanié was upset by this mark of distinction. He was so content, so happy with his girl! He loved, he was or he thought himself loved.

—Well said.

—What could gold possibly add to his good fortune? Nothing. But the minister insisted. He had to strengthen his resolve; he had to tell Madame Reymer. I arrived at his quarters right at the end of this unfortunate episode. Poor Tanié was collapsed in tears. `What is the matter, my friend?´ I asked him. Between sobs he told me, `It is this woman!´ Madame Reymer was working calmly at a tapestry. Tanié rose brusquely and left. I stayed behind with his lover, who did not allow me to remain ignorant of what she thought of Tanié´s irrationality. She exaggerated the severity of her financial state; she adorned her appeal with all the art that a cunning mind like hers knows to compensate for the sophisms of ambition. `What does it amount to? An absence of two or three years at most.´ `That is some time for a man that you love and who loves you as much as he does. ´ `He? loves me? If he loved me, would he hesitate to satisfy me?´ `But Madame, will you not go with him?´ `Me? I will not go; and as eccentric as he is he has not even suggested it to me. Does he have doubts about me?´ `I do not believe so, not at all.´ `After awaiting him for twelve years, he can certainly count on my good faith.´ `Sir, it is one of those unique opportunities that only presents itself once in

a lifetime; and I do not want the day to come when I must have regrets and reproach myself for missing it.´ `Tanié will have no regrets, so long as he has the good fortune of pleasing you.´ `That is very decent of you; but you can be sure that he will be very happy being wealthy when I am old. It is a peculiarity of women to never think of the future; it is not mine…´ The minister was in Paris. His hotel was only a foot from rue Sainte-Marguerite. Tanié met with him there and was hired. He returned with eyes dry and heart wrung out. `Madame,´ he said to her, `I saw M. de Maurepas; I have given him my word. I will go, I will go. And you will be satisfied.´ `Oh! My love!…´ Madame Reymer drops her line of work, throws herself on Tanié, tosses her arms around his neck, devastates him with kisses and sweet nothings. `Ah! It is times like these that let me know I am dear to you!´ Tanié answered her coldly: `You want to be rich.´

—She was, the little minx, ten times more so than she was worth…

—`And you will be. Since it is gold that you love, you must seek it out.´ It was Tuesday, and the minister had set the date of departure for Friday without delay. I bid him farewell as he was wrestling with himself, attempting to wrest himself from the arms of the beautiful, disgraceful and cruel Reymer. Of such a disorder of ideas, hopelessness, agony, I have never seen a second example. This was not a wail; it was an extended scream. Madame Reymer was still in bed. He held one of her hands. He could not stop saying and repeating: `Cruel woman! Woman cruel! What more do you need than the comfort you enjoy, and a friend, a lover such as myself? I have tried to find fortune in the sweltering countries of America; she wants me to seek it out once more in the ice floes of the North. My friend, I am aware that this woman is mad; I am aware that I am

foolish, but I am less afraid of death than I am of causing her sadness. You want me to leave you; I will leave you.´ He was on his knees beside her bed, mouth glued to her hand and face hidden in the covers, which, in stifling his mutterings, only made them sadder and more dreadful. The bedroom door opened; his head rose up brusquely; he saw the coachman who had come to announce that the horses were hitched up. He cried out, and again hid his face under the covers. After a moment´s silence, he rose, he said to his love, `Kiss me, madame. Kiss me one more time, for you will never see me again.´ His premonition was only too accurate. He departed. He arrived in Petersburg and, three days later, was struck by a fever from which he died on the fourth.

—I knew all of that.

—Perhaps you were one of Tanié´s successors?

—You got it. And it is with this abominable beauty that I ruined my business.

—Poor Tanié!

—There are some who would call him silly.

—I will not defend him, but I will wish from the bottom of my heart that their bad luck sends them to a woman as beautiful and duplicitous as Madame Reymer.

—You are cruel in your choice of revenge.

