

Aloys or Fatality by Ghislain de Diesbach

Translated from the French
by [David Platzer](#) (December 2021)



Jura Mountains, Félix Valotton, 1900

Ghislain de Diesbach, born in 1931 in Le Havre, is best-known in his native France for his acclaimed biographies of Proust, Chateaubriand, Madame de Stael, Marthe Bbesco, as well his history of the Emigration of French aristocrats during the Revolution and the Napoleonic Era. "Aloys or Fatality" as "Aloys ou la fatalité" is in his collection of short stories, Au bon patriote, published in the original French by Plon, in Paris, 1996. Cited as one of the author's favorites, it is the only story set in Switzerland.

Seated very upright, in the back of the sedan, his head high, his black stock tied seven times round his neck, his arms folded over his chest, Aloys de Willenzach gazed with emotion at the landscape of his native canton which he had left five years earlier. The horses' feet, as rhythmic as a military march, reaffirmed his tender feelings and rekindled old memories. As he raised the window so as to prevent the dust from soiling his suit, he breathed the bitter fragrance of cut hay. This agreeable smell gave him as much pleasure as had the sea breezes he inhaled when he landed at Cherbourg. After years on a boat, he saw the carriage's sway as marking the last call of an adventurous existence which had now ended. Incapable of making a tour of his thoughts, he contented himself in silence with savouring a feeling that his life had taken a satisfactory turn. He had been sailing on the Indian Ocean when he learned of his father's death. In consequence of that milestone, he was now possessed of a large fortune and also the only marquis in Switzerland. He had requested a leave of a year. He intended to make the break permanent.

In truth, he had only left Willenzach in order to escape his father and joined the King Louis-Phillippe's navy less from vocation than because his sire's hatred of France was equalled only by his aversion to the liquid element. His father's feelings with regard to France, that country's present ruler and the sea were derived from events that took place in his youth. A *sans-culotte's* distraction allowed the Marquis of Willenzach, at the time in Paris, to escape the 10 August massacre and join a Swiss regiment that was financed by British money, His trip across the Channel left him with a distaste for maritime voyages. As soon as he could, he went home, determined never again to travel outside of Switzerland. He married the daughter of a neighbour, a young woman of great beauty but of modest birth. He never forgave himself for allowing himself to succumb to a passing attraction. A brief

honeymoon was soon followed by the clouds of melancholy which dominated the Marquis's mind. He rendered his wife extremely unhappy to a point where she acquired a certain local fame for her tolerating so disagreeable a husband. Her neighbours' sympathy did little to comfort her for the misery she endured. Their son Aloys, born after ten years of marriage, was her consolation. She raised him with a disappointed wife's vengeful love; desperately unhappy as she was to see her son leave to serve France, his conflict with his father justified the decision too much for her to oppose it.

Before leaving home, Aloys had fallen in love with a child, aged sixteen, whose charming face did not altogether allow the world to ignore that her position in the domain was that of taking care of the Marquis of Willenzach's turkeys. She was the daughter of a woman who worked with the chateau's farmyard animals and a former soldier in the Swiss Guards who had been, in succession, the Marquis's milk-brother, childhood playmate and valet. He had risked his life in saving the Marquises in the September 1792 massacres and helped him in his escape to Great Britain. Thanks to his devotion, M. de Willenzach accepted to be his daughter's godfather and had named her Marie-Antoinette in memory of the unfortunate Queen of France. The Marquis's longstanding affection to his factotum was surprising in a man to whom all human sentiment seemed alien. Even so, when he perceived a reciprocal attraction between his son and his servant's daughter, he exploded into a violent rage. After threatening to disinherit Aloys if he persisted in this unacceptable love, he exiled him to first to Lausanne where one of his uncles was a bishop and then to Berne where another uncle was a pastor. Aloys was undeterred. To prove his constancy, he wrote letters to his flame, as passionate as they were useless since the young woman could not read.

Informed of this sad situation, Mme de Willenzach took it upon herself to teach the girl the alphabet. One day, the two of them were sitting under an apple-tree, tenderly spelling out a

letter from the beloved exile, when the Marquis, alerted by the unexpected sight of several turkeys wandering round unattended, surprised them. The violent scene that followed left the Marquise without a voice, Marie-Antoinette without hope and Aloys without land since M. de Willenzach announced formally that he was disinheriting him. He summoned Aloys back from Berne to inform of his decision. Aloys's response was to say that he would seek his fortune abroad. On the recommendation of a cousin whose personable appearance had impressed Madame Adelaide, he was presented at the Tuileries and was given by King Louis-Phillippe a post as an ensign on board of the frigate, *L'Audacieuse*.

