

in the request.—“To please ye then, and satisfy my own curiosity,” said the curate, “I will begin, if you will but give your attention.”

## CHAPTER VI

## THE NOVEL OF THE CURIOUS IMPERTINENT

ANSELMO and Lothario, considerable gentlemen of Florence, the capital city of Tuscany in Italy, were so eminent for their friendship, that they were called nothing but the Two Friends. They were both young and unmarried, of the same age and humour, which did not a little concur to the continuance of their mutual affection, though, of the two, Anselmo was the most amorously inclined, and Lothario the greater lover of hunting; yet they loved one another above all other considerations; and mutually quitted their own pleasure for their friend's; and their very wills, like the different motions of a well regulated watch, were always subservient to their unity, and still kept time with one another. Anselmo, at last, fell desperately in love with a beautiful lady of the same city; so eminent for her fortune and family, that he resolved by the consent of his friend, (for he did nothing without his advice), to demand her in marriage. Lothario was the person employed in this affair, which he man-

aged with that address, that in few days he put his friend into possession of Camilla, for that was the lady's name; and this so much to their satisfaction, that he received a thousand acknowledgments from both, for the equal happiness they derived from his endeavours. Lothario, as long as the nuptials lasted, was every day at Anselmo's, and did all he could to add to the sports and diversions of the occasion. But as soon as the new-married pair had received the congratulation of their friends, and the nuptial ceremonies were over, Lothario retired with the rest of their acquaintance, and forbore his visits, because he prudently imagined that it was not at all proper to be so frequent at his friend's house after marriage as before; for though true friendship entirely banishes all suspicion and jealousy, yet the honour of a married man is of so nice and tender a nature, that it has been sometimes sullied by the conversation of the nearest relations, and therefore more liable to suffer from that of a friend. Anselmo observed this remissness of Lothario; and, fond as he was of his wife, shewed by his tender complaints how much it affected him. He told him, that if he could have believed he must also have left so dear a correspondence by marriage, as much as he

loved, he would never have paid so great a price for the satisfaction of his passion; and that he would never, for the idle reputation of a cautious husband, suffer so tender and agreeable a name to be lost, as that of the Two Friends, which, before his marriage, they had so happily obtained; and therefore he begged him, if that were a term lawful to be used betwixt them two, to return to his former familiarity and freedom of conversation; assuring him, that his wife's will and pleasure were entirely formed by his; and that being acquainted with their ancient and strict friendship, she was equally surprised at so unexpected a change.

Lothario replied to these endearing persuasions of his friend, with such prudence and discretion, that he convinced him of the sincerity of his intentions in what he had done; and so, in conclusion, they agreed that Lothario should dine twice a-week at his house, besides holidays. Yet Lothario's compliance with this resolution being only not to disoblige his friend, he designed to observe it no farther than he should find it consistent with Anselmo's honour, whose reputation was as dear to him as his own; and he used to tell him, that the husband of a beautiful wife ought to be as cautious

of the friends whom he carried home to her himself, as other female acquaintance and visitants. For a friend's or relation's house often renders the contrivance of those things easy and not suspected, which could not be compassed either in the church, the markets, or at public entertainments and places of resort, which no man can entirely keep a woman from frequenting. To this Lothario said also, that every married man ought to have some friend to put him in mind of the defects of his conduct; for a husband's fondness many times makes him either not see, or at least, for fear of displeasing his wife, not command or forbid her what may be advantageous or prejudicial to his reputation. In all which, a friend's warning and advice might supply him with a proper remedy. But where shall we find a friend so qualified with wisdom and truth as Anselmo demands? I must confess I cannot tell, unless it were Lothario, whose care of his friend's honour made him so cautious as not to comply with his promised visiting days, lest the malicious observers should give a scandalous censure of the frequent admission of so well qualified a gentleman, both for his wit, fortune, youth and address, to the house of a lady of so celebrated a beauty as Camilla: for

though his virtue was sufficiently known to check the growth of any malignant report, yet he would not suffer his friend's honour nor his own, to run the hazard of being called in question; which made him spend the greatest part of those days, he had by promise devoted to his friend's conversation, in other places and employments; yet excusing his absence so agreeably, that Anselmo could not deny the reasonableness of what he alleged. And thus the time passed away in pathetic accusations of want of love and friendship on one side, and plausible excuses on the other.

"I know very well," said Anselmo, walking one day in the fields with his friend, "that of all the favours and benefits for which heaven commands my gratitude, as the advantage of my birth, fortune, and nature, the greatest and most obliging is the gift of such a wife, and such a friend; being both of you pledges of so great value, that though it is impossible for me to raise my esteem and love equal to your deserts, yet is no man capable of having a greater. And yet while I am in possession of all that can or usually does make a man happy, I live the most discontented life in the world. I am not able to tell you when my misery began, which now inwardly torments me with so strange,

extravagant, and singular a desire, that I never reflect on it, but I wonder at myself, and condemn and curb my folly, and would fain hide my desires even from myself: and yet I have received no more advantage from this private confusion, than if I had published my extravagance to all the world. Since therefore it is evident that it will at last break out, dear Lothario, I would have it go no farther than thy known fidelity and secrecy; for that and my own industry, which as my friend thou wilt turn to my assistance, will quickly, I hope, free me from the anguish it now gives me, and restore me that tranquillity of which my own folly has now deprived me."