—Moving on, if there are evil women and good men, there are also good women and evil men. And this supplement is no more a story[2] than the preceding.

—I am sure.

—M. d´Hérouville…

—The one still living? The Lieutenant General of the King´s army? The one that married that charming creature named Lolotte[3]?

—The same.

—A gallant man, lover of sciences.

—And of scholars. For a long time he was working on a general history of war in every century and every nation.

—A staggering project.

—To complete it he called for the help of some young gentlemen of distinguished merit, like M. de Montucla[5], the author of the History of Mathematics.

—Good lord! He had many men of that caliber?

—But the one named Gardeil, the hero of the adventure that I am going to tell to you, hardly yielded to him. A common passion for the study of Greek created a bond between Gardeil and I that time, the reciprocity of guidance, a taste for seclusion, and above all the facility with which we saw each other, made blossom into a rather striking intimacy.

—So you were still staying at the Estrapade.

—He, Sainte-Hyacinthe street, and his lady friend Mademoiselle de La Chaux, Saint-Michel square. I call her by her own name because the poor thing is no more, because her life can only honor it

in every well-made mind and award it the admiration, the regret and the tears of those that nature will favor or punish with a small portion of the sensibility of her soul.

—Well! Your speech is halting, and I believe you are crying.

—I can still see her big dark eyes, soft and twinkling, and the moving sound of her voice resounding in my ears and shaking my heart. Charming creature! Unique creature! You are no more! You have been no more for nearly twenty years; and my heart still tightens at the thought of you.

—You loved her?

—No. Oh La Chaux! Oh Gardeil! You were each a marvel; you, for a woman´s tenderness; you, for a man´s ingratitude. Mademoiselle de La Chaux was an honest woman. She left her parents to throw herself into the arms of Gardeil. Gardeil had nothing, Mademoiselle de La Chaux enjoyed considerable wealth, and this wealth was entirely sacrificed for Gardeil´s needs and whims. She regretted neither the dissipation of her fortune nor her blackened reputation. Her lover took the place of everything for her.

—So Gardeil was a charmer, amiable?

—Not at all. A small gruff man, taciturn and caustic; angular face, swarthy complexion; a wholly puny, thin figure; ugly, if a man can be ugly with a face so full of intelligence.

—And that was what made this charming woman fall head over heals?

—That surprises you?

—Still.

—You?

—Me.

—So you have forgotten your adventure with la Deschamps and the profound despair into which you fell when this creature closed her doors to you.

—Drop it; continue.

—I had said to you, `So she is very beautiful?´ And you answered sadly, `No.—She has a good personality?—She is foolish.—So it is her talents that sway you?—She has but one.—And this rare, sublime, marvelous talent?—Is to make me happier in her arms than I have ever been with any other woman.´ But Mademoiselle de La Chaux, the good, sensible Mademoiselle de La Chaux, secretly counted on, by instinct, unbeknownst to him, the good fortune that you once knew, and which made you say of la Deschamps: `If this unfortunate girl, if this despicable woman insists on kicking me out, I will grab a gun and blow my brains out in her foyer.´ You said that, correct?

—I said it; and even now I do not know why I did not do it.

—Admit it, then.

—I will admit to anything if it pleases you.

—My friend, the wisest amongst us is much happier not having encountered any woman, beautiful or ugly, clever or foolish, that would drive him mad enough for the Petites-Maisons. We men

complain a great deal, we criticize them occasionally. We watch the years go by like so many moments, carried off by the evil that shadows us; and we only think to cower at the strength of certain natural attractions, especially those of us with sensitive souls or ardent imaginations. The spark that alights by chance on a powder keg does not produce so terrible an effect. The finger ready to light the fatal spark over you or me is perhaps raised.

