

High Tide, Blue Moon

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An extract

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The Meeting

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Antwerp, a winter's evening in 1896

That afternoon young Baron Adrien de Gerlache had paid a visit to a shipping company in the north of the city. Having no further chance to ride a horse that day and longing for some physical exercise, he decided not to take a carriage but to walk from the harbour to the heart of the city. He was on his way to the mansion of Madame Osterrieth, the widow of a powerful businessman. She hosted a weekly salon at which she brought all kinds of interesting characters into contact. Composers, musicians, writers and painters, but he had heard tell that she had a particular weakness for explorers. He pondered on how best to approach his conversation with her; he must manage to interest her in his plan.

The sky was bright blue-grey above the wide river, and it was colder than expected. He stayed to the side, as it was busy on the quays. Carriages and wagons thundered over the cobbles in an endless column and the air was full of the snorting and steamy breath of horses. He regularly had to give way to foreigners, heavily laden and dressed in shabby, exotic gear, on their way to the Red Star Line shipping company. They were fleeing poverty and hunger and keen to build a rosier future in distant America. What an exciting idea! The harbour made his blood race.

While the young man, only twenty-nine, walked rapidly onwards along the bank of the Scheldt, in the exceptionally roomy mansion on the Meir the lights were being lit one by one. Léonie Osterrieth walked through the blue lounge grumbling at the cook's daughter, as the girl was late with the lights today. It was almost five o'clock and dusk was falling fast. She had only a little time before she went to get changed. When the girl had finished and disappeared to join her mother in the kitchen, the house was shrouded in silence. For a moment Léonie asked herself why she was actually hosting a salon. Wouldn't she much rather have been in Voshol castle, her country seat with its fresh air, its park full of tall trees and its good cheer? A glass of mulled wine and cinnamon by the fire and a game of draughts or chess with Emma. Her youngest daughter, an afterthought, was such wonderful company.

The things she kept committing herself to! In the past, with Jacques, she had had much less need to surround herself with people. She ran her fingertips over a damask curtain and pulled it straight.

In just a moment the house would be full of life. From six-thirty on two maids would admit the guests and take their hats and coats. Then dishes of cold fish with mayonnaise, smoked ham, pastries and wine from Bordeaux and Madeira would be carried into the salons. None of her five children would be present, but that really did not concern her. Robert was fully occupied with the business; Léon was on leave from the army and was staying with his sister Florence in Zillebeke; Paul was in Liège; and Emma preferred to be at Voshol, where her pony was stabled. Thinking of Florence and her husband Gaston and their formal conversations at table, Léonie was suddenly very glad that she was hosting a salon this evening. Nowhere in Antwerp and the surrounding area would the company and the conversations be as fascinating as here. The music as divine! There was always a composer anxious to present a new piece or a musician wanting to perform in borrowed clothes. Very regularly, but not this evening, she invited a promising musician or a female opera singer, a lady among all these gentlemen – she was quite liberal after all.

Upstairs she had herself helped out of her dress and brushed her long, still quite thick hair, among which to her annoyance the first silver hairs were appearing. She put it up deftly and with a certain nonchalance.

‘The Japanese earrings,’ she said to the chambermaid. ‘And the beetle brooch.’

Every jewel was a memory of Jacques. The beetle, with a pearl the size of a pea between its front feet, was a present given during their honeymoon in Frankfurt, where they visited his family. What memories! Undoubtedly her in-laws had expected her to be a naïve, unworldly young lady, but Antwerp had a flourishing harbour and though she had not yet travelled, the world had come to her door.

The brooch gave some colour to her purple dress. Purple, not black; not the traditional habit of the widow, with a high collar and wraps that were too warm. She refused to dress like that. Her breasts might not be as firm as they were, but they were full and her skin was far from having that parchment look that she saw with some of her friends. The chambermaid buttoned her dress from behind. She did not wear a corset, as she could not stand feeling shut in. She also did without a bustle. She looked at herself penetratingly in the mirror. At her husband’s funeral she had taken her eldest daughter imperiously by the wrist: ‘Tell me, I’m going to *live*, aren’t I? I don’t want to die, I want to *live*.’

