

A Passion for Lord Pierrot
a short story by Colin Greenland

Introduction

I wrote this story for David Garnett's Zenith 2 anthology, as another in the series of portraits of nasty men that includes Tarven Guille the taxidermist in Other Voices and Isa's father the mad inventor in 'The Wish'. What they share is a mastery of dubious science, an appalling attitude towards women and an infinite capacity for arrogant, romantic self-delusion. Mortimer Lychworthy, twenty-eighth Earl of Io and Master of the Guild of Aether Pilots, is obviously another of the same fellowship.

Why I've been compelled to pillory these grotesque examples of extreme tendencies in my own sex is a mystery to me. Presumably it's in some sense the other side of the more prominent mystery, which people always seize upon and question me about when I'm on stage: why are all my novels about women?

Actually, I don't think it is a mystery, unless there's an equivalent mystery in Mary Shelley writing about Victor Frankenstein or Ruth

Rendell writing about Inspector Wexford. The mystery is perhaps why more men haven't done it. That doesn't mean I know why I do it, though. I can tell

you that it's not a matter of decision. The character always comes first, as a whole person, whose story I am to tell. What that story actually is, is a matter of many, many decisions, as is how I am to tell it. For this

bitter-sweet piece I adopted the Commedia dell'Arte imagery and elegiac tone I first encountered in works by Michael Moorcock, the chronicles of

Jerry Cornelius and of the Dancers at the End of Time. The narrative voice, detached, anonymous, but still quite personal, I also borrowed from

Mike, before learning that he had also borrowed it, from George Meredith.

It was one sentence in this story, the one about 'the gala concert on Artemisia to celebrate the opening of the new Trans-Galactic Passage', that gave me my first glimpse into the universe of Harm's Way.

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A Passion for Lord Pierrot

In the land of Anise, on the planet of Triax, it is the hour after dinner.

Lord Pierrot sits alone in his apartment, playing the accordion. He reclines on a couch and plays a slow, sad tango. A melancholy fit is upon

him, for he remembers the past, the years before he came into his inheritance.

He is thinking of other nights, nights of gaiety when he sauntered with his comrades through yellow gardens on the moon, the same moon that now shines on the lake, turning it the colour of fine honey. On those

nights

he had not a care to his name, and the songs he sang were merry. He was young then, Lord Pierrot, and now he is old, as they reckon such things

on

the planet of Triax.

Lord Pierrot's whole apartment is most sumptuously appointed. The furnishings are made of velvet, the floor of glossy yellow hardwood imported all the way from Peru, on Earth. Splendid specimens of the

local

wildlife decorate the walls, represented by their severed heads. But tonight Lord Pierrot is not comforted by luxuries, nor by the trophies

of

his skill in the slaughter. Tonight there will be no comfort for him

but

in the arms of his paramour, Daphne Dolores.

He will go to her now, this minute. He rises and tucks the accordion

under

his arm, to entertain her, later, with some music. With this thought he steps from his chamber into the shaft and goes down, out of the front

door

into the stifling night.

Lord Pierrot crosses the lake by means of his little rowing boat. The

moon

is bright. Tomorrow night, he thinks, it will be full. Across the water

he

sees a light in the window of the lodge that stands upon the other

shore.

Moon or no moon, that is his beacon, his guiding star.

He moors below the lodge, in the lee of a black rock that shelves out

like

a parapet over the water. The rock was brought back from the Horsehead Nebula by Lord Pierrot's father, at a time when society admired such actions. Lord Pierrot climbs upon it now and stands gazing at the

moonlit

lodge. A languid breeze toys with his pale hair.

In the silence he hears the door of the lodge open, and then he sees

her,

sees Daphne Dolores, running to greet him.

'Daphne Dolores!' cries Lord Pierrot, and he springs from the rock. At once she is in his arms. He holds her very tightly, though not inconsiderately. He feels the beating of her heart, that splendid

organ.

Its rhythm betrays only a slight sign of exertion -- or is that

passion,

passion for Lord Pierrot?

'Daphne Dolores,' murmurs Lord Pierrot ardently. 'My love.'