M. d´Hérouville, wanting to speed up his project, greatly overworked his colleagues. Gardeil´s health suffered for it. To lighten his load Mademoiselle de La Chaux learned Hebrew, and while her lover rested she spent a portion of the night translating and transcribing bits of Hebrew. It came time to tackle the Greek authors; Mademoiselle de La Chaux rushed to perfect her then superficial knowledge of this language: while Gardeil slept she was busy translating and copying passages of Xenophon and Thucydides. She added Italian and English to her knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. Her English was so good that she could translate Hume´s first essays on metaphysics into French, a work whose difficult subject matter added infinitely to the difficulty of the idiom. When study exhausted her resources she amused herself by writing music. When she feared her lover might be overcome with ennui she sang. I am not exaggerating anything, as can be attested to by M. Le Camus, doctor of medicine, who consoled her when she was troubled and cared for her when she was in need, who remained by her side in the attic that her poverty had relegated her to, and who closed her eyes when she died. But I am forgetting one of her first misfortunes: the persecution that she had to suffer at the hands of a family outraged by the scandalous and public relationship. Both truth and lies were employed to dispose of her liberty in a humiliating manner. Priests and her parents pursued her from quarter to quarter,

from house to house, for many years reducing her to a solitary and hidden life. She spent her days working for Gardeil. We visited her at night, and in the presence of her lover all her grief, all her worries vanished. —My word! Young, timorous, tenderhearted in the face of so many difficulties. What a happy being.

—Happy? Yes, she only ceased to be so when Gardeil was revoltingly ungrateful.

—But it is not possible for ingratitude to be the reward for so many exceptional qualities, so many signs of affection, so many sacrifices of every kind!

—You are mistaken, Gardeil was ungrateful. One day, Mademoiselle de La Chaux found herself alone in the world, without honor, without support. I assure you, I stayed with her for some time. Doctor Le Camus stayed with her always.

—Men!

—Who are you talking about?

—Gardeil.

—You see the villain and you do not see the good man right beside him. That painful and hopeless day she rushed to my quarters. It was morning. She was pale as death. Though she had only discovered her predicament the day before she looked like one who had been suffering for a long time. She was not crying, but one could see that she had cried a lot. She threw herself into an armchair, she did not speak, she could not speak, she held out her

arms to me as she cried out. `What is it?´ I asked her. `Has he died?…´ `It is worse: he no longer loves me; he is leaving me…´

—Go on then.

—I do not know if I can. I see her, I listen to her, and my eyes fill with tears. `He no longer loves you?…´ `No.´ `He is abandoning you! ´ `Oh yes! After all that I have done!… Monsieur, my mind is troubled; have pity on me; do not leave me… above all else do not leave me…´ While uttering these words she had hold of my arm. She was squeezing it tightly, as if near her lay someone who threatened to tear her away and carry her off… `Have no fear, mademoiselle.´ `I fear only myself.´ `What do you need?´ `First, save me from myself… He no longer loves me! I tire him! I annoy him! I bore him! He hates me! He is abandoning me! He is leaving me! He is leaving me!´ This echoed line was followed by a profound silence, and following this silence, convulsive bursts of laughter a thousand times more terrifying than the fits of despair or the groans of agony. Next came tears, cries, inarticulate words, gazes turned towards the sky, trembling lips, a torrent of pain that one must let run its course, which I did. I only began to address her reasoning when I saw that her soul was broken and stunned. So I resumed: `He hates you, he is leaving you? And who told you that?´ `He did.´ `Come, mademoiselle, a little hope and courage. This is no monster…´ `You do not know him; you will know him. This is a monster like no other, like none there ever was.´ `I cannot believe that.´ `You will see for yourself.´ `Does he love another?´ `No.´ `You have not caused him any suspicion, any dissatisfaction?´ `None, none.´ `What is it then?´ `My uselessness. I have nothing left. I am no longer good at anything. His ambition. He has always been ambitious. The loss of my health, of my beauty, I have suffered so much and am so tired; boredom, weariness.´ `We