Jacques had been seventeen years older than her: people had often looked askance at her and gossiped that she had married him for his money. They ignored the fact that Jacques had been a handsome, athletically-built man, taller than average, and that she – not exactly small for a woman, though next to him she seemed to be – had looked up to him. It was a comfortable position: the wife of a strong, powerful and attractive man.

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Adrien strode rapidly into the Meir, his scarf flapping nonchalantly, only one glove in his right hand. It was the done thing to keep your gloves, once you had taken them off, in one hand, but that morning he had been unable to find the matching glove. Carelessness! He must do something about it. The cold prickled his cheeks and lips. There was the Osterrieths’ legendary house, all the candelabras lit in the windows. A palazzo, they would call it in Italy. My God, how wonderful it must be to have a fortune like the Osterrieth family. The expeditions he would undertake then!

The entrance hall was filled with a hubbub of voices; it was like the meeting of a gentlemen’s club, an evening especially for younger or new members. He followed the butler and through the open doors saw groups of men and the occasional woman. Judging by their dress definitely not only members of the nobility. Madame Osterrieth obviously did not select her guests by their wealth or title.

He actually recognised Camille Saint-Saëns. He heard the odd German voice; there was an important German community in Antwerp and Madame Osterrieth was its radiant centre. Apart from that... just look, it was crystal clear: Léonie Osterrieth surrounded herself with birds of passage! He read it in their faces and heard it in their voices: men who were travellers, like him. They were here only briefly and would fly off to unknown islands and distant continents.

There were three salons, linked by open double doors; richly decorated in an eclectic style. Parquet floors, white marble fireplaces, highly polished panelling and walls covered in rich materials. There was a maritime painting, sailing ships and riverboats somewhere in the north, by the painter Robert Mols, who he knew by hearsay was the brother of Madame Osterrieth. The curtains were heavy and the furniture elegant, and all that beauty was illuminated by huge crystal chandeliers. It smelled of wine, cognac, smoked ham and a sultry Arab perfume. Madame Osterrieth sat in the third salon, like a goddess among her worshippers. He had expected a matron, corpulent and with the rather muddy complexion that most women acquire at that age. But she was not like that all.

‘*Madame*, may I introduce myself? Adrien de Gerlache.’

He was disturbing her in the middle of a conversation, but she did not seem to mind. She turned away from the elderly gentleman standing next to her sofa.

‘Ah, the young baron.’ She proffered her hand charmingly to shake his, but for an instant he had the feeling that she wanted him to kiss her hand. She was an attractive woman. Her dress was a touch frivolous: long earrings *and* a necklace, flounces on her skirts and a décolleté. His mother would disapprove of this dress for a lady of a certain age and moreover in mourning.

‘Adrien,’ she patted the place next to her on the sofa. Léonie Osterrieth obviously hated formalities, but she had the age and the fortune to allow herself certain liberties. The elderly gentleman, whom he now thought he recognised as an important town councillor, seemed disappointed and went over to a table where tarts and macaroons had been laid out and a servant was pouring coffee and tea.

‘You’re the man who wants to go to Antarctica, aren’t you?’ said Madame Osterrieth, a little too loudly.

A few bystanders stopped their conversations and stared at her as if she had pronounced a magic formula.

‘I understood that the king had refused your request.’ She took a sip of her mulled wine. And when he did not reply: ‘The king, dear boy? Ha, the look on your face says enough. We can let that subject rest. Come on, let’s go for a walk.’

It was dark and damp outside and it surprised him that she wanted to go into the garden. She wrapped a fur stole around her shoulders, took a lady’s cigarette out of a case and led him across an inner courtyard into the garden. They walked arm in arm along the path. An Eden in the middle of the city.

‘Antarctica.’ She breathed the name into the darkness. ‘What are your plans? Something like that weird journey to the North Pole in a balloon. What was his name, that Swede: André? Are you going to disappear in a balloon like him?’

‘No, *madame*.’ When he heard her mocking tone he almost withdrew his arm from hers in indignation. But actually she was right: he really had considered it. ‘Nothing like that. Crossing the ice in a balloon, that’s bound to end badly.’