For five years, he travelled the principal seas of the globe. He saw exotic things of beauty or even the existence nobody else in Switzerland suspected; even so, none of these fascinations matched for Aloys the more comely beauties he found so delightful as he sat in the sedan. He was approaching the end of his journey and, in less than an hour, he would be at Willenzach. He would have liked to be, for a brief moment, one of the peasants who stopped mowing in the fields to gaze at the vision he provided them in his elegant sedan as it rolled on in a cloud of dust. The beautiful carriage enchanted his vanity; his love would soon know an even greater satisfaction when he would be able to see again Marie-Antoinette. The anticipation of this event would have crowned his wishes but for an unquiet presentiment that troubled his happiness. He was by nature superstitious and feared that an event would happen to reverse a project long planned.

In order to challenge fate, he imagined all the obstacles that could have happened in his absence, to separate himself from Marie-Antoinette. Her feelings towards him might have changed and, weary of waiting for him, she may have married some rustic in the village without daring to tell him so in a letter. He put aside these thoughts. Had they not sworn an eternal fidelity? Perhaps she had died of languor, dying

slowly of love for him? This idea flattered him so much that he reproached himself with horror. And what if she had become ugly or he himself should find her less pretty after he had travelled the world and known so many different women of different classes and colours? In the letter she had written to him, telling him of the death of M. de Willenzach, his mother had said nothing of the young woman and this silence seemed to him to hide some kind of drama. Suddenly unquiet, he lowered the window and cried to the coachman to drive more quickly. The whip cracked, the cloud of dust rose about the carriage and, a half-hour later, Aloys glimpsed the first houses of Willenzach appearing before him. The village was traversed without the sedan slowing, the avenue mounted at a great trot and the horses, exhausted by this last effort, collapsed just before reaching the chateau's front steps.

Mme de Willenzach, busy surveying the cooking of jams, ran from the back of the kitchens without putting down the large ladle with which she has been pouring into pots. Throwing herself on her son's neck, she spilled a little syrup on his suit. Aloys, after a flash of annoyance, smiled at his mother's excitement. After giving his frock-coat to a servant to clean, he followed his mother into the room she had prepared for his return. There he saw flowers in vases, new candles in chandeliers, tobacco in a large pot of faience and rum in a flacon usually reserved for orange blossom. A valet brought in the suitcases from the carriage and Mme de Willenzach arranged the contents in drawers. She burst with exclamatory joy over the presents Aloys had brought her but her excitement was even more evident when she saw his uniform as ship's lieutenant with its epaulets on the shoulders, golden stripes, pretty embroideries and a belt that emphasized his waist's trimness. She suggested he wear it at the dinner she had organised that evening, and to which village notables and several neighbours were invited. He dared not ask her for news of Marie-Antoinette but once he was alone in his bedroom, he looked at the windows where he could see the poultry yard.

There he saw Marie-Antoinette in animated conversation with a kitchen-maid who, without doubt, had come to announce the good news of the young master's return. She was still at Willenzach and had not changed or forsaken her promises to him. He was certain to love her just as he had before and his fears disappeared.

In the chateau, there was excitement over the great moment. He heard his mother giving orders to the domestics to open the cupboards and polish the silver. He heard various noises, the crash of dishes echoed by loud sobs. He smiled. At his return, life had been reborn in a house that his father's misanthropy had long kept in near lethargy. The valet placed his great uniform on his bed and was waiting to help him put it on.

"Thank you, Hans, I have no need of you to dress me which I can do myself ... instead, do go and carry this letter!"

Rapidly, he wrote a letter to Marie-Antoinette, giving her an assignation that evening next to the pond where they had first met at the beginning of their idyll.

Too respectful to make clear his astonishment, the valet retreated, thinking that this must be an example of French manners which were known to be common. To dress alone! Never would the late Marquis have done such a thing! It was enough to make him regret for the first time, his late master.

In truth, Aloys had no wish to be seen by the valet or anyone else undressed for if he was, he knew he would soon be the subject of gossip and conversation. He undressed and stepped into his cabinet. The large looking-glass where he had in the past studied himself in those days when he was prone to adolescent coquetry, now showed his image; entirely nude, he nevertheless seemed adorned in sumptuous Oriental evening dress. On his body, there seemed to be a strange orange flora mixed with a monstrous fawn: exotic flowers, fabulous animals in as if confusing tapestries on which naïve artists had

designed an earthly paradise. To the rhythm of his breathing, a dragon thrilled on his torso; a serpent rolled round each of his arms, a menacing head darting towards his neck. Every time he moved, a fantastic world animated itself: reptiles waved and swelled their muscles; flowers trembled as if agitated by the breaths of animals blotted in measured petals. "The new Marquis de Willenzach, tattooed as a Papuan," he said to himself in a low voice as he caressed a body that seemed to him alien to him and the contemplation of which fascinated him.

