

BIENFAISANCE,
OU
LA BONNE MÈRE;
CONTE
MÉLÉ D'ANECDOTES.

*Charity, or the Good Mother; a Story Interspersed with Anecdotes.*¹

Madame de Circey is a woman who lives quietly with her family in a Parisian quartier yet despite that she mixes with high society; though only for reasons of charity or convention does she, in passing, see people of her own rank. The great and the good often come to her door but she almost always refuses them entry, though the unfortunate are welcome at all hours of the day. She excites envy and malicious gossip in her equals. They wish to fathom the reasons for her retirement and her distancing of the world but no one has a beautiful enough soul, nor a heart sensitive enough, to appreciate this respectable woman who, still young and beautiful, devotes all her time to charity. If occasionally she goes to the Theatre it is only when good Plays are being performed and to take her children there to offer them salutary lessons whilst they enjoy themselves. She never misses, for example, *The Father of the Family*, *The School for Mothers*, *The Anonymous Good Deed*, *The School for Fathers* and several other Plays of this type.² Days when one does not go out and when no one visits are days of genuine pleasure. The ill-fated are welcomed, consoled, dressed, meals are shared with them, one table for all. Madame de Circey presides over everything: she is called the venerable mother and never was a woman better named. No distinction is made, everyone shares the events of their lives and the anecdotes they may have gathered. The good father Ambroise, an old Soldier blinded by gunshot, recounts to the young Marquis de Circey all the great actions he saw with his own eyes; one can imagine that he is frequently questioned by his young protector, who promises him in advance relief from his deficiencies that his mother has already realised. Mother Périllon, who is the oldest of Madame de Circey's poor entertains Julie, a seven year old child, with all her mother's good deeds and inflames her young heart with that

¹ This piece is listed in the *Gazette de France* of 20 May 1788 as a new publication published that week, and then bound in the third volume of her collected *Oeuvres*, the first two having been advertised in the same paper on 20 February that year. It is rare for the three original volumes to be found together (one complete set was sold at auction for 15,000 euros in July 2023). The text encloses a one-act play called *La bienfaisance récompensée, ou la Vertu couronnée* that is at times described as a separate theatrical work which is confusing given it forms part of the narrative structure of *Bienfaisance, ou la bonne mère* and was probably not conceived to stand alone.

Olympe de Gouges may have been loosely describing herself in this piece and it has been quoted, along with a few other references, as proof that she had a second child for whom no official records have been found but is believed to have died in childhood. The work presents an exemplary independent woman and her household; someone who manages her own affairs and who gives her time and affection as well as financial support to those less privileged than herself while also being a mother who cherishes her children. This decent, compassionate, competent woman never refers to any male figure of authority. She lives her life according to her own terms and discredits the commonly held view that such women are dependent courtesans. The many references to the duc d'Orléans excellent qualities reflect her desire for his patronage in the literary world but also for his support of her son Pierre Aubry's military career (de Gouges having bought him a position in one of the duc's regiments) who was in his early twenties at the time of publication. This text, among others, was used a few years later to disparage de Gouges by portraying her as one of the duc d'Orléans many mistresses and the mother of his children. There is not a shred of evidence for these suggestions which were politically motivated at the time but subsequently repeated as fact.

² *Le Père de famille* by Denis Diderot dates from 1760; *L'École des mères* by Marivaux dates from 1732; *Le Bienfait anonyme* by Joseph Pilhes dates from 1785; *L'École des pères* by Alexis Piron dates 1728.

charity that allows us to recognise that those deprived of fortune are not unworthy, that nature has given all men, haphazardly, the right to aspirations, that it is the most skilled who have benefited from great advantages and that the weakest make up the greater number: the rich oppress, command, demand and the unfortunate obey respectfully and submissively. The tyranny of a man who cannot see beyond his own rank and fortune, and who lacks the essential principles of decency towards the misfortunes of others is a terrible thing: thus, more or less, does the aged Périllon express herself to Julie who says, 'But Mama is not like those people who steal from others and never help them in their need. You see, my good friend, that she gives to the poor as much as she does to us and that your grand-daughter has a gown as beautiful as the one I am wearing today.' 'Yes, my child', replies the good woman, 'if all rich people behaved towards the poor as your mother does there would be far fewer unfortunates, fewer criminals and fewer depraved men.' 'What', responds Julie whose reasoning belies her age, 'are crimes committed for wealth, and that leads to depravity!' 'A time will come,' says the old woman, 'when you will see that all this is possible.' 'Oh! I'd rather stay forever a child if I have to see such disagreeable things.' The young Marquis, aged ten, comes and interrupts the conversation, leading good father Ambroise by the hand. 'Ah! My sister,' says he, 'listen to one of father Ambroise's anecdotes that he brought back from a Town where he was garrisoned, it's enough to make you tremble.' 'Ah! Don't tell it to me if it's so frightening.' 'Sister, you must hear it to discover that there are men more savage than the wildest animals when it comes to that miserable metal that is called Gold, for which humankind is endlessly at war.' 'Ah, my brother,' responds Julie, 'we must never have any in our home.' 'My sister,' answers the Marquis, 'we cannot do without it, but listen to the story and you will see what horrors the thirst for Gold creates in man's character. Come, good father Ambroise.' 'You listened to it attentively, Marquis,' replies the old chap, 'and you will tell it better than me.' 'So be it,' says the Marquis, 'let us sit down.' Madame de Circey arrives with all her household and, without disconcerting her son, sits near him, as do the others present. The Marquis starts thus, 'A brave Soldier who had distinguished himself in the army, had reached the rank of Colonel of his Regiment. He had two sons whom he educated as befitted his wealth. The elder failed miserably to fulfil his father's intentions and his excessive libertinage soon dragged him to the grave. This unhappy father was left therefore with only his younger son whose childhood had been most promising. Unfortunately for him his father, due to an excess of discretion, enrolled him in a Regiment other than his own. He wanted his son to be free from any unpleasant business, fearing that the Officers disliking his discipline would reproach him for being the son of a successful man. But this ingrate in whom lay the seeds of every vice abandoned himself to the most terrible one and became a declared gambler who, from crime to crime, reached the blackest of trespasses. An old heiress living alone in her Castle, two leagues from the city where he was garrisoned, was reputed to possess great treasures. One day when this wretch had no assets left at all, having lost everything gaming, he contemplated the most horrible attack in order to avoid being pursued for several promissory notes that would have forced him out of his Regiment: he visited this old Lady of quality who received him warmly, respecting his uniform and the name that was so appealing to her. She had known his father and held him in high esteem.) She even suggested he spend a few days with her which he readily accepted.' Julie interrupts the Marquis, 'Well! I see nothing scary here.' 'I am very fearful', says Madame de Circey, 'of what may follow.' 'You are right, mama' says the Marquis, then addressing his sister, 'You will soon tremble my dear Julie. This monster,' he continues 'unworthy of such a virtuous father had the baseness, or the horrible passion, to get up in the night, draw his sword, and go to the bedside of the woman who had received him so well, and mercilessly attack her, stabbing her in the bosom twenty times.' Julie cries out and faints, the young Marquis caught up in his story's action fails to notice. He only sees the crime and putting his hand to his own sword he already seeks to take revenge for the