cease to be lovers, but remain friends.´ `I have become an unbearable object; my presence weighs on him, the sight of me troubles and offends him. If you only knew what he said to me! Yes, monsieur, he told me that if he was condemned to spend twenty-four hours with me he would throw himself from the window.´ `But this aversion is not the work of a moment.´ `What do I know? He is by nature so scornful! so uncaring! so cold! It is difficult to see into the depths of his heart! and it is so awful to read his death sentence! He pronounced it to me, and with such harshness!´ `I cannot imagine anything like that.´ `I have a favor to ask of you, and that is why I came here: will you grant it to me?´ `Anything you ask.´ `Listen. He respects you; you know what he owes me. Perhaps he will not be embarrassed to show his true self to you. No, I do not think he would have his guard up. I am only a woman, and you are a man. A kind, honest and just man inspires respect. You will inspire respect in him. Give me your hands, do not say no; accompany me over to his house. I want to speak to him with you there. Who knows what effect my pain and your presence will have on him. You will accompany me?´ `Willingly.´ `Let us go…´

—I am worried that her pain and presence will leave things exactly as they are. Contempt! Contempt is a terrible thing in a relationship, and for a woman!…

—I sent her to seek out a litter, as she was hardly in a state to walk. We arrive at Gardeil's, at this huge new house, the only one on the right side of Hyacinthe street when coming from Saint-Michel square. The porters stop; they open the doors. I wait. She does not get out. I lean over and I see a woman seized with a universal trembling. Her teeth were chattering as if from feverish chills, her knees were hitting together. `A moment, monsieur; I am sorry; I

cannot… what can I do here? I will have torn you from your affairs for nothing; I am so sorry; I ask your forgiveness…´ But I held out my hand to her. She took it, she tried to get up; she could not. `One more moment, monsieur,´ she told me, `I am such a bother; I am a burden to you.´ At last she pulled herself together; and as she rose from her seat she added softly: `We need to go in; we have to see him. Who knows? Perhaps I will die there…´ Across the courtyard; at the door of the apartment; in Gardeil's office. He was at his desk in his dressing gown and bonnet. He waved hello to me and continued the work he had started. Then he came over to me and said: `You must admit, monsieur, that women are an inconvenience. I apologize a thousand times for the extravagances of mademoiselle.´ Then he addressed himself to the poor creature, who was more dead than alive. `Mademoiselle,´ he said to her, `what more do you want from me? It seems to me that after explaining myself to you in so clear and precise a manner everything should be settled between us. I told you that I no longer loved you, I told you that person to person. Apparently your plan is for me to repeat it to you in front of this gentleman. Well, mademoiselle, I do not love you anymore. Extinguished in my heart is this feeling of love for you and, I will add if it makes you feel better, for any women.´ `But tell me why you no longer love me.´ `No idea. All I know is that I started without knowing why, that I stopped without knowing why, and that I feel it is impossible for this passion to return. It was a childish pursuit of which I believe myself to be and congratulate myself for being completely cured.´ `What are my faults?´ `You have none.´ `You have no secret complaint with my behavior?´ `Not the least. You have been the most loyal, decent, kind woman a man could desire.´ `Have I overlooked anything it is within my power to do?´ `Nothing.´ `Have I not sacrificed my parents for you?´ `It is true.´ `My fortune.´ `I