This work of art had been created in Singapore. *L'Audacieuse* had anchored there after great repairs and to entertain himself during this stopover, Aloys had let himself be guided by an old sailor round the town's curiosities. One evening, they went to see a tattooist, famed throughout the archipelago. The tattooist showed them some of his most singular works. He had executed them twenty or thirty years before on subjects of the Marharadjah of Samarang. This prince, for the love of art, had then decapitated these subjects so that these tattoos, suitably framed, could adorn his palace's walls. After his death, they were returned to the artist. This extraordinary collection fascinated Aloys who returned several times to the old man and asked his permission to see him at work. The Malay, flattered by the white lord's interest, offered to tattoo him in memory of his visits. Aloys had on his chest since his birth, a little red spot, the size of a coin. His grandmother, discovering this mark, had cried that it reminded her of the blow of the lance with which Christ had been pierced on the cross and prophesied that the child would in time become a martyr of the church. His father had remarked, dryly, that the spot was a symbol of the blood that had been spilled by the Swiss and himself at the Tuileries and himself in defence of the King. To hide it, Aloys had the Malay to design on his torso a fabulous animal one of whose eyes now bore the little red spot.

The repairs look longer than expected and the stopover at Singapore was prolonged. Aloys often returned to see the old artist. The exquisite suffering caused by the needle's tingling when it was creating strange designs gave him a curious pleasure. While some of his shipmates whiled away their days in opium dens and other ill-famed places, he consecrated his time to the small room where tattoos were created. Extended on a leather bed, his spirit was numbed by the diffuse pain by the metamorphosis of which he was the object. He loved this state of abandon induced by these dreams, stranger even than the old man's compositions, that haunted his semi-consciousness.

When the ship was at last ready to leave, only his face, his hands and the soles of his feet were untouched and he was proud that the rest of his body was entirely tattooed making it seem an odd and beautiful armour. The fantastic world that adorned him called cries of fear from the majority of women he encountered by hazard during his travels. In a tavern one evening, a woman fainted when she saw the dragon. In Saint Domingo, a planter's wife was seduced by the monster, and had it engraved on a ring in memory of this coupling which to her seemed something out of mythology.

Aloys could not prevent himself from laughing when he imagined how his mother's astonishment if she were to discover his secret but he felt a greater uneasiness when he thought that Marie-Antoinette too might faint on the evening of their marriage. To escape this disagreeable possibility, he put on the shirt Hans had prepared for him and then his uniform. He was now again the slim, blonde officer whose accent had made French officers on the Audacieuse laugh. He carefully brushed his short beard, fairer still in colouring than his face; he was finishing this when he heard the gong announcing dinner. As he arrived at table, a servant discreetly gave him a letter from Marie-Antoinette, accepting his invitation to meet later in the evening and proclaiming her fidelity to their love.

This thought of their imminent reunion reassured Aloys. He showed, throughout the meal, the verve and talent for evocation common to travellers towards those who stay at home.

After the departure of almost all of the last guests, the family notary, who had also been invited to the dinner, asked the new Marquis to meet with him so that he could give him the last wishes that the late Marquis had asked him to give the prodigal son on the latter's return. The scribe took from his case, a large envelope including a number of papers and a sealed letter bearing the subscription "To my son, Aloys de Willenzach."

"The late Monsieur the Marquis confided to me this letter in which he expressed his supreme last wish," said the solemn man of the law. "I must ask Monsieur the Marquis to read it before the other documents."

Aloys took the document to an armchair, broke the seals, and began to read the letter in a low voice.

"When you read this letter," wrote the old gentleman, "I shall be no more than a shade among shades, a glorious memory to my brothers in arms, a bad one to you. I beg you to forget this just as I have sought to forget, on the insistences of your mother, your youthful follies. Because of that, I have forsaken my intention of disinheriting you and I am leaving you my fortune on the condition that you fulfill a duty I have not have had the courage to carry out in my lifetime. For this, however, I must make a confession.

"I have not always done justice to the admirable woman that is your mother and I have gravely offended her in several circumstances; there is one, however, that I am going to tell you about. From a guilty liaison formed with a person of loose manners was born a daughter whose mother had no wish to raise, claiming that it would damage her career. I shall refrain of naming this unworthy woman but you must know the identity of

the daughter so that you can repair my wrongs toward her. Her name, you shall doubtless have divined, is Marie-Antoinette. She was hardly a month old when I confided her to the excellent Karl and his wife, making them swear to the secret of her birth. I counted on giving her a small dowry and planned on marrying her to some honest boy only to see the two of you drawn together by a link more than merely fraternal.

“How can convey my horror and then my pain to be so cruelly punished in this way for a passing fancy? I dared not to tell you the truth. I preferred to distance you from Willenzach but this precaution was not adequate to interrupt this damned link. Your enlistment in the Usurper’s navy caused me a pain almost as great as your love for Marie-Antoinette, but your distance reassured me. I should have liked to take advantage of your absence to arrange for Marie-Antoinette an alliance that looked good in all kinds of ways. She refused and I could not overcome her resistance. If she has inherited her mother’s beauty, she also, alas, possesses my own stubborn character before the trials encountered in life quenched it.