blood of this unfortunate victim. 'This sword,' he says, 'will henceforth be the vilest instrument, though it was only invented to clear the name of any gallant man unjustly insulted.' Julie comes to and the Marquis, noticing the change in her features reassures her saying, 'The story is not yet over, you must, my sister, arm yourself with courage in order to hear it right through to the end and you will see that this nature is very uncommon.' Madame de Circey tells him, 'No doubt this miserable man stole the treasures from this woman he had just assassinated.' 'Yes mama', replies the Marquis, 'but that is not all.' The aged Périllon adds, 'And the crime led this villain to the scaffold.' 'That would be the least of it' takes up the Marquis, 'must the crimes of the child reflect on the virtues of the father? Let us return to M. de Belfor (that is the name of the unfortunate father). He received the fatal news that his son was condemned to undergo the most ignominious death; that he was condemned, like a vile brigand, to die on the wheel. This good man, too strong in adversity, viewed his last moment with a resolute eye.' Father Ambroise interrupts him at this passage. 'Marquis', he says, 'honour, already present in you, has matured your reasoning for you are able to understand the father's character and you embroider the Story for I only told you the basic facts.' 'My friend,' replies the Marquis, 'what of it, so long as I have understood it properly, and you will be the judge at the end.' He continues, 'This brave Officer had the courage to call for an assembly of the Council of War in the presence of the entire Regiment, and inform it of the horrible incident that had just befallen him. There were groans, it was deemed regrettable, he was begged to never give up his leadership of the Regiment as this stain could tarnish neither his virtue nor his honours. This good man, with tears in his eyes, embraced all the Officers, and every last Soldier; thanked them for all their kindness and begged them not to oppose his retirement: if he yielded to their friendship then his despair would drag him into an unknown world. The dismayed Regiment accepted his resignation with sorrow. Filled with the regrets of an Officer and a Soldier he took the stagecoach to reach the Town where his son was to be executed. He reached the prison at the moment that this cruel end, fully deserved for such a horrible crime, was being prepared. This good man had no trouble reaching his miserable son's cell. He asked to speak to him privately and the two were left alone. The unfortunate father had barely set eyes on his son than he took two pistols out of his pocket, aimed at him and said, while firing a shot, here is your share and here is mine but the coward pulled his head back. "Go," he says to him, "you are worthy of the scaffold that awaits you. I wanted to wash away the stain you have imposed on my good name before dying." Straightaway, with the other pistol, he blew his brains out in front of his son who was then taken to his execution, having been the instrument and witness of his father's death.' Everyone is dismayed by this tale, the ability to speak only returning after the shedding of tears. As each person is expressing an opinion on the fate of this unfortunate father Madame de Circey's man of business arrives (an unusually honest man, given his role). He directs, with the greatest economy, Madame de Circey's expenditure, and he allows her to satisfy her penchant by sharing her income with those less fortunate. He is witty, naturally cheerful: 'You are all sad it seems to me,' he says on entering. Julie hastens to speak first. 'Ah! M. Prud'homme, if you knew the story that my brother has just recounted it would make you tremble.' 'Well then I don't want to hear it,' replies M. Prud'homme, 'on the contrary I have come to tell you one which, as interesting as it is cheerful, will distract you from the gloom that appears to have engulfed you all. It happened yesterday, four leagues from Paris.' He is known to be amusing so everyone gathers round him. 'A renown hunter whose name is very dear to France, as he himself is, had been chasing a deer from seven in the morning to four in the afternoon. Tormented by hunger he entered, with one of his Companions, into the home of some kind Peasants who received them with that natural generosity that reigns among these good people. "Sit down, Sir," said the old Guillot, "you must be cold, I'll burn a faggot of twigs for you." "My word," replied the Hunter, "I'm more hungry than cold. Wouldn't you have something you

could offer me? I would be infinitely grateful." "My word," said the Peasant, "I do have bread and wine at your service." "That's a very dry feast," replied our amiable Hunter, "when one has an appetite as good as mine: could you not add a bit of stew to it. I see a pot there that contains, according to my sense of smell, something delicious." "By Golly! I can well believe it, I am very sorry but you won't be tasting it." "Why ever not? I will pay you whatever you consider appropriate." "I'm not a bit interested in your money," replied the good man, "understand, my fine Sir, that this stew is for my daughter-in-law who is in her bed." "What, is she ill? Ah! You are right and I beg you to forgive my indiscretion." "Oh! This illness is not terribly distressing," said the old Guillot, "it amuses the women, no sooner is it over than they're happy to start again. She's in labour my good Sir and she has this night given us a bonny Boy as beautiful as yourself, and who I love as much as if he were a Prince; but there is no pleasure without pain: see, the Godfather that I had chosen has let us down, and the Godmother wants to wait for him. The Priest, who is becoming impatient, has let it be known that he wants to baptise the infant dead or alive, today, and you'll see I'll be obliged to use the Beadle and that will bring bad luck on our lad." Our Hunter, who had listened to everything with an attentive ear, was already longing to offer himself as Godfather and bring happiness to a person that fate had just brought to his attention. If I named the hero,' he says, interrupting himself, 'you would not be surprised by his generous gesture, but I want to leave you to enjoy the surprise, just like the good people of the Village, and the good Priest. The stranger offered himself as Godfather, he was accepted, on condition that the Godmother agreed: the Lady was contrary and said that she did not want to hold the infant with someone unknown so the good people feared they were facing another dilemma but our intrepid Hunter who had in his game-bag twenty means to resolve it, said to the good Peasant, "Find me the poorest girl in the Village, send her to the Church, and I will go there myself." It was no sooner said than done, and the new Godfather, after having gobbled a decent bit of bread and drunk two or three noggins of wine, ran speedily to the Church with his Companion. The Curate looked him up and down and asked his name. "I am Louis-Philippe-Joseph de Bourbon." At these words the young Marquis cries out, 'I would have guessed it, Sir.' "Monsieur," said the Curate who was being self-important, "one does not joke with such names, so pay close attention to what you are about to do." "Add," said the Godfather, "Duc d'Orléans, first Prince of the Blood."³ "Sir I see that you are making fun of us.", said Guillot. "Does our worthy Lord go about alone like you are here, accompanied by I know not who, dressed any old how? I was happy not to stand on ceremony and as you rightly say it is not so hard to name a Christian, but I do not want to appropriate such beautiful names to give them to our lad." "Guillot is right," added the Curate, "we will just have to call some other people to name the infant." "Gadzooks!" answered the Prince who was now beginning to get impatient with the Curate. He unbuttoned his greatcoat to show his Sash and his Insignia. "Gentlemen can you doubt who I am, actually?". These good people, likewise the Curate, threw themselves at his feet but his Lordship made them arise with such goodness that soon pleasure replaced fear. Only the little Nicolas who was holding a lit candle and let it fall, ran quickly to the Priest's house. He cried out along the way, "*His Lordship the Duc d'Orléans, his Lordship the Duc d'Orléans.*" Everyone followed him and the Priest, having heard him, came down into his courtyard. "What's happening, young Lad?" "Come quickly, Father, his Lordship the Duc d'Orléans wants to serve as Godfather to Guillot." The good Priest who thought the little Boy was having fun, wanted to reprimand him. "Wait, little rascal", he told him, "I'll teach you to make fun of Guillot and of our good Prince." "I'm not joking," took up Nicolas. "it was him in person, and I've just seen his Sash and his beautiful Insignia that shines like a huge Sun." Someone arrived to save the little Boy and confirm the truth to the Priest. The good Clergyman had no idea where to put himself. He was wearing his nightcap, and a cotton gown. "Eh! Quick," said he, "my wig, my cassock. Follow me, young