'My darling,' Daphne Dolores replies, in rapture.

Daphne Dolores is slight and becomingly small of stature. She looks up

at

Lord Pierrot and presses the palm of her hand to his breast in a way

that

he finds irresistible. Her blue eyes sparkle in the moonlight. At this moment he would do anything for her, anything she asked. At this moment

he

would give up his wife, his house, his lands, his laboratories, and

take

her away on a journey to another star, a journey to last a lifetime.

Fortunately, Daphne Dolores does not ask him to do so. She does not ask him for anything. It is not in her nature to ask for things.

The most she will ever ask him is: 'Are you pleased to see me?'

Lord Pierrot is inflamed with love for her. He kisses her fiercely, bearing down on her in his hunger for her lips.

She returns his kiss as avidly as he gives it her, Daphne Dolores. Thus they remain, a minute or more, as they reckon these things on

Triax.

Then they enter the lodge, and close the door upon the night.

Lord Pierrot bids his darling extinguish the lamp that guided him across

the lake. He prefers darkness for these meetings. He does not like to let

Daphne Dolores see his face too clearly, for it will remind her that he is

old, and remind him too of what she is. She is a young woman, Daphne Dolores.

She obeys him in this request, as in all things, and returns to him at once.

Lord Pierrot is solicitous. He pays full attention to the woman in his arms. He must not waste an instant of her company. He kisses her again, hungrily, as if he could somehow suck new youth from her mouth.

Daphne Dolores makes a small noise in her throat. Her hand presses the back of his neck as they kiss.

Her love for him is complete and true. Lord Pierrot knows that of her.

He

knows it so well that he no longer reflects on it. It is not in her

nature

to love a man and afterwards, cease from loving him.

Lord Pierrot rolls up his ruffled sleeves, pushing them back from his long, slender wrists. His hands are narrow, his fingers taper. He wears

a

ring with a large, square, black stone. He wears it at all times, and never takes it off, not even with a woman. He has excused it to them,

to

Daphne Dolores and to all those who came before her, as a sentimental attachment, a betrothal gift from his wife.

Lord Pierrot begins to undress Daphne Dolores.

She stands quietly on the rug as he reveals her body to the night.

Daphne Dolores is white and slim as a boy. Her hair is cut short, and layered as closely to her head as the fur of an otter. Lord Pierrot

runs

his hand over her hair and kisses her throat. She shuts her eyes and

lifts

her chin with pleasure.

Her shoulders and hips are narrow, Daphne Dolores, her stomach flat.

She

has no breasts to speak of. Her nipples look like wounds in the dim

light.

It is scarcely conceivable now, but thus his wife, Lady Dove, used to be,

down

on one knee to remove her stockings. With his lips he brushes her pubic hair. He is consumed with desire for her. Rising, Lord Pierrot pulls at the buttons of his gown. Beneath it he wears neither shirt nor undergarment. His chest is narrow and hairless. He kisses Daphne

Dolores

as he tugs his arms from the sleeves and forces down his baggy

trousers.

His penis is slender, and elegantly curved. It lifts in the dark like

some

strange nocturnal plant of Triax, seeking for the moon.