“Thus it is to you, my dear Aloys, that I entrust the fortune of this unhappy child. I beg you to assure to her an honourable outcome and one not too unworthy of the blood that is hers.”

After reading this letter, Aloys remained for several minutes prostrated in the armchair and then got up and left the room without saying a word. His mother heard him mounting the stairway and closing the door to his room. She wanted to see him but she knocked at the door in vain. Through the door, she heard the sound of muffled sobs. Could it be that her husband, a tyrant over those close to him in life, was continuing his work beyond the grave?

In the corridor, she crossed a chambermaid who, seeing her mistress in tears, began to cry herself. This feeling of emotion extended to the laundry-room and, several minutes

later, to the kitchen and the courtyard and then soon the entire domain knew that some misfortune had plunged the chateau in the grip of desolation. The animals, with their mysterious instinct, divined the torment of the humans; the cows, unquiet and pensive, ceased their mooing; the horses, in their stalls, were as nervous as during stormy days and the dogs hid while moaning lugubriously. Marie-Antoinette waited vainly by the pond for the young master's arrival, and but for her solid Swiss foundation of good sense, might have become the Ophelia of the cantons.

Early the next morning Aloys left his room. He had not undressed and he still wore the same clothes he had the evening before, but now, his shirt was rumpled, his collar torn and his hair disarrayed. He went out to the stables, saddled a horse and rode in a frantic gallop with a noise was such as to pull the chateau's inhabitants out of their torpor. Mme de Willenzach, who had spent a sleepless night opened her windows and cried "Aloys! Aloys!" before fainting.

Aloys only returned in the evening and on foot, his horse having injured itself in jumping over a ditch; Aloys finished him off with a pistol's shot. Mme de Willenzach was saddened by the news since the horse had been the most handsome in the stable.

"What matter a horse," said her son, "when I myself has lost everything?"

"Everything lost! Are we ruined?" exclaimed the Marquise. "Has your father disinherited you while promising he would do nothing of the kind?"

"Ruined, oh my mother, nothing like that. It is I who am ruined in losing Marie-Antoinette. Read this!"

He thrust the letter into her hand. Mme de Willenzach read it without showing too much surprise.

"Is it an odious machination to stop me from marrying Marie-Antoinette?" he asked anxiously.

"I don't think so," his mother answered calmly. "If I never imagined that the child was your father's daughter, I knew that she was not that of Karl and his wife. At the time, your father told me he had rescued the girl as a charitable act. Since he never seemed a man of pleasure, I never suspected anything of this kind."

"What to do? What to do?" moaned Aloys. "There is nothing left now but to die ..."

"Do stop talking such nonsense and go and change your clothes while I myself attend to my own toilet. In an hour, we shall meet again and I shall examine the situation with a reposed mind. I cannot reflect until I have combed my hair!"

Mme de Willenzach's cold resolve surprised her son.

"What can you mean, my mother? What issue can come of a situation that has none?"

"Go and change and don't lose courage. Trust in me. Have I not always helped you?"

Aloys obeyed but his worries were such that he did not wait until the hour was finished before returning to his mother. Still at her toilet, his mother dismissed her maid and finished pinning up her headbands herself. In the reflection of her dressing table, she saw the image of her son and reflected that a day had been enough to destroy harmony. His eyes were haunted by a fatal passion that was devouring his heart. His lips were trembling and his face had turned grey. This disarray moved her to a point that it made her tenderness for him grow.

"Aloys," she said to him with firmness, "stop feeling so desperate. The situation is not so tragic nor straightforward

as you think it is.”

“I fear that you don’t understand. Marie-Antoinette and I are sister and brother. That is the horrendous truth that nothing can change.”

“What do you know of it, Aloys?” she asked, turning towards him. She went on arranging her hair and smiled at him with a hint of mischief.

“Can my father’s word be put in doubt?”

“And that of your mother? Can that be put in doubt?”

“God forbid! But can that change anything with regard to this sad fatality?”

“Everything, my dear son! Everything!” cried the Marquise, regarding him in adoration. “I love you too much to sacrifice your happiness to my honour as a woman, and in my turn, I must admit to a fault of my own committed long ago ... twenty-six years in fact ... Aloys, you are not the son of the Marquis of Willenzach.”

“What are saying, my mother? Is that possible?”

“Alas! I am not the irreproachable wife to whom your father pay homage in his letter and I myself, also had a moment of feebleness of which you were the fruit. Will you forgive me?”

Aloys kneeled before his mother, took her hands and kissed them tenderly.

“Oh, my mother, bless you, you have given me life a second time. Forgive you? It is I who must thank you for giving me what I need ...”

“Does it not sadden you to know that the Willenzach blood does not run in your veins and that you are not the real heir of that illustrious race, you who have always been so proud of

your name?"