3 Throughout this work de Gouges writes Duc rather than the correct duc.

Lad, and help me.” There he was taking his stairs four at a time, quickly putting on his cassock and his wig that was neither combed nor powdered. The little Boy wanted to save the Priest from appearing in front of the Prince looking so untidy. “Wait, Father, let me put a bit of powder on you so that you at least look a little whiter.” He ran to the bag of flour and threw nearly a half-bushel’s worth over the head of the good Priest who was now whitened from head to toe. Despite this accident he still ran to the Church, shaking himself all along the way, but the imprint of the flour on the black cloth was so considerable that the Prince, on seeing him, could not refrain from laughing.’ All those hearing this story retold with such buffoonery cannot hold back and imitate his Lordship the Duc d’Orléans. Julie especially yields to her great joy: ‘Ah! This story is so much better than the one recounted by my brother.’ ‘My sister,’ responds the Marquis, ‘if all men thought like the Bourbons, there would be fewer wicked people on the earth, and everyone would be good and generous.’ ‘Let me finish,’ says M. Prud’homme, ‘and you will see if the nation should congratulate itself on possessing such a true man as its leading Prince. The infant was baptised: he offered it an annuity of six hundred *livres*, and the same to the young godmother who will now be able to marry her Lover. The joyful cries of the whole Village honoured the Duc d’Orléans. The Priest was very happy and the Curate remained a fool but his Lordship the Duc d’Orléans, losing sight of nothing, knew he was reassured and promised him his protection. There is the end of my anecdote; I believe it pleased you

[five lines of evenly spaced full stops follow].

Madame de Circey applauds enthusiastically, as do all the good people who surround her. The young Marquis adds, ‘It pleased me very much but I prefer, on the part of this great Prince, the heroic and generous trait he showed towards his Groom; this last is worthy of both of them, meanwhile one cannot doubt the first.’⁴ ‘This most generous act from the new Duc d’Orléans shows us that he will imitate the Author of his days.’ Julie replies, ‘Brother, tell us it again. I will know if you have forgotten anything.’ ‘Willingly, sister,’ replies the Marquis. ‘His Lordship the Duc d’Orléans, staying at the Château de Villercotret, got lost out hunting one day with his Groom.’⁵ In order to find his way back he had to cross a Bridge whose parapet had been washed away by the river, the torrent being so strong and violent. This august Prince, not perceiving the danger, did not take care to use the centre of the Bridge. His horse stumbled and the Prince was instantly engulfed by the flood, but he had the presence of mind to take his feet out of the stirrups and, coming to, he resurfaced above the water. The Groom, seeing the Prince in danger, began swimming to fly to his rescue and though he kept all his sang-froid, the torrent took hold of him and he only had time to cry out to the Prince that all was lost. His Lordship the Duc d’Orléans, having barely regained his senses and only just having enough strength left to save himself from the peril he faced, turned towards the voice that had called out to him. He saw his Groom fighting against the horrors of death so this intrepid Prince gathered his strength and like a second Leopold of Brunswick, though not able to dissimulate the danger, swam to the rescue of this unfortunate man.⁶ Humanity and bravery carried him,

4 The term used by de Gouges is ‘jockeis’ an alternative spelling of ‘jockey’ which in this instance I believe refers to the post of a young (and generally small) stable lad or groom who accompanied his master on rides, as was customary during the eighteenth century.

5 The castle of Villers-Cotterêts was a favourite royal hunting residence of French kings since at least roi Dagobert. Francois I rebuilt it and made it a fitting royal palace famed for its lavish sport and entertainments. Following restoration the castle is due to open, in 2023, as a site dedicated to the French language and French-speaking cultures.

6 In 1785 Leopold of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel drowned aged thirty-two when his boat capsized on the river Oder during a flood. Immediately it was reported that he had been attempting to rescue villagers threatened by the raging waters. This news spread quickly throughout Europe thanks to prints and poems etc. and the legend of his sacrifice took root. He was viewed as an exemplary modern man selflessly willing to risk himself for the greater good. The details of the drowning are now questioned though the legend lives on through numerous statues and memorials. The duc d’Orléans’ adventure took place in 1787 and was soon available as a print clearly intended to convince the general public of the duc’s selfless heroism. Several

Heaven lent him its support! He reached his Groom, grabbed him, and taking him with one hand, swam to the bank. When a man shows himself to be so great, so generous, so beneficent I would say, here are three that the same century has produced and it is to be hoped that future centuries will witness, in Princes of the Royal Blood, the same example of true humanity! When Leopold of Brunswick ordered his subjects to fly to the rescue of the unfortunates who were dying in the flood in front of their eyes they were all too indifferent, or not brave enough, to obey this August order; so this young hero throw himself into a barque and he alone attempted to save them. Heaven, abandoning him, thought it a fitting reward to commend him to posterity in memory of this beautiful act and soon he was engulfed by the waters. Yet humanity's plaintive cries, heard from all parts, took charge of his glory and fame took pleasure in spreading the news of this memorable action all around. Every Sovereign, rivalling each other, suggested a Prize for whoever would create a fitting eulogy for this immortal Prince. His Lordship the Duc d'Orléans showed the same courage, the same beneficence, the same intrepid spirit and Heaven preserved his days to prove to us that we must always fly to the rescue of the ill-fated, and that danger does not always strike the one who risks it. What I cannot praise in this great Prince is his overbearing modesty. He would like his beautiful act to sink into oblivion .