Lothario stood in great suspense, unable to guess at the consequence of so strange and prolix an introduction. In vain he racked his imagination for the causes of his friend's affliction, the truth was the last thing he could think of; but no longer to remain in doubt, he told Anselmo, that he did his friendship a particular injury, in not coming directly to the point in the discovery of his thoughts to him, since his counsels might enable him to support, and, perhaps, to lose or compass such importunate desires.

"It is very true," replied Anselmo; "and

with that assurance I must inform you, that the desire that gives me so much pain, is to know whether Camilla be really as virtuous as I think her. Nor can this be made evident but by such a trial, that, like gold by the fire, the standard and degree of her worth be discovered. For, in my opinion, no woman has more virtue than she retains, after the force of the most earnest solicitations. *Casta est quam nemo rogavit*: and she only may be said to be chaste, who has withstood the force of tears, vows, promises, gifts, and all the importunities of a lover that is not easily denied: for where is the praise of a woman's virtue whom nobody has ever endeavoured to corrupt? Where is the wonder if a wife be reserved, when she has no temptation nor opportunity of being otherwise, especially if she have a jealous husband, with whom the least suspicion goes for a reality, and who therefore punishes the least appearance with death. Now I can never so much esteem her who owes her virtue merely to fear or want of opportunity of being false, as I would one who victoriously surmounts all the assaults of a vigorous and watchful lover, and yet retains her virtue entire and unshaken. These, and many other reasons, which I could urge to strengthen my opinion, make me desire that my

Camilla's virtue may pass through the fiery trial of vigorous solicitations and addresses, and these offered by a gallant, who may have merit enough to deserve her good opinion; and if, as I am confident she will, she be able to resist so agreeable a temptation, I shall think myself the most happy man in the world, and attain to the height and utmost aim of my desires, and shall say, that a virtuous woman is fallen to my lot, of whom the wise man says, who can find her? If she yields, I shall, at least, have the satisfaction of finding my opinion of women justified; and not be imposed on by a foolish confidence, that abuses most men; which consideration will be sufficient to make me support the grief I shall derive from so expensive an experiment. And assuring myself, that nothing which you can say can dissuade me from my resolution, I desire that you yourself, my dear friend, would be the person to put my design in execution. I will furnish you with opportunities enough of making your addresses, in which I would have you omit nothing you may suppose likely to prevail with, and work upon a woman of quality, who is modest, virtuous, reserved, and discreet by nature. The most prevailing reason that makes me choose you for this affair above all others, is, because if she should prove so frail,

as to be overcome by addresses and importunities, the victory will not cost me so dear, since I am secured from your taking that advantage, of which another might make no scruple. And so my honour will remain untouched, and the intended injury a secret, in the virtue of thy silence; for I know my friend so well, that death and the grave will as soon divulge my affairs. Wherefore, if you would give me life indeed, and deliver me from the most perplexing torment of doubt, you will immediately begin this amorous assault, with all that warmth, assiduity, and courage, I expect from that confidence I put in your friendship."

Lothario gave so great an attention to Anselmo's reasons, that he gave him no other interruption, than what we mentioned. But now, finding his discourse was at an end, full of amazement at the extravagance of the proposal, he thus replied: "Could I, my dear Anselmo, persuade myself that what you have said were any more than a piece of raillery, I should not have been so long silent; no, I should have interrupted you at the beginning of your speech. Sure you know neither yourself nor me, Anselmo, or you would never have employed me on such an affair, if you had not thought me as much altered from what I was, as you seem to

be; for as the poet has it, *usque ad aras*; a true friend ought to desire nothing of his friend that is offensive to heaven. But should a man so far exert his friendship, as to deviate a little from the severity of religion, in compliance to his friend, no trifling motives can excuse the transgression, but such only as concern, at least, his friend's life and honour. Which therefore of these, Anselmo, is in danger, to warrant my undertaking so detestable a thing as you desire? Neither, I dare engage. On the contrary, you would make me the assaulter of both, in which my own is included; for to rob you of your reputation, is to take away your life, since an infamous life is worse than death; and by making me the guilty instrument of this, as you would have me, you make me worse than a dead man, by the murder of my reputation. Therefore I desire you would hear with patience what I have to urge against your extravagant desire, and I shall afterwards hear your reply, without interruption."