"Have you forgotten all that separated me from my father? For the world, I shall always be his son but in the secret of my heart, I shall cherish another father ... In fact," and here a shadow passed across his face, "who was my father and what was his station?"

Mme de Willenzach leaned towards her son, still kneeling before her, and embraced him again.

"Reassure yourself, my dear angel, you have no reason to blush about the true author of your days. He was the most handsome man, the proudest and most attractive of his time. Had he not been, should I have succumbed to his charm? What distinguishes honest women from the others is that when they cede, it is on purpose!"

She dreamt for an instant and then continued her story.

"Your father was the Baron Scipio von Metellus, from one of the oldest families in Berne, a family that traces its origins back to ancient Rome. A childhood friend of the Marquis de Willenzach, they met again in the Swiss Guard where both served as lieutenants. They succeeded in escaping the 10th August Massacre but while in my husband's mind, memories of the scenes he witnessed remained engraved in his mind, in the Baron they were quickly erased. The joy of escaping that carnage indeed augmented his taste for life and while the Marquis fell every deeper into misanthropy, the Baron turned to frivolity. Notwithstanding their differences in character, the two friends always met with pleasure and every year, the Baron Scipio spent a week of 10th August at Willenzach to celebrate the anniversary of this sad event. The day itself, a great luncheon was held in the courtyard of honour for the soldiers who had escaped and, in the evening, a dinner reuniting the surviving officers. The ceremonies thrilled your father ... rather my husband ... who, after toasting the unhappy

sovereigns of France and the comrades fallen in the defence of the Tuileries, invariably fell down dead drunk. At one of these events, the Marquis fell after the fortieth toast and was carried to his apartments. The other officers, embarrassed, retired soon after. I was left alone with the Baron Scipio who had kept his head. He congratulated me on tolerating so courageously this debauchery. 'Alas!' I said to him, not without naivety, 'at Willenzach, every day is the 10th August! My husband talks of nothing else ... ' He took my hand, kissed it and murmured: 'My poor friend, let us talk of something else.' We were alone in my boudoir. Downstairs, the servants were putting the great hall in order...Thus, you were conceived an evening of the 10th August ... Your real father was at the Tuileries and you are in every manner, a hero's son!"

"What a marvellous story!" said Aloys with delight. "Have you seen again the Baron?"

"Only once ... At the *Lion de Lucerne's* inauguration. M. de Willenzach gave a speech which he had rehearsed several times over the preceding weeks. While he spoke I looked through the crowd in search of the Baron Scipio. Our looks crossed and our smiles met. This gallant man never wanted to return to Willenzach to remind me of our distracting moment and henceforth, he refused his friend's pressing invitations. It was M. de Willenzach who went to Berne and passed sojourns there with his friend. Was that delicacy not admirable?"

Aloys got up, kissed his mother's hand once more and announced that he would leave in an hour for Berne.

"But what will you do there?"

"I shall see my real father"! Embrace him! And beg his consent to my marriage to his best friend's daughter!"

He laughed, made a whirl and gave the servants his orders. In half an hour, the travelling sedan was ready. Before mounting it, Aloys went to the farmyard where Marie-Antoinette,

disappointed by the failed appointment, was feeding pigeons in a melancholy way. He took her in his arms, seized her wildly in his arms and reassured her:

“The obstacles that oppose our happiness are about to disappear,” he said. “I am obliged to spend a day in Berne, but after my return, we shall celebrate our engagement and you, at last,” he added in a mysterious way, “will soon have the rank which is your right.”

Leaving the girl stunned, he ran into the carriage which was about to leave when Mme de Willenzach appeared at the threshold, waving a handkerchief:

“Aloys! Aloys!” she cried. “Tell the Baron that I shall always love him!”

Aloys reached the doors of Berne at the end of the day. Despite the late hour, he enquired where he could find the Baron Scipio von Metellus's domain. The passer-by to whom he posed the question, smiled as he looked at him, indicated the way and wished him to amuse himself. This last phrase astonished him a little but he understood it when he saw how brilliantly illuminated the Metellus's house's façade in the *Junkergasse* was. Carriages were lined along the arcades; the baron was giving a party. Aloys hesitated fearing he might be an intruder, but then the image of Marie-Antoinette banished his doubts. When he was introduced into the great hall where the master of the house received his guests, every eye present turned towards him. The dinner was reaching its end. The Baron von Metellus, surprised by this unknown visitor, rose to welcome him. Aloys saluted him and then, in a subdued voice, begged him to forgive this intrusion:

“It concerns,” he said, “an affair that to me is of the greatest importance, without which I should not have taken the liberty of disturbing you at this hour of the day. May I see

you in private?"

"But who are you, Monsieur the Officer?" asked the Baron.

"I am Aloys ... " answered Aloys, blushing as he spoke, "I am ... or rather I was Aloys de Willenzach."