[three lines of evenly spaced stops follow] but are great examples not essential! And in what century has one needed them more than in this one where the spirit of selfishness is daily increasing in substance! Ah!, the young Marquis shouts out, captivated by his narrative, 'if only I had the maturity and eloquence to recount this heroic action I would throw myself at the feet of his Lordship the Duc d'Orléans and say, "My Prince, you are great, generous, and you possess the true characteristics of man as nature wanted them to be. You cannot prevent the publication of your great acts. If all Sovereigns have excited the enthusiasm of writers, in favour of the Prince of Brunswick, can you prevent a feeble pen, lacking artifice and deceit, describing the admirable trait that covers you in glory, more than your titles do, and that wins you every heart?"' Madame de Circey, thrilled to see her son impressed by the action of this great Prince, cannot prevent herself from shedding tears of joy. 'Ah! Mama,' says he, 'you will laugh later. The Prince, satisfied that he had saved his Groom and no longer having a horse on which to return to Villercotret, made his way towards the Castle with his poor Companion. His clothing dripped all along the way as the Duchess waited for him impatiently at the gates. The virtues of this August Princess are well known, as is the tenderness she feels for her Spouse; she was alarmed at not seeing her Prince come back with the rest of the hunt. His Lordship the Duc d'Orléans, noticing from afar the Duchess's concern, laughed uproariously on reaching her and, to reassure her, made light of his accident. I even know that he genuinely laughed at finding himself arrayed in such a way. No one would have known about this incident if the Groom had not recounted what had happened. Despite his Lordship trying to silence him, and not agreeing with it, his actions are such as I have recounted them to you; he will be forever remembered by the French nation and admired by all the universe. That, my sister, is the famous anecdote. Did it interest you?' 'My brother how can you ask?' replies Julie, 'you will do me the favour of telling it often, and I assure you that no entertainment could please me more. I would like to be able to recount it like you one day.' 'That will be easy, sister, for I assure you I have no part in it for though I included my thoughts in the story of the brave Officer, I simply made a fair comparison between the Duc d'Orléans and the Prince of Brunswick. It comes from the source so you will do it as well as me.' Madame de Circey gets up and covers the Marquis and Julie in kisses. 'Ah! My children,' she says, 'I am so happy to be a mother! I want to offer proof of maternal love. Since we are considering his Lordship the Duc d'Orléans I must offer you a fact about his August Spouse. A few days ago the Duchess was asked which one of her children she loved the best. She replied with that naive and pure goodness that we know

to be hers: "I have no preference, they are all dear to me." People insisted; she was reminded that there was always some partiality that a true mother always managed to hide, though feeling it nonetheless. Her candour was called upon for a sincere explanation. "Well," said she, "I will tell you: it is always the one who is absent." 'Ah! Mama,' says Julie, 'you are like that. I see clearly that when my brother is not here you do not love me as much.' – What tenderness, virtue and sensibility in the Duchess's answer! – All address their hopes and prayers to Heaven for this respectable Princess as well as for her August Family. Dinner is announced. No doubt the House of Orléans will be a talking point throughout the meal; will next month's Tales provide such interesting Anecdotes?

The dessert is barely served when Madame de Circey's Notary is announced. The young Marquis runs up to him and, shaking his hand, asks him if he has anything new to tell them. The Notary knows his taste for Anecdotes and especially those with traits of heroism and charity. 'Ah! Marquis,' the Notary tells him, 'tomorrow you will see in the Newspapers an astonishing event. I have a letter on me that will explain it all as well as his Lordship the Duc d'Orléans's new form of benevolence on the subject.' 'Ah! Share it with us quickly,' replies the young Marquis, as do Julie and Madame de Circey. The old Notary is surrounded, the young Marquis brings him an armchair and makes him sit down. Lightning is not more prompt, but despite his impatience the Notary takes his time. He fusses greatly taking his seat, his hat is in the way, he rummages in his pockets and takes out the letter but then spends a long time fiddling with his spectacles. The young Marquis, perceiving his embarrassment, takes the letter from him: 'I will read it for you,' he tells him, 'do worry about it, just sit comfortably.' The young Marquis reads so fast that he is obliged to start again. He does not need to be asked twice:

LETTER WRITTEN FROM PARIS.

*Noyon, the sixth of April***.*

My dear friend, and dear colleague, I have to share with you one of the most astonishing things: women have always been refused valour, courage and literary merit yet despite our prerogatives, our superiority and even the strength that we seem to have gained as our share, these have not been able to prevent this feeble and timid sex from distinguishing itself, surpassing itself and equalling us. You will be convinced of this by what I am about to tell you.

On the first of this month, at about midnight, four men went down into a cesspit: barely had they descended than they were suffocated. Unfortunately these events are only too common, rarely has anyone escaped thanks to such prompt and such intrepid help, either because the night was not conducive to finding a man brave enough to save such unfortunates who are nearing their last, or because no one else presented themselves when the woman named Catherine Vassent offered to go down herself.⁷ No one tried to stop her. This intrepid sixteen year old girl went down into, and then climbed out of, the pit up to seven times and brought out two dying men to whom she restored life but, despite the various weaknesses that the poisonous vapours induced in her, she absolutely wanted

⁷ The story of Catherine Vassent's heroism is true and was widely reported in newspapers at the time. On the night of 31 March 1788 the young woman risked her life to save four men employed to empty the night soil from the town's cesspits. They were overcome by toxic fumes emptying one next door to where Vassent worked as a servant. Unable to bear witness to bystanders doing nothing she took the initiative and located the first three men by their calls as no light penetrated the pit. Recovering from her own intoxication she insisted on finding the fourth man using a grappling hook to locate his inert body. Catherine Vassent was feted nationally, and rewarded for her courage by the town, the duc d'Orléans (whose lands encompassed Noyon) and the king. De Gouges's version is more or less accurate though Vassent was twenty not sixteen and her luxuriant and strong hair, mentioned in later reports and depicted in celebratory prints, is not mentioned in eyewitness accounts. Catherine Vassent subsequently married and had one child according to municipal records.

to save those left in there. By the third she herself succumbed. A God no doubt offered his support. She attached her hair to a rope to which she had tied the expiring man. How surprised the helpers were to see this young woman almost dead! But barely had she regained her senses than she wanted to fly to the fourth who was left behind. People hesitated for a while, then they were forced to cede to her pleading but her courage and her zeal came too late. The town of Noyon suggested a recompense for this girl. This heroic act reached the ears of the Duc d'Orléans. How surprised the town of Noyon was to find a Missive from this great Prince, bringing the news that follows:

GENTLEMEN,

The memorable actions of Catherine Vassent have been made known to me: so much virtue and courage merits a significant recompense. I will offer her my protection for ever; I will award her an annuity of two hundred *livres* and promise to find work for the person she has chosen, or will choose, as her husband. I give another hundred *écus* to the widow of the unfortunate man who died in the pit, to be passed down to their children, and again three hundred *livres* for the three who were saved. A *Te Deum* must also be sung to which Catherine Vassent is to be escorted at the head of the Municipal Corps, holding by a ribbon the three men she saved. The Farmer-General has just accorded her the right to sell tobacco, a salt franchise and the sum of two hundred and forty *livres* for her supplies.⁸

End of the Duc d'Orléans's Letter.