am sorry for that.´ `My health?´ `That may be.´ `My honor, my reputation, my sleep?´ `Whatever pleases you.´ `And you find me odious!´ `That is difficult to say, difficult to hear, but since it is so, it has to be admitted.´ `He finds me odious!… I know it, and do not respect myself any more for it!… Odious! Oh, God!…´ At these words a mortal pallor spread across her face; her lips lost their color; drops of cold sweat forming on her cheeks mixed with tears descendeding from her eyes; they were closed; her head fell on the back of her armchair; her teeth clenched; all her limbs were quivering; the quivering was followed by a fainting spell that seemed due to the apprehension that she had worked up at the door to the house. The duration of this state frightened me. I took her mantelet from her, I loosened the strings of her dress and petticoat and splashed a bit of cold water on her face. Her eyes opened halfway; one could hear a muffled murmuring in her throat. She was trying to say: I am odious to you. She only articulated the last syllables of the phrase, then issued a piercing cry. Her eyelids lowered, and the fainting spell began again. Gardeil, seated coldly on his armchair, his elbow resting on the table and head rested on his hand, watched her without emotion and left it to me to care for her. I told him repeatedly: `But, monsieur, she is dying… we have to call for someone.´ He answered me by smiling and shrugging his shoulders: `Women lead a hard life. They do not die over such a little thing as this. This will pass. You do not know them very well. Their bodies do whatever they want them to do.´ `She is dying, I tell you.´ Her body was as if without strength or life. It slipped away from the top of the armchair, and she would have fallen to the ground to the left or right had I not been holding her. Meanwhile Gardeil rose up brusquely, and, pacing his apartment, said with an impatient and moody tone: `I could do without this dismal scene. I do hope this will be the last. Who the

devil does she bear a grudge against? I loved her; I will smash my head into a brick wall if that is the least bit false. I do not love her anymore, she knows that now, or she will never know it. Everything has been said…´ `No, monsieur, everything has not been said. What? You believe that a good man has only to strip a woman of everything she has and leave her?´ `What do you want me to do? I am begging as much as she is.´ `What do I want you to do? To associate your misery with the one that you have reduced her to.´ `You enjoyed saying that. She would be no better for it, and I would be much worse.´ `You would act like this to a friend that has sacrificed everything for you?´ `A friend! A friend! I do not have much faith in friends, and this experience has taught me to have no passion for them. I am frustrated that I did not realize this sooner.´ `And it is right that this unfortunate woman should be the victim of your heart´s errors.´ `And what is to say that one month, a day later, I would not have been just as cruelly the error of hers.´ `What is to say? Everything that she has done for you, and the state that you see her in.´ `What she did for me?… By God! He is fully acquitted by the loss of my time.´ `Oh, monsieur Gardeil, what a comparison between your time and all the priceless things that you have taken from her!´ `I have done nothing, I am nothing, I am thirty years old, it is time to think of myself, now or never, and to treat all this nonsense like it is worth.´

Meanwhile the poor woman was coming to a little bit. At these last words she regained enough energy: `what did he say about the loss of his time? I learned four languages to ease his workload, I read a thousand volumes, I wrote, translated, copied day and night, I exhausted myself, wore out my eyes, boiled my blood, I came down with an awful illness from which I may never recover. He does not dare tell you the cause of his displeasure, but you will see.´ At that

instant she pulled out her handkerchief, withdrew one of her arms from her dress, bared one of her shoulders, and, showing me an erysipelatus mark, `The reason for his transformation, there it is,´ she said to me, `there it is, there is the effect of those sleepless nights. It came one morning with these rolls of parchment. M. d ´Hérouville, he told me, is very anxious to know what is in these, this work has to be done by tomorrow, and it was…´ At that moment we heard someone´s steps coming towards the door. It was a servant announcing M. d´Hérouville´s arrival. Gardeil´s face went pale. I invited Mademoiselle de La Chaux to withdraw and tidy herself up… `No,´ she said. `No. I am staying. I want this disgrace uncovered. I will wait for M. d´Hérouville. I will speak to him.´ `And what good will that do?´ `None,´ she answered me, `you are right.´ `Tomorrow you will regret it. Leave him his evil deeds; it is a revenge worthy of you.´ `But is it worthy of him? Do you not see that this man here is not… Let´s go, monsieur, let us leave now, for I can neither answer for what I would do, nor for what I would say…´ In the blink of an eye Mademoiselle de La Chaux had repaired the disorder this scene had made of her clothes and raced from of Gardeil´s office. I followed and heard the door slam shut behind her. I later learned that someone had given notice to the porter.

I conducted myself to her quarters, where I found Doctor Le Camus waiting for us. The passion that he felt for this young woman differed little from hers for Gardeil. I recounted our visit to him, and while I spoke the signs of his anger, pain, indignation…

—It was not too difficult to see from his face that your failure did not displease him all that much.