The face of his host lit up:

"The son of my dear Wilfrid! How did I fail to recognise you at once? You look so much like your father at his age!"

Opening his arms in a theatrical fashion, he embraced the young man who was a little discountenanced by this welcome.

"Join us at table, my dear, and drink with us! We can talk about this business later in my cabinet."

Aloys agreed and found himself seated between two ladies whose dress and conversation convinced him that the baron lived gaily. He did not respond to their advances and he was relieved when the baron, seeing his embarrassment, gave him a sign to follow him.

"What, my boy, brings you here? I can see from the expression on your face that you have not come here to amuse yourself and I have no wish to make you wait longer. Are you in debt? Is it money that you need? I have too often dipped into your father's wallet not to render you the same service..."

"I thank you for your generosity, Monsieur, but it is not money that I have come to ask you for. You will have heard of my father's death ... "

"Alas! Yes, poor Wilfrid! He must be well content to have join the souls of Their Majesties in a celestial Versailles ... "

"After I read certain papers that he left me," Aloys brusquely interrupted, "my mother revealed to me that I am not the Marquis de Willenzach's son but yours..."

"Mine!" exclaimed the Baron. "What does this joke mean?"

Aloys recounted to him, suppressing some details, the story his mother had told him. When he had finished the tale, the baron remained pensive.

"My faith, it is very possible. The marquise was a very charming young woman and we drank so much at that commemoration of the 10th August that I have lost all memory of what happened afterwards ... at any rate, if your mother told you that, one must believe it ... Women's memories are so much more reliable because they come from the heart ... Well, my son, I am pleased to make your acquaintanceship! All one needs to have a posterity to make even the most prolific family man jealous is to remain a bachelor!" He began laughing. "Decidedly, that poor Wilfrid never had any luck! Always misled and always by his best friend! I shall end up feeling remorseful!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Oh! It is another story and resembles yours only in its conclusion; but surely now you would prefer to return to drink with us to this happy circumstance?"

"No, Monsieur, tell me this story."

"It is spicy and will amuse you. Since you insist, here it is: you know that your father and I were very close in our youth and has happens with friends, we shared everything, and there was nothing that one refused to lend to the other ... for a long time, we shared money, horses and women ... that is to say, that I took his money, mounted his horses and lent him most of my mistresses to him since he, poor fellow, had hardly any idea how to find them on his own. One year, we had the same woman for several months. Your father was already married but he was bored at Willenzach and would make run away to Berne. This woman was an actress who was a bit mad ... indeed she was completely so; I have forgotten her name; she changed it

often, as frequently as she did her husbands, but her art was ravishing. I remember her still in the great aria in *La Sultana invalidee* which was one of her great successes at the time. It began like this:

'Love is like a bird, who perches where it wishes...'

"Please, Monsieur, I am devoured by curiosity."

"That creature was our mistress. It was the time of the Congress of Vienna and Berne was gayer than it is now. All of the great figures who were on their way to the Congress or were on their way back stopped in Berne. The season that year was dazzling ... There was always a court of admirers round ... what was her name?"

"What does it matter?" said Aloys who was feeling impatient.

"What was the name of that battle? The Be...the Beresina! Yes, that's it! La Teresina! There was always a court at her feet and she easily allowed herself to be seduced: even Wilfrid fell! She covered her with jewels that she resold as soon as she got them and he also covered her with insults since she was also cheating on him without a hint of shame. More than once, he interrupted the performance with vehement shouts much to the amusement of the audience. One day, this charming person discovered she was pregnant; this didn't stop her from going on performing to the extreme limit of her strength and above all beyond decency ... Ah! my dear, what courage to go on singing, her hands on her chest:

*'I am the old sage
The prince's choice
To adorn his old age...'*

"And so, Monsieur?"

"And so, she was obliged to quit the stage. She went to stay in the country for several months and there she gave birth to

a child. Needless to say, she couldn't keep the child with her because of her profession's demands. At first she wanted to confide the child with me since I was the happy father of the—"

"—My God..."

"What would such a devil of a man as me do with an infant with a bib? In addition, I was far from rich and could hardly keep myself afloat. Teresina and I decided to persuade Wilfrid that he was the child's father. It was the shining consecration of all our friend's favours to her. He was so pleased that he was ready to believe it! We gave him our little girl ... What is wrong, my dear friend, you don't look at all well?"

"No...I don't know ... I must be tired from the journey ... I haven't slept for several days ... Excuse me ... La Teresina ... would you know where I might find her?"

"My dear, how should I know? It will soon be ten years since I last saw her. However, I did see recently in a gazette that she was acting in a comedy in Geneva. She may still be there. But why should you be interested?"

Aloys jumped up like a flash.

"Where are you going?" asked the Baron. "This house is yours, no need to lodge anywhere else?"

"Forgive me for leaving you so brusquely but I must leave at once for Geneva."