She stopped and held her cigarette between her fingers. He hastened to give her a light. As she stood inhaling with enjoyment, he explained his plan. He had studied at the university and at Nautical College, but now he sounded unsure of himself. When he started talking about the funds he thought he would need, he actually stammered. She seemed to be listening attentively, but as soon as he had finished speaking, she cast a glance over the bare shrubs and walked on a couple of yards to pick a dead branch off the garden path.

‘Come and give a lecture in my salon,’ she said absently and without looking at him. ‘Take it up with my secretary, he keeps the diary.’ She arranged her skirts and went ahead of him to the terrace doors. ‘We shall see.’

Léonie

2

She was standing on some library steps peering at the titles of books full of botanical drawings. Here it was: *Flowers, fruit and leaves, chosen from the flora of Java – painted from life*. What a weight! She descended the steps and opened the volume on the large table. Magnificent. A print of a strange prickly fruit, though inside it was like a pale plum – she could almost taste the wonderful, sweet juice. She turned the heavy pages. Drawings of plants, wet from the rain or dried out by the sun, here and there gnawed by insects: leaves like the tentacles of an octopus, in flaming purple. Bunches of flowers that seemed to hang heavily over the pages and berries on long fibrous strands like pearls on a string. A fruit called a mangistan; its flesh, so the book said, was soft and juicy – why had she never seen such a fruit, let alone tasted one? The Dutch artist who had created this book had travelled to Paramaribo with her husband. When he died there, leaving her with debts and five children, she had exploited her special talent for depicting the plant kingdom of Java and sold her pictures as coloured lithographs. She was fearless, this Berthe; later she travelled to Texas and back to Java, going where no Western woman had ever been. A female explorer. They existed after all, didn’t they? Léonie seemed to remember; she had an insatiable appetite for knowledge of women who like herself were restless, who longed to journey through unknown territory.

‘Sebastiaan!’ she called hoarsely, went over to the cord on the wall, and rang the bell. He had been working on the household accounts in the room next door and came in with cuff bands round his sleeves.

‘I want another book. A work on insects, you know, by that other female writer who travelled to South America with her daughter. Would you look it up for me?’

Sebastian would know; Jacques always said that their secretary carried everything that had ever been written with him in his skull.

‘Seventeenth-century, *madame*,’ said Sebastiaan with a nod and moved the steps. He knew exactly where it was, took it out of the bookcase with both hands and descended carefully. He laid it on the table and opened it at the title page, after which he disappeared without a sound.

‘Remarkable,’ whispered Léonie to herself. *Metamorphosis of Surinamese Insects*. Travelling to such a distant country and in the seventeenth century at that! She herself had never got farther than Germany and the South of France and even then her mother had commented unfavourably.

But that’s dangerous, Léonie, they’ve got Russian ‘flu there!

And: What’s the point?

There was a drawing of a kind of pineapple with a brown moth and something that resembled a cockroach. She closed the book, but the lithograph remained imprinted on her retina. The subtle tints, the accurate sketch. If only she had a talent like that!

She sat down by the window and folded her hands in her lap. The garden was hushed in the freezing cold, in the falling darkness the bare trees and shrubs were like silhouettes in a Chinese shadow puppet play. In an impulse she stood up to open the window. It was stuck, and she had to exert considerable force, but she needed air. Air! Perhaps she should just go into the garden, but there was a wall round it. A cold breeze came in and she breathed greedily. She *could* travel, she told herself. That was what she wanted after all; to close the door of this palace behind her and leave. She would take plenty of luggage with her, of course. Enough money to pay for porters; she had money to meet all her needs.

But the only one of her female acquaintances who travelled was the eccentric wife of an elderly count, who without her husband's permission had taken off to darkest Africa and, so it was said, consorted with black men.

'Only ugly women travel without their husbands,' her mother had once said. 'A beautiful woman doesn't need to do such things. Beautiful women marry nice, rich men. And a beautiful widow marries again and has all she needs.'

Would she herself ever marry again? If her mother had been alive, she would definitely have said that in Léonie's case there was no reason to.