—It is true.

—There is man for you. He is no better than that.

—This rupture was followed by a violent sickness, during which time the good, honest, tender and kind doctor gave her such a treatment he would not have reserved for the noblest woman in France. He came three, four times a day. In spite of the peril he slept in her room on a canvas-strap bed. It is fortunate that this was only a disease of the heart.

—In returning to us she drifts away from her memories of others. And then she has a pretext to be troubled without indiscretion or constraint.

—That thought, otherwise just, does not apply to Mademoiselle de La Chaux.

During her recovery we sorted out her schedule. She had more than enough spirit, imagination, taste and knowledge to be admitted into the Académie des Inscriptions. She had listened to us wax metaphysical for so long that the most abstract matters had become familiar to her. Her first literary endeavor was the translation of Hume ´s Essays on Human Understanding. I proofread it, and to tell you the truth she had left me with very little to rectify. This translation was printed in Holland and was well received by the public.

My Letter on the Blind and the Dumb appeared at almost the same time. She raised some very perceptive objections which gave rise to an addition dedicated to her[6]. I have done worse things than make this addition.

Mademoiselle de La Chaux´s happiness had been somewhat restored. The doctor cooked for us occasionally and these dinners

were not too sorrowful. Since Gardeil´s estrangement, Le Camus´ passion had made marvelous strides. One day, at the table during dessert, as he was expressing it with all the honesty, sensitivity and naïveté of a child, she said to him, with a sincerity that pleased me greatly but which will perhaps displease others: `Doctor, it would be impossible to heighten the respect I have for you. Your kindnesses fulfill me, and I would be as gloomy as the monster of Hyacinthe Street were I not steeped in the fiercest gratitude. You tell me of your passion with such grace and sensitivity that I would be, I think, angry if you were to stop. Just the idea of losing your company or of being deprived of your friendship is enough to make me miserable. You are a good man, if there ever was one. Your goodness and sweetness of character is incomparable. I do not believe that a heart can fall into better hands. I appeal to my own from morning till night in your favor, but appeal in vain to that which does not desire it. I am not making any more progress. Meanwhile you will suffer, and so I feel a vicious pain. I do not know anyone more worthy of the happiness that you seek, and I do not know what I would not do to make you happy. Anything is possible, without exception. I mean, doctor, I would… yes, I would go so far as to sleep… so far as to include that. Do you want to sleep with me? You only have to say so. That is all I can do for you. But you want to be loved, and I do not know a way.´

The doctor listened to her, took her by the hand and kissed it, wet it with tears. And I, I did not know whether I should laugh or cry. Mademoiselle de La Chaux knew the doctor well. The next day I said to her, `But Mademoiselle, if the doctor had said the word?´ She answered, `I would have kept my promise, but that would never have happened; my offers were not of the sort that would be accepted by a man like him…´ `Why not? It seems to me that if I were in his position I would have simply hoped that the rest would follow.´ `Yes,

but if you were in his position, Mademoiselle de La Chaux would not have made you the same proposition.´

The Hume translation had not made her very much money. The Dutch will print anything provided they do not pay for it.

—Lucky for us. Given all the restrictions we place on thought in our country, if they even once decided to pay the authors they would bring the entire book industry to their doorstep.

—We advised her to write a light read, one that would bring her more profit than respect. She worked for four or five months, at which point she brought me a short historical fiction entitled "The Three Favorites." It had a deftness of style, finesse and earnestness, but - without her having realized it for she was incapable of any malice - it was scattered with a multitude of details applicable to the King´s mistress, the Marquise of Pompadour; and I did not conceal from her the fact that whatever the sacrifice, whether it be in softening or removing these sections, it would be almost impossible for her work to appear without compromising her, and that the unhappiness of spoiling such a good thing would not guarantee her another.