"It is almost midnight; it is sheer madness. You will not be able to find a horse at this hour."

"Mine should be well rested by now; if not, I shall procure one at any price."

"But why are you so in a rush to go to Geneva? What do you want to do there?"

"I wish to see La Teresina."

"Are you mad?" cried M. von Mettelus, "She is over fifty. At your age and with your looks, you can make other conquests. Stay here, finish the evening with our friends. I am sure that you will find several among the ladies who will be not be indifferent to you."

"No, Monsieur, it is impossible. An overwhelming duty calls me to Geneva. It concerns my happiness, my health, my life. I shall explain to you later ... Goodbye."

Aloys removed himself from the Baron Scipio's paternal embrace and left almost in a run, leaving his host somewhat perplexed:

"It is curious," he said to himself. "I have waited seventy-one years to find a son entirely to my taste and he disappears in an hour, as quickly as he appeared. The younger generation is very badly brought up. Best to return to the older..."

Aloys rolled the rest of the night and most of the next day, reaching Geneva just as the sun was setting. He made his way to the *Hotel des Bergues*, changed there in haste and informed himself there about La Teresina. He learned that not only did she live in the city but that evening she was giving her twenty-first farewell performance. The number astonished him:

"Ah yes," he was told, "that incomparable artist cannot resolve to leave a stage where she is always reminded of her admirers' enthusiasm. She is always beautiful and her art is unequalled in Switzerland. The Tsar himself came to applaud her and she recently returned from Saint-Petersburg where she enjoyed a tremendous success. "

A stable-boy who overheard their conversation as he was passing by, seconded the singer's greatness:

"When one hears her one cries just as one does at *Rene des*

Vaches."

Without wasting any more time, Aloys rushed to the theatre where the tragedy, Cleopatra's Galley, was appearing in four acts and fifteen changes of scene, including one evoking the naval battle of Actium. He slipped into the theatre at the end of the first act, just when La Teresina, playing Cleopatra, was reaching the end of a speech:

*While Rome today holds under its law
I delight, Charmian, by what I saw,
Leave us behind us everything that reeks of pain.
I shall not speak complaints in vain,
Anthony is at last here, he has returned at last,
I live only to think of my love unsurpassed ...*

As the audience broke into frantic applause, Aloys examining through his lorgnette La Teresina, found that with her twisting frowns, she was not as sublime as he had led to believe. With her blonde wig covered with roses, her veils and bracelets which clanged in a way reminiscent of Turkish music, she looked more like a painted mummy than the famous queen of Egypt. He confined his disappointment to a neighbour sitting next to him in the stalls:

"Had you been here yesterday, you would have laughed," the neighbour told him. "because in the last scene when Cleopatra takes the asp to her breast, a mouse ran across the stage and La Teresina ran over the stage, the snake still in her hand ..."

"This is the second time you have seen the play?" asked Aloys.

"The fifteenth time! I come to every show because with La Teresina, each performance is different from the last. What a woman!"

Unable to bear seeing the ancient stage goddess exchanging lines with Anthony while devouring with her eyes escorting

soldiers, Aloys decided to take advantage of the interval to have the interview he had planned to postpone until the play's end. He made his way backstage to the dressing rooms. A maid who seemed as old as her mistress, led him to the reclining actress who gave him a languid glance. The dressing room was filled with flowers whose fragrances combined with that of make-up to make the atmosphere suffocating.

Aloys could only babble without thinking, such was his impatience, as he presenting himself.

"Madam, I beg you to forgive me for my audacity ... my fate is in your hands ... but I must begin with a confession ... I am ... "

At first surprised by this entrance, La Teresina sat up, clasping together her hands, heavy with rings, and put them under her trembling chin as she emitted a feeble cry:

"Ah, Monsieur, no need to say anything more. Words are no more than hindrances from which beautiful spirits must liberate themselves the better to meet. Do not say the confession I can divine your thoughts from your lips and read in your eyes..."

"What have you divined?"

"There are things that women can understand without their being told. I know the way of the young, how it is best to spare them words and reassure them ... "

After this, La Teresina opened her arms and began to recite:

*Come, handsome messenger of the gods,
And take this bond...*

Aloys, horrified, stepped back a step.

"What have you understood? Is this not a form of contempt?"

"What sort of tale you are telling?" asked La Teresina with a certain anger. "Are you not in love?"

"Yes, but ..."

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"For you to clear the darkness that surrounds me, for you to decide my destiny! I am in love with your daughter, Marie-Antoinette, but there is a strange fatality that clouds our mutual inclination."

"My daughter! Marie-Antoinette! You are dreaming. Do you think me old enough to have a daughter of marrying age? What insolence!"

"It is not a dream but a story that is fairly long ..." Aloys told her, as briefly as he could, the events of the last few days. Hardly had he completed his story before the theatre director appeared in some irritation:

"Is there something wrong? We are waiting to raise the curtain and the audience is getting impatient."