Lord Pierrot directs Daphne Dolores to take hold of it, and she does.
He gasps in pleasure.
Later, when pleasure has had its fill, Lord Pierrot lies back against
the pillows with Daphne Dolores nestling in the crook of his arm. She lies
lightly upon him, for which he is grateful, for the night is very hot,
and they are both somewhat sticky.
Up in the rafters, something catches Lord Pierrot's eye: a small mass
darker than the darkness. It is sure to be a nest of the skylings,
which persist in infesting his eaves. Every year at this time it is necessary
to send an automaton to pluck out the nests of the skylings and cast them
into the lake. These nights Lord Pierrot shares with Daphne Dolores are
not numbered; they are precious and few. The squawking of baby birds must
be permitted to disturb the making of love.
'You're very quiet, my love,' says Daphne Dolores.
Lord Pierrot kisses the top of her head.
'What are you thinking of?' she asks him.
'I'm thinking of you, my delight,' he tells her. His voice is high, and
quavers. It seems to lose all its virile resonance after lovemaking.
Lord Pierrot has remarked it before, and wondered whether anything can be
done about it. 'I'm thinking of you,' he says. 'And how perfect you are.'
It is a lame, trite answer, he knows. Nor is it altogether true. Lord
Pierrot is in fact thinking of his wife, Lady Dove, and wishing she
were away from home. But what a gross error of tact it would be even to
mention this to his mistress, as they lie together in the afterglow of passion.
Lord Pierrot is nothing if not fastidious. It embarrasses him to utter
falsehoods and platitudes, though Daphne Dolores has an inexhaustible
gives capacity to receive them. She rejects nothing, not if Lord Pierrot
it.
He gets out of bed, leaving her lying there. He finds his accordion on
the floor and, dusting it reverently with the palm of his hand, remembers
his plan to delight Daphne Dolores with a serenade or two. He opens the
door and sits there, on the step, looking out at the night.
upon Now that he has drained the cup of passion dry, the melancholy fit is
him again. Lord Pierrot plays once more the slow, sad tango.
'What a mournful tune, my love!' exclaims Daphne Dolores.
Lord Pierrot looks round at her, seeing only a dark shape in the dark
scent house, out of reach of the moonlight. The lodge is full of the musky
of her. Lord Pierrot lays his accordion aside.
'Would you have me always happy?' he asks her.
'For my sake,' she tells him.
'Ah, that I might do everything for your sake,' he muses, sorrowfully.
'Then would you be mistress indeed.'
Lord Pierrot wishes his wife might be sent away, just for a while,
before

the end of summer. He has an aunt, in the north-west. She and Lady Dove have always got on wonderfully well together. They play bezique, and compare their illnesses.

While the accordion finishes its tango Lord Pierrot cups his chin in his hands and watches the golden moon of Triax climb above the trees along the lake shore. The heat blurs the sky about it to the violet of a fresh bruise.

The moonlight creeps through the open door, finding Daphne Dolores where she reclines, naked and pale on the tousled sheets. When the instrument falls silent, Lord Pierrot speaks in Latin, telling her that his melancholy is but natural, under the circumstances. 'Post coitum,' says Lord Pierrot, 'omne animal triste est.'

'You have said that to me before,' says Daphne Dolores. 'I remember it. I wish I could be learned, and know such things.'

'So you could, my dear,' replies Lord Pierrot, 'so you could, if you would first grow to my age.'

'Oh, now you will complain of your years, and talk of decline and the inadequacy of flesh,' says Daphne Dolores at once, protesting, though in gentle merriment. 'I shall not allow you to remain in this mood,' she declares, and she rises from the bed and comes to him where he sits in the doorway.

Stooping, she embraces him from behind, stroking his cooling flesh and kissing his ear and his neck until he begins to rouse again. 'No, Daphne Dolores,' says Lord Pierrot then, and with a touch he deters her, disengaging her arms from about his neck. He nods his long head in the direction of the lake. 'It is time I returned to my lady.'

At that Daphne Dolores casts herself upon him and clasps him to her once again. 'Stay with me tonight,' she pleads. She twists her fine fingers into his soft white hair.

Lord Pierrot is surprised at her forwardness, though flattered as any man would be. Usually she is more modest. He felicitates himself for having roused a new passion in her tonight. Her love for him, which he would have sworn was complete, is growing yet.

He detaches her hand from his hair and brings it to his lips. 'Alas,' he says. 'I may not. Women,' he tells her, 'are creatures of the heart; but men must bend the knee to duty.'

The truth is, that Lord Pierrot is grown old, as they reckon these things on Triax, and amorous exertion, especially in the season of heat, leaves him not only melancholy but also exhausted. But this is neither the place nor the time for truth; only for the voice of regret, in words of parting.

Bidding Daphne Dolores a gallant farewell, Lord Pierrot closes the door of the lodge, straightens his cuffs, and steps carefully in the dark down past the black rock to the sandy margin of the lake. He goes to board

the

little boat that will take him back to the shore.