The joy expressed by all those who heard the reading of this letter is indescribable. Julie and the Marquis cannot refrain from embracing the Notary. This last [the Marquis] tells him: 'In truth, my old friend, your report is charming. These accidents are unfortunate but, when they do happen, they are very conducive to good practices. Since time immemorial mankind has needed good examples, and in the centuries to come posterity will cite this one as a model. Two great Princes will have heard of, and followed, the sentiments of this good and sweet Humanity. A young girl lacking in education, and born in a Village, has elevated herself to the level of these two Great Men. Nature never loses sight off a being she has favoured. She places it in the first rank. Leopold of Brunswick and his Lordship the Duc d'Orléans, as well as Catherine Vassent, their names will be engraved throughout time in indelible characters and carried by fame right up to the Heavens.' The young Marquis is so strongly moved that he expresses himself with a warmth surprising in one so young. He is listened to, admired. 'I can see quite clearly that if you were an Author,' M. Prudhomme [sic] tells him, 'you would immediately write a Play on this subject.' 'Ah! I assure you I will. Why am I not a genius like Voltaire? At my age he would have been able to write it.' 'When one is able to have these thoughts, Marquis,' says father Ambroise, 'one can take it on, and I am convinced that you will succeed.' Everyone agrees with father Ambroise, especially Julie. 'I will help you, brother, and we will perform this Play at home among our dear friends.' The young Marquis thinks for a moment, then, jumping with joy: 'Thank you sister. I am going to try it on my own, and make the first attempt at this excellent labour [one line of evenly spaced full stops follows]. I will read my first draft to you alone and if you find it to your taste, we will communicate it to mama and our friends. I am only going to make a plan but then if it is good, I will finish it.'

⁸ A *fermier général* was a man legally entitled to administer certain taxes on behalf of the French crown. The process hugely enriched those involved, was open to abuse, often used brutal powers to enforce collection, and was deeply unpopular across the country.

Madame de Circey cannot restrain herself from expressing her entire affection; she kisses her son, allowing him discover how happy she is to be his mother. As the Marquis makes his escape, yearning to hold a pen, word is brought that Julie's Dance Master has arrived. 'My word,' says she, 'I am not disposed to have my lesson. One looks so stupid when one dances and my brother, who is busy planning a Comedy, is much happier than me. I would much rather hide behind his chair, and see him write.' 'I will let you, my dear Julie,' says Madame de Circey, 'we'll send your Master home. Your aim is too commendable to allow a dance lesson to interfere with it.' Julie leaves the room jumping for joy. Everyone congratulates Madame de Circey on having two such interesting children. 'Alas!' says she, 'Heaven has granted me a very great favour. I am the happiest of mothers, and I would have been the most unfortunate if my children had not fulfilled my hopes. True happiness comes from the satisfaction that our children offer us, and unfortunately this purest and most virtuous love is almost never felt anymore. One only hears talk of decorum, [one line of full stops evenly spaced follows] and fathers no longer love their children, and the children lack consideration and respect for the authors of their days. At the youngest age they have seen pleasures in the paternal home; a lack of attention paid to them, delivered up to mercenary hands, such as those of indiscreet and often debauched Domestic who, far from inspiring respect for their fathers and mothers, poison their young hearts with all the vices. Their feelings are already febrile before they have seen the world. They form awful impressions. Fathers and mothers who keep a close eye on their children, who never cease to show them the most loving friendship, trust and the virtues that are the fundamentals of mankind need never fear that they have brought into the world such awful examples. [sixteen lines of evenly spaced full stops follow] 'So it is vital,' responds father Ambroise, 'that this mother forces herself to confide her children to the estimable care of a devoted friend, especially if they are youths for I believe that an educated woman is far more capable of forming the heart and mind of a young man, and in this his Lordship the Duc d'Orléans has shown proof of his discernment by naming a woman as his children's Preceptor.⁹ It is true that this woman has risen well above her sex, that she has soared above the grand literary world, and she alone has given the death blow to this supposed Philosophy that degrades mankind's most noble sentiment.' [nine rows of evenly spaced full stops follow] This conversation would have continued longer if Julie had not returned. Her joy was a picture. 'Ah! Mama,' says she, 'Oh! My friends! My brother is so clever! He is writing a Comedy as easily as I make a doll. Oh! It will be the finest thing if he finishes as well as he has started.' At that word M. Bien-Venu is announced, and M. Bien-Nourri.¹⁰ Madame de Circey does not seem to know these names but she thinks that they are poor unfortunates coming to beg for her help. How surprised she is, on having listened to them, to find that these two characters are men of letters who are not coming to ask for her assistance but rather to make her aware of a man who no longer deserves her charity. 'You are, without doubt, Madame, a woman as estimable as you are rare thanks to your virtues. But to spread them as far as the Author of *The Almanac of Great Men* would be to tarnish them.'¹¹ This horrible work has now infected all

9 Stéphanie-Félicité Du Crest de Saint-Aubin, later comtesse de Bursart de Genlis, and marquise de Sillery (1746 – 1830) was a self-taught educator and writer. She married in 1763, and in 1772 became lady-in-waiting to the duchesse de Chartres, wife of the future Philippe-Egalité, and was made tutor to their offspring. This was a position of importance and authority and had never been offered to a woman before. The children were potential heirs to the French throne, being of the Orléans line. Genlis died a few months after seeing one of her pupils, Louis-Philippe, crowned King of France.

10 These two names are puns, Bien-Venu meaning welcome and Bien-Nourri meaning well fed.

11 *Le Petit almanach de nos grands hommes* of 1788 written by Antoine de Rivarol (1753 – 1801), assisted by Louis René Quentin de Richebourg, marquis de Champcenetz (1760 – 1794), satirizes contemporary male authors. I have not been able to find the first exact publication date for *Le Petit almanach de nos grands hommes* which was reprinted frequently in 1788 but clearly it must have pre-dated de Gouges's text of May 1788. De Gouges, alert to literary rumour, accurately suggests further down that Champcenetz and

of the Provinces; it was not enough to poison Paris, they had to come and trouble the repose of peaceable men who live far from the Capital.' 'I know not, Gentlemen, of what you speak,' replies Madame de Circey, 'I do not have the honour of your acquaintance and I have never read *The Almanac of Great Men*.' 'How lucky you are, Madame!' says one of the strangers. 'It is not the same for us, we took the Stagecoach to reach Paris and pursue this deadly Writer. He may escape our pen but he won't escape our embraces.' 'Would you not rather suffocate him, Gentlemen, as you hug him?' says Monsieur Prud'homme, 'You seem to me to be too angry not to squeeze him very tight. If you take my advice, you will give less importance to a mercenary text that would have expired long ago if the resentment of men of Letters had not given it a new life. You have given it an existence it would never have obtained if you had had the strength to laugh at it. It is a small Dwarf that has beaten and dismayed a crowd of Giants because it was clever enough to attack their weaknesses.' 'Monsieur Prud'homme,' takes up Madame de Circey, 'you speak wisely. Gentlemen do you think the great Voltaire would have had so many antagonists if he had known how to despise them and be silent on their account? But he flew into a rage, he became angry like a child, and he renewed their verve. As for the Author of *The Almanac of Great Men*, his thirst and his need for money drove him to conceive of a perfectly pleasing project. He said to himself, Voltaire had to fight a Regiment of petty Writers and I want to attack an army but I will mix the good with the bad, those one can esteem as well as those that one must despise. This mix will have a prodigious effect. I will tear apart the children of Apollo, the most respected Muses. It is so easy to employ the path of ridicule, and if one has the stupidity to be angry about it, to shout and complain then my *Almanac* will reach the skies. Even the ignorant will want to buy it. Even those who find themselves ill-treated by it will be stupid enough to purchase it, at whatever price it may be, and thus I will achieve my aim. His project succeeded far beyond his hopes, and you must agree, Gentlemen, that you are the ones beaten and paying the forfeit.