She sensed the truth in my observation and became only more distressed. The good doctor predicted all her needs, but she accepted his charity with all the more reservation, as she felt herself less disposed to the sort of gratitude that he hoped to receive from her. Besides, the doctor[7] was not wealthy then, and he was not particularly in a position to become wealthy. From time to time she took her manuscript from its folder and said to me sadly, `Well! There is no way to make anything of this. It will have to remain there.´ I gave her some singular advice: send the work as is, without toning it

down or altering it, to Madame de Pompadour herself, with a postscript explaining the delivery. This idea pleased her. She wrote a charming letter on all counts, but most importantly with a tone of sincerity to which it would be impossible to say no. Two or three months passed with no word and she had deemed the attempt fruitless, until a Saint-Louis cross came to her home with a letter from the marquise. The work was given the praise it merited, she was thanked for her sacrifice, a market was acknowledged, no offense was taken, and the author was invited to come to Versailles, where she would find a gracious woman disposed to give the help that depended on her. As he was leaving Mademoiselle de La Chaux ´s home the envoy left a roll of fifty louis smoothly on her mantelpiece.

The doctor and I urged her to take advantage of Madame de Pompadour´s good will, but we were working with a girl whose modesty and shyness matched her merit. How to present oneself there in rags? The doctor raised this concern immediately. After clothing there were other excuses, and then still more. The voyage to Versailles was deferred from day to day until it was almost inappropriate to go through with it. It had already been some time since we had spoken to her about it when the same emissary returned with a second letter filled with the kindest reproaches and another bonus offered with the same gentleness as the first. This generous act of Madame de Pompadour has never been discovered. I spoke of it to M. Collin, her confidant and distributor of her secret favors. He had not heard of it, and I like to think that it is not the only one that her tomb contains.

It was thus that Mademoiselle de La Chaux twice missed the opportunity to pull herself from poverty.

She later moved to the outskirts of the city, and I entirely lost track of her. From what I have learned of the remainder of her life, she had become nothing but a fabric of grief, infirmity and misery. The doors of her family were obstinately closed to her. In vain she solicited the intercession of the saintly folk that had persecuted her with so much zeal.

—According to custom.

—The doctor did not abandon her. She died on straw, in an attic, while the little tiger on Hyacinthe street, the only lover that she had had, practiced medicine in Montpellier or Toulouse, and in the greatest comfort enjoyed his well-deserved reputation as a clever man, and his usurped reputation as a decent man.

—But this is still more or less according to custom. If there is a good and honest Tanié, Providence sends him to a Reymer. If there is a good and honest La Chaux, she will come to be shared by a Gardeil[8], so that everything happens for the best.

One might answer that it is rash to make so definitive a pronouncement on the character of a man based on a single act; that a rule so severe would reduce the number of good men on earth to less than the Christian Gospel admits as elect in heaven; that one can be fickle in love, even claim little devotion to women without being deprived of honor or probity; that one is in control neither of suppressing a passion that flares up, nor of prolonging one that is ending; that there are already enough men in the streets and houses that are fully worthy of the name scoundrel without inventing imaginary crimes that multiply them to infinity. One might ask whether I have not betrayed, or deceived, or abandoned a woman without mentioning it. If I desired to respond to these questions my

answers would not linger without retort, and it would be a dispute that would last till judgment day. But lay hands on your conscience, and tell me, you, Sir Apologist of the Unfaithful and the Deceivers, if you would take the doctor from Toulouse as your friend?… You hesitate? Everything is said, and I hereupon ask God to take under His holy protection every woman to whom it will take your fancy to pay your respects.

ENDNOTES

[Transcriber´s note: The notations (N.) and (BR.) designate footnotes taken from the Naigeon and Brière editions, respectively. The endnotes by Assézat are unmarked.]

[1] In 1749, M. de Maurepas, still Secretary of the Navy, wrote Louis XV a report in which he developed a strategy for opening trade relations with the English colonies through inland Canada. This plan was thereafter adopted, and Maurepas saw it executed before his death. (BR.)