"Let them wait!" said the false Cleopatra in a royal tone as she turned to her maid who had been following closely the conversation, her eyes gleaming with curiosity:

"Rosalinde, do you remember," she asked, "my having a daughter in 1816?"

"I remember it as if it was yesterday! Madame was so beautiful in your nightdress of satin blue, your lace bonnet and at your feet, the white goat with golden horns whose milk nursed the infant! I remember that the goat was afterwards bought by the Count d'Affry for his niece, Mme de Prevondavaux who had twins and not milk ..."

"But the child," insisted La Teresina, "Did I give it to the Marquis de Willenzach though it was the daughter of the Baron Scipio von Metellus?"

"That, Madame, you will know better than me," laughed the

maid. "I remember how she was run over by the Count de Pourtales one day when he came to lunch with Mme de Prevondaux ..."

"What? If the poor child was run over how can someone want to marry her?" asked la Teresina, bewildered at the thought.

"No, Madame, the goat," said Rosalinde in floods of laughter.

Aloys regarded the two women in an irritated way.

"I remember how right after the birth, the Abbot Tschurri came at dawn to baptise the child ..."

"Tschurri! Nicolas Tschurri!" cried La Teresina, clapping her hands together. "I remember him so well with his white collar, his black curls and blue eyes! It was he who was the child's father. I remember it so well. The Baron Scipio thought he was fooling the dear Marquis but he himself was fooled. The real father was Nicolas Tschurri. Marie-Antoinette is not your sister. I made fools of them all ..." La Teresina burst out into laughter while sketching a dance step, accompanied by the Turkish music of her bracelets.

"And so Marie-Antoinette is an abbot's daughter?" murmured Aloys, pensive. "How could that be? It seems difficult ..."

"Is he a child?" La Teresina laughed, taking Rosalinde as a witness of this naivety. "Do you really think that abbots are made in a different way from other men? Abbot Tschurri was my confessor. All the women were mad about him and invented all kinds of sins to prolong their time in the confessional. I thought of sins so delicious that he could not resist committing them with me. We were soon off together leaving others to their acts of contrition and we knew unforgettable earthly delights. Alas! What has happened to my little abbot? He was born to become a bishop, a cardinal, a pope! I spent several days together with him and I have never forgotten him. Perhaps remorse made him cloister himself in a monastery ..."

Alas! My little Abbot, where are you now? How happy you would be to see the triumphs of the woman who you loved so much ... Rosalinde, where has he gone?"

"Madame, I have no idea."

"How can you say you have no idea," cried impatiently La Teresina. "You saw him."

"Not for twenty years."

"I am not talking about the Abbot, stupid creature," cried La Teresina, "but the young man. What has happened to him?"

"Madame, he has gone. He seemed so happy with what Madame told him."

"That was why I said what I said to him," observed the actress. "I like so much giving pleasure to men and this one was so handsome I couldn't resist ... "

"But, Madame, does that mean that the young girl is not really that of the Abbot Tschurri?"

"How should I know?" said la Teresina, shrugging her shoulders. "Perhaps the Abbot Tschurri's, perhaps the Marquis de Willenzach's, perhaps the Baron Scipio's, perhaps someone else's ... There are so many men on the earth ..."

At that moment, the director's head appeared in the door:

"Madame, the audience is furious. If you don't appear on stage, we shall have to give out refunds ..."

When La Teresina, her wig on the wrong side of her head, appeared on stage, Aloys too impatient to wait for the end of the play, had already reached his hotel to get his carriage and return home. The next day, the sedan arrived at Willenzach at the hour of dinner and Marie-Antoinette, in the role of fiancée, sat at the chateau's table.

Two months later, she became Marquise de Willenzach. The radiant air of the young couple dissipated the shadow of a misalliance that the general view projected on the family shield. Not wishing to reveal the truth, the dowager Marquise let it be understood that her daughter-in-law came from illustrious origins that certain political imperatives prevented from being unveiled. There were whispers that the new Marquise was the daughter of a German princess and a pianist in vogue. Other rumours hinted that she was the product of a love between Queen Hortense and a herdsman in the Bernese Uplands.

That evening, Aloys carried his young bride in his arms up to the nuptial chamber. He remembered the tattoos that covered his whole body: "I shall blow out the lamp and undress in the dark," he told to himself and while waiting to do so, he helped his wife, who had dismissed her maid, to unlace her corset. Since his impatience made him clumsy, he took a pair of scissors to cut the laces. The corset fell and, with a brusque gesture, he pulled off the cambric on the shirt under which throbbed anxiously the young woman's heart. The bride emitted a light cry of alarmed modesty; she wanted to protect herself with her hands but her gesture was not quick enough to prevent Aloys from seeing on Marie-Antoinette's left breast, a little red spot the size of a coin and exactly like the one he had on his own chest.