Anselmo having promised his attention, Lothario proceeded in this manner. "In my opinion, you are not unlike the Moors, who are incapable of being convinced of the error of their religion, by scripture, speculative reasons, or those drawn immediately from the articles of

our faith; and will yield to nothing but demonstrations, as evident as those of the mathematics, and which can as little be denied, as when we say, if from two equal parts, we take away two equal parts, the parts that remain are also equal. And when they do not understand this proposition, which they seldom do, we are obliged by operation, to make it yet more plain and obvious to their senses: and yet all this labour will at last prove ineffectual to the convincing them of the verities of our religion. The same must be my method with you, since your strange desire is so very foreign to all manner of reason, that I very much fear I shall spend my time and labour in vain, in endeavouring to convince you of your own folly, for I can afford it no other name. Nay, did I not love you as I do, I should leave you to the prosecution of your own odd humour, which certainly tends to your ruin. But to lay your folly a little more open, you bid me, Anselmo, attempt a woman of honour, cautious of her reputation, and one who is not much inclined to love; for all these good qualifications you allowed her. If therefore you already know your wife is possessed of all these advantages of prudence, discretion, honour, and reservedness, what have you more to inquire after? And if

you believe, as I myself do, that she will be impregnable to all my assaults; what greater and better names will you give her, than she already deserves? Either you pretend to think better of her, than really you do, or else you desire you know not what yourself. But then if you do not believe her as virtuous as you pretend, why would you put it to the trial, why do you not rather use her as you think she deserves? On the other hand, if she be as good as you profess you believe her, why would you go to tempt truth and goodness itself, without any reasonable prospect of advantage? For when the trial is over, she will be but the same virtuous woman she was before. Wherefore it is allowed that it is the effect of temerity, and want of reason, to attempt what is likely to produce nothing but danger and detriment to the undertaker, especially when there is no necessity for it, and when we may easily foresee the folly of the undertaking. There are but these motives to incite us to difficult attempts, religion, interest, or both together. The first makes the saints endeavour to lead angelic lives in these frail bodies. The second makes us expose ourselves to the hazards of long voyages and travels in pursuit of riches. The third motive is compounded of both, and prompts us

to act as well for the honour of God, as for our own particular glory and interest; as for example, the daring adventures of the valiant soldier, who, urged by his duty to God, his prince, and his country, fiercely runs into the midst of a dreadful breach, unterrified with any considerations of the danger that threatens him. These are things done every day, and let them be never so dangerous, they bring honour, glory, and profit, to those that attempt them. But by the project you design to reduce to an experiment, you will never obtain either the glory of heaven, profit, or reputation: for should the experiment answer your expectation, it will make no addition, either to your content, honour, or riches; but if it disappoint your hopes, it makes you the most miserable man alive. And the imaginary advantage of no man's knowing your disgrace will soon vanish, when you consider, that to know it yourself, will be enough to supply you perpetually with all the tormenting thoughts in the world. A proof of this is what the famous poet Ludovico Tansilo, at the end of his first part of *St. Peter's Tears*, says, in these words:

"Shame, grief, remorse in Peter's breast increase,  
 Soon as the blushing morn his crime betrays.  
 When most unseen, then most himself he sees,  
 And with due horror all his soul surveys.

"For a great spirit needs no censuring eyes  
To wound his soul, when conscious of a fault;  
But self-condemned and even self-punish'd lies,  
And dreads no witness like upbraiding thought."<sup>1</sup>

So that your boasted secrecy, far from alleviating your grief, will only serve to increase it; and if your eyes do not express it by outward tears, they will flow from your very heart in blood. So wept that simple doctor, who, as our poet tells us, made that experiment on the brittle vessel, which the more prudent Reynoldus excused himself from doing.<sup>2</sup> This, indeed, is but a poetical fiction, but yet the moral which it enforces is worthy being observed and imitated. And accordingly I hope you will discover the strange mistake into which you would run, principally when you have heard what I have farther to say to you.

"Suppose, Anselmo, you had a diamond, as valuable, in the judgment of the best jewellers, as such a stone could be, would you not be satisfied with their opinion, without trying its hardness on the anvil? You must own, that should it be proof against your blows, it would not be one jot the more valuable than really it was before your foolish trial; but should it happen to break, as well it might, the jewel

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, Note 1, Chapter VI.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix, Note 2, Chapter VI.

was then entirely lost, as well as the sense and reputation of the owner. This precious diamond, my friend, is your Camilla, for so she ought to be esteemed in all men's opinions as well as your own. Why then would you imprudently put her in danger of falling, since your trial will add no greater value to her than she has already? But if she should prove frail, reflect with yourself on the unhappiness of your condition, and how justly you might complain of your being the cause of both her ruin and your own. Consider, that as a modest and honest woman is the most valuable jewel in the world, so all women's virtue and honour consist in the opinion and reputation they maintain with other people; and since that of your wife is perfect, both in your own and all other men's opinion, why will you go, to no purpose, to call the reality of it in question? You must remember, my friend, that the nature of women is, at best, but weak and imperfect; and for that reason we should be so far from casting rubs in its way, that we ought, with all imaginable care, to remove every appearance that might hinder its course to that perfection it wants, which is virtue.

"If you believe the naturalists, the ermine is a very white little creature; when the hun-