[2] This word alone would suffice to make the reader lose all confidence in the account that follows it, and yet it is literally true. Diderot adds nothing either to the events or to the temperaments of the characters he introduces. Mademoiselle de La Chaux´s passion for Gardeil, the monstrous ingratitude of her lover, the details of her meeting with him, of their conversation in Diderot´s presence, who had accompanied her to the house of this ferocious beast. The hopelessness touching this betrayed woman, abandoned by him for which she had sacrificed her sleep, her fortune, her reputation, her health, and even the charms by which she seduced him: all this is of the greatest exactness. As Diderot knew the actors in this drama

particularly well, for the facts he had been witness to or the friendship that had entrusted him with them were still recent when he resolved to record them, his imagination had not had the time to alter them by adding or subtracting some circumstance to produce a greater effect. And here again is one of the fairly rare accounts of his life, where he says only what has seen, and has seen only what was.

As for the curious particularities that he recorded from Mademoiselle de La Chaux and that he documented in his writing, I will add only a single fact - that he omitted through forgetfulness and that was worthy of being conserved - that this so tender, so passionate, so interesting by her extreme sensibility and by her misfortunes, above all so worthy of a better fate, had also been friends with D´Alembert and the Abbot de Condillac. She was in a position to hear and assess the works of these two philosophers. She had even given the latter, who´s Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge she had read, the very wise advice of returning to his first thoughts, and, if I may use the expression, to begin at the beginning, i.e., the reject with Hobbes the absurd hypothesis of a distinction between two substances in man. I dare say that this very philosophical view, this sole idea of Mademoiselle de La Chaux suggests more breadth, depth and accuracy in her mind that the whole of Condillac´s metaphysics, in which there is in effect a radical and destructive vice that affects the entire system, and yields more or less vague and uncertain results. One sees that Mademoiselle de La Chaux sensed this; and one regrets that Condillac, more docile to the judicious advice of this enlightened woman with uncommon insight, did not follow the route that she pointed him towards. He would not have scattered so many errors over the one he decided upon, and upon which one can only run astray, as happens daily to those that take him as their guide. See, on this philosopher, the

preliminary reflections that serve as an introduction to his article, in the METHODICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA, Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Philosophy, t. II, and what I have again in my Historical and Philosophical Memoires on the life and work of Diderot. (N.)

[3] Antoine de Ricouart, count of Hérouville, born in Paris in 1713, is the author of Treatise on the Legions, which carries the name of the marshal of Saxony [4], Paris, 1757. He furnished the authors of the Encyclopédie with some curious dissertations. It was hoped that they be sent to the minister under Louis XV, but an unequal marriage excluded it. He died in 1782. (BR.)

[4] Only in the first three editions. The work had been first printed on a copy communicated to the marshal and was found in his papers.

[5] Montucla was only thirty years old when he published his History of Mathematics, Paris, 1758. It was reviewed and finished by Lalande, Paris, 1799-1802. (Br.)

[6] See t. 1, p. 399.

[7] Le Camus (Antoine), who left behind other memories of charity.

We owe to him a large number of works of literature and of medicine. We will here cite only: The Medicine of the Mind, Paris, 1753. Strategy for Wiping Out Smallpox, 1767. Practical Medicine Made Simpler, More Reliable and More Methodical, 1769. Numerous memoirs on different subjects of medicine. Abdéker, or the Art of Conserving Beauty, 1754-1756. Love and Friendship, comedy, 1763. The Pastoral Romance of Daphnis and Chloe, translated from Longus´ Greek by Amyot, with a double translation, Paris, 1757. This

new translation by Le Camus is still worth reading after the one just published by M. Courier in Sainte-Pélagie, where he was detained for a work commissioned by the estate of Chambord. Paris, 1821. (BR.)

[8] Gardeil died on April 19, 1808, at the age of 82. We have from him a Translation of Hippocrates´ Medical Works, from the Greek text according to the Foës edition, Toulouse, 1801. (Br.)—He Practiced in Montpellier.

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