And in my opinion, this little man, although very pleasant, does not merit the resentment of so many estimable men, and especially you, Gentlemen, who took the Stagecoach to fight a ghost who will disappear back to his oblivion like the visionaries in the eyes of wise and enlightened people. Let us leave the pen free and we will see inferiority fail of its own accord. A poorly conceived and defended lampoon has an astonishing merit in the eyes of the French. The man who has the strength to profit from his troubles, and his inconsequence, makes a fortune, and that is the greatest value of the Author of *The Almanac of Great Men*. He had to make himself known, and it is said that he has now taken on another genre, and that he appears to be profound and genuine in a letter concerning the Work of M. N**. I would not be surprised to see this same man, who was execrated and scorned, attempt a second assault, and become generally esteemed. Take the example of M. C. B**. ¹² For my part, Gentlemen, I only know the man of whom you speak by reputation.' Father Ambroise says, 'I don't know why they left me out of their *Almanac* for I, once in my life, wrote a quatrain and my name would have appeared in it quite nicely.' 'Truly,' said M. Bien-Nourri, that is where they shone at their brightest.' ¹³ 'It is

Rivarol will lampoon female authors which they duly did in *Le Petit almanach des nos grandes femmes* (1789), including an entry for de Gouges 'the playwright' ridiculing her avowed ability to create texts at speed.

¹² M. N** would have been recognised by readers as signifying Jacques Necker the political economist, statesman and author to whom Rivarol had written an open letter, and M. C. B ** the playwright Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais.

¹³ These two sentences slip into referring to authors plural which was the case in real life but not in this narrative where only one author is mentioned. I assume 'they shone at their brightest' refers to Champcenetz and Rivarol's list of writers as being the best the *Almanac* has to offer given how spitefully they penned the portraits of named authors.

stated,' replies Madame de Circey, 'that the bizarreness and strange names that are found in this anthology are the only merits of this feeble work' 'There are many articles that are unintelligible,' replies M. Bien-Venu. 'The author has not understood it any better,' replies M. Prud'homme, 'but he knew full well that even lacking common sense one could often make one's reputation.' The Strangers are crushed, and cannot dissimulate their wrong. Looking at each other they say, 'Let us return to the Stagecoach without saying or doing anything to this wretched Writer.' 'That would be wise,' the Notary tells them, who up until this moment had not said a word, 'and bear in mind that we have prevented your plan and if this Author had not had flat shoulders before, he does now, and his mind has totally changed for it is assured that he has been trepanned.¹⁴ 'It is true,' says Madame de Circey, 'that a great change must have come about in this man's system to produce such an effect. It is quite extraordinary to see a Satirist put himself forward as a wise Moralist. No one would have paid attention to this last work if the Author had not made a reputation for himself thanks to an irregularity, for an irregularity often finds success with the French Nation. But the strange subject of our meeting has taken up enough time. I cannot, Gentlemen, be of any use to you. If our observations were such as to influence your thoughts then I will congratulate myself on receiving you.' 'You can be sure of it,' says M. Bien-Nourri. 'And we leave contented,' adds M. Bien-Venu. '*The Almanac of Great Men* will no longer trouble our peace-of-mind: if meanwhile, Madame, this cynical Author has the effrontery to carry out the threat he has just mentioned to us and now strike the fair sex for he says he has nothing to fear from the vigour of its pen or its power, then be assured that we will return, not to seek revenge for the outrage he did us but to punish him, for life, for his cowardice.' Finishing their conversation the two champions take their leave of Madame de Circey. Everyone applauds this chivalrous resolution. Madame de Circey is due to discuss her affairs with her Notary and her Steward; old father Ambroise and mother Périllon are going to retire when Julie and the Marquis arrive. Julie cannot contain her joy. She shouts: 'It is charming, it is charming.' Everyone is curious to discover the aptitude of an eleven year old child. Making everyone take a seat Madame de Circey says 'Come, my son, read us your pleasing work.' The Marquis lowers his eyes and for the first time in his life appears most disconcerted. 'It seems to me, my son, that you are afraid to show us this draft that you took on with such assurance and eagerness.' 'Ah! Mama,' says he, 'what a difference there is between the desire and the effect. This afternoon I was yearning to be able to read to you my feeble attempt, and now I am trembling....' Julie interrupts: 'Stop, brother, and remember your promises. Did you not say you would rely on my judgement. The truth comes out of the mouths of children, therefore, I confirm that your play is charming, well written and above all, interesting.' 'Do read it, son,' adds Madame de Circey, 'you can be sure that we will be kind to it. Your age, the lack of time and the enthusiasm which you have brought to such an interesting subject assure you in advance of the success of your play. Do read it, son.' 'All right, mama, I can no longer resist, you have reassured me.' Julie watches him. He is still trembling. 'Ah, how timid one is as an Author. I feel right now, sister, that it is not without reason. But I will go ahead and read my draft.'

CHARACTERS

¹⁴ I find this sentence impossible to unravel. The original French is '...si cet Auteur n'avait eu jusqu'à présent les épaules plates, il les a actuellement; et son esprit a bien changé de forme, car on assure qu'il a été trépané.' I have consulted numerous early dictionaries, checked printers' terms and sayings (de Gouges spent a lot of time with her printers and 'shoulder' is a typographical term), likewise dictionaries of phrases and sayings both French and English, and anatomy and medical texts but have found no reference whatsoever to 'flat' shoulders. In French flat can imply dull or platitudinous but I can find no reference to it being associated with 'shoulders' as a saying. I tried to find an alternative combination of similar sounding words that might indicate a mistake on the part of her secretary not hearing de Gouges properly, or signs of a typographical error but so far I have drawn a blank. Perhaps 'flat' is to be read as 'square' i.e. broad which would make more sense implying that the Author has gained strength.

CATHERINE VASSENT, Servant.
SERGI, Weaver, secretly in love with Catherine.
The old VASSENT, Catherine's father.
Madame GERTRUDE, Catherine's Mistress.
BERTRAND, Catherine's brother.
The Chevalier de MONTVILAIN, ridiculous vain old man, in love with Catherine who does not love him at all.¹⁵
A GREAT PRINCE
Several Officers from the Town.
A Group of Girls and Young Men.
The three Unfortunates who were saved by Catherine.

The Action takes place in Noyon.

CHARITY
RECOMPENSED
OR
VIRTUE CROWNED
COMEDY

The Set represents the Square in front of the Town Hall, one can see at the back the facade of a Temple with carved above its entrance, in gold letters on black stone, LONG LIVE HIS LORDSHIP, with three fleurs-de-lys, beside it LONG LIVE CATHERINE VASSENT.

FIRST SCENE

[The old VASSENT, COMPATRIOTS, BERTRAND.]

VASSENT, *at the head of several Compatriots who form a chorus* – Oh! My daughter! Oh! My daughter! Oh! My blood!

THE COMPATRIOTS – Such happiness, such happiness, to be her father! Heaven protected her, heaven overwhelms you with its favours. Such happiness, such happiness! His Lordship is arriving, his Lordship wishes to set her up.