It is a boon, Lord Pierrot's little boat, a device of his own invention quite indispensable for these nocturnal trysts. As it rows itself noiselessly across the honey-coloured water, Lord Pierrot is able to

take

his ease and recoup some of his dissipated energies. He looks around at the torpid, sultry night. In the reeds not a lizardfish, not a dabchick

is

stirring. The whole world, it seems, is still; still as if all Triax

were

barren, and the secret ways of life not yet pieced together there.

Lord Pierrot congratulates himself on the satisfactory conclusion of another night's dalliance.

Back indoors, Lord Pierrot sheds his clothes and hands them to a

waiting

automaton, which trundles away to launder them. They will be fresh and

dry

by morning. Belting a poplin robe about him, Lord Pierrot steps into

the

shaft and allows it to carry him up past the dining hall, past the libraries and laboratories, to the upper floor where both he and his

wife

have their apartments.

He looks in on his wife, the Lady Dove. She is still awake. She lies propped on a great many pillows, reading a volume of the collected correspondence of a grande dame of another age. Here, on this benighted outpost of the empire where the Pierrots keep their family seat, few letters reach them, and Lady Dove must make do with these printed

relics.

She looks at him over her glasses. 'What time is it, Pierre?'

She has her bedside console, and need only ask the house intelligence;

but

she prefers to ask him. Lord Pierrot stifles his irritation, making an effort to construe this habit of his wife's as deference due to his authority in the household. He tells her it is half-past eleven, or a quarter to one, however they reckon these things on Triax. 'Time you

were

asleep, my dear,' he tells her, and pats her on the shoulder. Lady Dove needs a great deal of sleep. She has grown colossally fat since he

found

it expedient to remove her ovaries. The slightest exercise fatigues

her.

'And you, Pierre, are you not going to bed?' she asks.

'Directly, my angel,' says Lord Pierrot; but first he will stay and converse with her awhile, as is only mannerly. He looks around for a chair, but they are all laden with clothing, books and female

impedimenta

that Lady Dove has been too weary to put away. Lord Pierrot averts his eyes from a pile of her enormous underwear. He sits gingerly on the

narrow

margin of the bed that is not occupied by the flesh of Lady Dove.

'I have been taking a stroll in the grounds,' he tells her, 'by the

light

of the moon.'

'Moonlight is not good for the brain,' declares his wife at once. 'The radiance of the moon is unsettling. It tends to unbalance one.'

Lord Pierrot strokes her great hand consolingly. 'I find it more

calming

these days than the heat of the sun,' he tells her mildly.

Lady Dove is full of opinions on what is and is not healthy. Her capacity for them has grown as her bulk has swelled, and as her own vitality has declined. This stricture against moonlight is typical, mere feminine superstition. As a scientist, Lord Pierrot would like to dispute it, but as long as he allows her to remain in error, he can be sure Lady Dove will leave him to pursue his nocturnal excursions uninterrupted, for fear of moonlight. And Daphne Dolores knows never to come near the house. So all is well. He embarks on a trivial anecdote, the story of an amusing but entirely logical error made by his automatic lepidopteron, which has been unable to grasp the subtleties of Triacian taxonomy. 'There it sat, solemnly mounting and labelling an entire drawer of bluebottles!' Lady Dove lies like a torpid hippopotamus, breathing hoarsely through her open mouth. Her heavy eyes never leave Lord Pierrot's countenance, though he does not assume she is attending to his anecdote. She is simply watching his mouth move. Meanwhile, covertly, he is studying her. Unintentionally, automatically, he compares her cumbersome flesh, her stale and suffocating bosom and lank hair with the fragrant delights he has tasted so recently in the arms of Daphne Dolores. He remembers when he first set eyes on Lady Dove, at a gala concert on Artemisia to celebrate the opening of the new Trans-Galactic Passage. She was a delicate flower then, a rose in bud adorning the arm of her papa, Lord Panteleone, while he was but a subaltern in the ranks of science, a rising young buck of some promise in the Innovation Corps. Now he is Lord Pierrot, master of the tango and the heavy night, yearning madly for the moon. 'You seem tired tonight, Pierre,' says his wife. 'You drive yourself too strenuously.' Lord Pierrot looks sharply at her. It would be unlike her, unworthy of her, to resort to innuendo. 'Science is a hard taskmaster,' he replies, blandly. 'I hope you are not overdoing it,' she says. 'You will make yourself ill.' He thinks she sounds a trifle disgruntled, but Lady Dove has returned her attention to her book. Lord Pierrot bids her politely good night. He kisses her pendulous cheek, quickly, and goes to his own room. As he bids the intelligence turn out the light, a second poignant memory occurs to him, unsought, of that time when Dove and he made a foursome with Gerard Pomeroy and Mona Twisk to sample the innocent pleasures of the gardens of the moon. Those golden days. Behind the marshmallow kiosk his Dove had unbuttoned her glove and, almost unprompted, relieved him of an importunate erection. His astonishment and pleasure were alloyed, a little, with alarm at her expertise. How could his dainty treasure be so