VASSENT – What! The Prince is coming in person to grace the ceremony being prepared for my daughter by his presence?

BERTRAND – That is not all, father, it is said that he couched in writing, on beautiful paper which he sent to his Honour the Judge by his good Courier, that he wanted to see my sister Catherine married. They say he is arriving today, this good Prince. Should I not go ahead?

¹⁵ The Chevalier's name is a pun, his name sounding like 'my ugly one' or 'my mean one'.

VASSENT – Go and consult the Judge, he'll tell you what to do.

Mama, be aware that I have only written poor songs; it takes so much longer to write in Verse than in prose, and I will beg my friend Colin to take on the style of the Verse, or Monsieur Palissot, for there are no better Poets than these two good Writers, and I am convinced that they will not mind improving my draft with the vibrant and happy colours of their style. Besides, the subject is so beautiful, and I am a child! What a lot of reasons to excite their interest and persuade them to exercise their verve!

SCENE II

VASSENT, Madame GERTRUDE, the Chevalier de MONTVILAIN.

VASSENT, *going towards Madame Gertrude* – Oh my Protectress! I owe you my daughter's happiness, and her virtue; you raised her as your own child so she could not have thought in any other way than the one that decided her action.

Madame GERTRUDE – I had no part in the act of heroism that has immortalised her. Nature did it all for her, and she owes me nothing. I merely congratulate myself on having had her in my service, and it is a joy for me to witness the tributes that she is receiving.

Le Chevalier de MONTVILAIN – If I were not afraid of breaking the rules of etiquette I would give her my name. I have been in love with for her for six months.

VASSENT – You, Sir.....But are you really thinking clearly? My daughter is not fit for you.

THE CHEVALIER – That is true, but I love her and this exercise that has just covered her in glory could well...

MADAME GERTRUDE, *stopping him* – You will drive yourself mad. The courtship will not be long, and I can assure you that I would see nothing for you to complain of if Catherine agreed to have you today.

THE CHEVALIER, *moving back* – Do you consider such a thing, Madame Gertrude, and do you realise that in my youth I refused the most eligible women. I was known as the greatest Dandy. I have birth, I have a fortune and credit. I am not going to boast of the charming pieces of Poetry or Music I write, that have enriched the most famous Concert Halls of Paris.

Madame GERTRUDE – Yes I know. You have always had great affectations like wanting to be a great Lord, to be an equal with them, but you lost your footing and now you have to beat a retreat. It is time for the ceremony, let us hasten to enter and find our places.

The Chevalier de MONTVILAIN, *giving his arm to Madame Gertrude* – We will talk very quietly about this affair.

TRIO

VASSENT

Ah Mister Chevalier! Sir
Please stop this mocking,
She is not for you, my daughter,

And for us the honour would be shocking.

The Chevalier de MONTVILAIN
To his Lordship I will take her,
I want to ensure her pleasure.

Madame GERTRUDE
Ah! he is quite mad!
Ah! the old chap is mad!

They finish the Trio as they exit.

SCENE III

SERGI and BERTRAND, *enter from the opposite wings to the ones from which the preceding Actors exited. Sergi has a handkerchief in his hand, and wipes his tears.*

BERTRAND – By Golly, that's not good, to cry when everyone else is laughin'. Do you have a fancy for my sister? You taught us our craft, and I'm grateful, without you I'd never have known it. You're so clever! There's not a Weaver like you in Noyon, nor in our Village. You must have travelled a lot to know so much more than others.

SERGI – Alas!

BERTRAND – What, still cryin'! I'll be gettin' discourteous if you don't find your courtesy.

SERGI – Today your sister's being crowned. Ah! She's really worthy of it....

BERTRAND – Are you envious of 'er?

SERGI – No, but...

DUO

SERGI

Ah! My friend I implore you to help me,
I will die if you abandon me.

BERTRAND

I love you.
I will help you;
Speak, what should I do?

SERGI

I've no more courage, nothing left to hope for;
Catherine ignores
That I love her, that she is the one I adore.

BERTRAND, *with emotion* – Well then, I'm goin' to tell her all about your feelings for 'er.

SERGI – Avoid, my dear Bertrand, informing her of them.

BERTRAND – God’s blood, I can’t define you. You’ll die if you don’t have ‘er as your wife, but you won’t see to it that I let ‘er know. I’m quite sure she’ll want to save you, but you know ‘er well, have you forgotten what she’s done, and that she’d rather die than see someone else perish?

SERGI – I believe it but it has been forbidden that anyone propose to her at all. His Lordship, in agreement with the Farmer-General, as well as the Officers of the City, want the choice of the man that would suit her as a husband to be hers alone.

BERTRAND – By Golly, that’s why I have to argue with you, suppose she was to choose someone else, what the deuce kind of trouble would we be in then. I won’t hear of it, I’m rushin’ there.

SERGI, *stopping him.*

SONG

Stop, my dear Bertrand, don’t contravene
The orders of his Lordship,
Of my heart she is the queen,
And if she doesn’t love me,
That is a tragedy,
But we must yield to the wishes of his Lordship.

BERTRAND – I believe you but I’m going to speak up, but I’m warnin’ you that I won’t be at the ceremony for I couldn’t shut up. See, it makes me queasy to see you in the state you’re in. But I hear trumpets and drums, deuce, it’s beautiful. Ah! What a beautiful ceremony is being readied, and it is for a chorus. Catherine. Oh! I will go mad if my head doesn’t get turned.

SCENE IV

THE DOORS OF THE TEMPLE OPEN

The robed Municipal Corps comes down first, the City Guards accompany them, the Trumpets and Drums of the Town follow, two lines of young Boys come down all dressed in white, each one carrying a crown, two lines of Girls also dressed in white form a double column, they carry garlands, Catherine arrives among them dressed in white, her hair disordered with a crown on her head, and leading with a ribbon the three unfortunate men that she has saved.

QUARTET

ONE OF THE ASPHYXIATED
Great God protect us.

THE SECOND ASPHYXIATED
May your hand guide us.

THE THIRD ASPHYXIATED
This is your work, for us it is a Divinity.

ALL TOGETHER

Oh, our benefactress. Oh! Incomparable girl, our days are no longer our own, all our sighs are for you.

CATHERINE – I am honoured to receive the prize. Ah! What a sweet recompense, you live, that is enough. Oh, my friends! Oh my brothers! My heart is touched but I am not seeking glory, it is for me, it is for you, that I saved you. And what a sweet reward!

ALL THE ACTORS TOGETHER – Admire, celebrate this intrepid girl, her courage makes all hearts rejoice.

The quartet repeats. End of the Chorus.

SCENE V

BERTRAND, *running up* – Ah, what have I just seen. There is the great Prince arrivin'; he doesn't look any better than us. I can see him approachin'. Shh! I'll make a big effort and get close to 'im to hear better.

SCENE VI

THE PRINCE

Several Lords, Negros and Dukes.

THE PRINCE, *stopping at the back of the Stage* – What a touching picture!

CATHERINE and THE THREE ASPHYXIATED MEN *throw themselves at the feet of his Lordship* – Ah! Your Lordship, my happiness is beyond the act of compassion that I undertook.

THE PRINCE, *raising her up* – There is no husband on earth who can reward her. Only Heaven can take account of it, soon the entire Universe will admire you, but what a joy for me to see so many young people bring together so much strength and humanity. Ah, men may have at times distinguished themselves but can one at present compete with the courage, and the generosity of spirit, of this sex for too long oppressed.

ALL TOGETHER – Here is the Prince, here is the great man.

THE PRINCE – Gentlemen I have not come for you to praise me; Catherine Vassent is the one we must celebrate, the one you must admire as much as I do.

VASSENT – The good Prince.

BERTRAND – The good Lord?

SERGI – The great man?

THE PRINCE, *approaching the Municipal Corps* – Gentlemen, has Catherine chosen a husband? Who is the fortunate man she has named?

FIRST JUDGE – My Lord, she has not yet pronounced her decision.

CATHERINE – Ah, My Lord, suffer that I keep my liberty, it belongs to my father, it is for him alone that I wish to preserve it.

THE PRINCE – What! Young and beautiful Catherine, no young man has caught your attention.

The Chevalier DE MONTVILAIN, *approaching the Prince* – If I may, My Lord, confess; does your Lordship remember me.

THE PRINCE – Eh! My friend Montvilain, what coincidence brings you to these parts? I thought you were philosophising in the middle of a desert.

The Chevalier de MONTVILAIN – Ah, what would you do, My Lord, man is not always wise. This event brought me to Noyon, and another adventure might bring me to Cochin China; but I would like to settle myself near Catherine, if you would allow, My Lord, that I unite myself with her, that I give her, right now, my name and my hand.

CATHERINE, *aside* – Heavens.

SERGI – I am lost.

THE PRINCE – I consent if she accepts you.

QUARTET

THE PRINCE to the Chevalier de MONTVILAIN
Ah! How very droll,
The old Fogey.

SERGI
I am lost! Ah, what a tragedy!
Ah, what a tragedy!
All that's left is pain and for me to die.

CATHERINE
Ah! I succumb to fear,
And my good cheer,
Today ends for tragedy is here.

The Chevalier de MONTVILAIN
The poor girlie,
Is so much in love with me;
In my soul I do believe,
That my wife she will be.

Madame GERTRUDE – My Lord, My Lord, de Montvilain is taking advantage of her, I do not believe that Catherine has him in mind, and I even believe that she inclines towards someone else. (*To Catherine.*) Speak my child and do not be afraid to explain yourself in front of His Lordship, he is such a good Prince.

CATHERINE – Oh! My dear mistress, or rather my mother, if I may call you thus. (*To the old Vassent.*) Oh, my father, what is demanded of me?

SERGI – Your happiness.

The old VASSENT – My daughter, you must obey.

THE PRINCE – No, I do not want to force her heart. If nothing engages it, I want her to stay free but I insist that she explain herself with that loyalty and candour of which she is capable.

CATHERINE – My Lord.

THE PRINCE – Well, my child.

CATHERINE – A husband...

THE PRINCE – Is very interesting in the eyes of a spouse, especially when he is beloved.

CATHERINE – Who would know better than you, My Lord?

THE PRINCE – Ah, I admit it, I am the happiest of men. So! Make one more man happy.

CATHERINE, *aside* – If I dared name him!

The old VASSENT – Fear nothing my child, open your heart to His Lordship.

CATHERINE, *to her father* –

SONG

Ah! I owe you this life that is mine.
And my days forever are thine;
But father, if Catherine
Were to choose her husband badly!
The object of my desire,
Knows not my feelings, sadly.

(*While looking at Sergi, the Prince follows her gaze, Catherine continues.*)

Ah, if only that heart read my pain!
I see him; he hears me....can I give him a name!
Can I admit to my feelings.
No, I dare not; what vigour, how I suffer!
And all of a sudden I feel my heart flutter.

THE PRINCE, *at the end of the song points to Sergi* – And there is its conqueror.

SERGI, *surprised, aside* – Has she chosen me? Has His Lordship pointed to me? Catherine is lowering her eyes.

THE PRINCE, *to the Judges, pointing to Sergi* – What is this young man's name?

The Chevalier de MONTVILAIN – He is a poor devil, they call him Sergi.

THE PRINCE – Well, Chevalier, this poor devil is the conqueror. (*To Catherine.*) Have I made a mistake, Catherine?

CATHERINE – Ah My Lord, nothing escapes your penetrating eye.

ALL TOGETHER – Hurrah, Sergi wins.

THE PRINCE, *taking Sergi by the hand* – He dare not believe his good luck.

SERGI, *throwing himself at the feet of the Prince, and kisses them.*

THE PRINCE, *raising him* – Get up, my son, it is not at my feet that you should be kneeling, but at those of your love since today she has made you happy.

SERGI, *wants to approach Catherine but does not know how to express himself, he looks around at everybody.*

CATHERINE, *lowers her eyes, and this dumb Scene must be interesting.*

THE PRINCE – Poor Sergi is quite overwhelmed, he cannot speak.

Madame GERTRUDE – Ordinarily, My Lord, when the heart is taken the tongue is tied.

BERTRAND, *to Sergi* – Come along brother, for soon I'll be that, chirrup why don't you.

SERGI – Ah! I cannot tell you all I am feeling. (*To Catherine.*) Ah! Catherine, is it true?

CATHERINE – Yes, my dear Sergi, I would prefer you to the greatest King on earth.

The Chevalier de MONTVILAIN, *saluting the Prince* – There is nothing left for me to do, I am going to retire philosophically to my desert.

THE PRINCE, *to the Judge of the Town* – I would like to see the widow, as well as the children, of the unfortunate man who perished.

THE JUDGE – We will bring them to you, Your Lordship, without fail; but the poor widow is so overcome that she could not find the courage to come to this ceremony.

The Play ends with a Chorus.

The Prince is accompanied by cries of joy, and a Ballet could be added to the end if that were deemed suitable.

End of the Play.

Madame de Circey, smiling, 'You must not flatter yourself, my son, nor be discouraged, your Play is interesting due to its subject matter but it does feel rather impromptu, and in the Theatre neither negligence nor eagerness are tolerated. Perhaps another would have done better than you.' The Marquis does not know how to respond

and confusion disconcerts him somewhat. 'But Mama,' says Julie, 'my brother did what he could, and in such a short time to write a Comedy, that is a great deal.' 'What pleases me,' says a great Man, 'is that the Marquis already seems to understand mankind's soul.' 'In truth,' says the Marquis, with a more assured tone, 'you thought that at eleven a young man was not fit to do anything but as for me I feel that if I could only give myself up to my imagination I would do much better than I have just shown you. Drafts are always more difficult and awkward. Everyone must agree, and I beg the reader to judge this Story, Anecdote and Comedy as a very real impromptu. It was conceived, written and printed within a few hours. These are ephemeral things that always deserve indulgence and the Author, modest and fearful, begs it on behalf of this attempt.'