knowledgeable about the male organ? How did she know what to do? Not, thinks Lord Pierrot to himself, that she had to do very much. In acts of

venery, he commends himself as he falls asleep, he has always been prompt, very prompt.

Next morning, when Lord Pierrot awakes, he directs an automaton to throw open the window. The green land of Anise lies veiled in haze. This day promises to be just as hot as all its immediate predecessors. The heat can affect a man, playing upon his blood. Lord Pierrot thinks again of his memory of Dove, of her unexpected dexterity. It is bitter to him now.

When did he and his wife last enjoy the pleasures of concupiscence? How many years is it since he has seen beneath that billowing nightgown? Lord Pierrot winces inwardly and turns away from these unhappy reflections. Already he is suffused with longing for his paramour, for Daphne Dolores. He must meet her again tonight. He orders breakfast in the Magenta Room, with the french windows open onto the terrace. It is nearly an hour before Lady Dove makes her ponderous appearance.

She drops, panting, into her reinforced chair. Lord Pierrot is courteous, even solicitous. He waves away the butler hovering with its scalpel extended and cuts Lady Dove's grapefruit himself.

'My poor precious,' he murmurs, 'how was your night? Was it comfortable at all?'

'Not a bit,' answers Lady Dove, and proceeds with a catalogue of symptoms and grievances so anatomically detailed that Lord Pierrot's disciplined scientific objectivity is almost overborne. Swiftly passing beyond sympathy into squeamishness, he withdraws his attention, and recovers equilibrium only by most meticulously buttering a muffin.

'I was thinking you might visit Aunt Penthesilea, my darling,' says Lord Pierrot, 'in the north-west. It is cooler there.'

'Your aunt is on a cruise,' says Lady Dove. 'To Percival's Star. She has gone to take the waters on Syringa. I told you so. You never listen to me, never.' She mashes her grapefruit clumsily with a spoon.

Lord Pierrot looks at her in rising anger. His wife is being petulant. She believes she is the one who should have been taken on a restorative cruise to Syringa, as if that or any other fanciful 'therapy' might make any dent in the arsenal of her ailments.

Lord Pierrot regards his wife, her wet lips drooping over her breakfast dish. He is on the point of retorting that he too could wish her halfway across the galaxy; but he maintains his dignity.

'What a shame,' he says, and finishes his muffin in three quick bites. Slender as he is, Lord Pierrot has always had a robust appetite. He attempts a new, neutral subject. 'The skylings will be hatching any day now,' he observes.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Lady Dove drops her spoon. It falls from her fingers and clatters among the crockery. She gives a small, convulsive quiver, but no sound. To his horror, Lord Pierrot sees that she has begun to cry. There she sits, silent and still as a great bolster, while tears well up in her tiny eyes and slither down her mountainous face. Embarrassed by this unprovoked effusion, Lord Pierrot blots his lips hurriedly with his napkin and flees the table, leaving his kedgerees almost untouched. He spends the day in the laboratories, where his privacy is guaranteed. While the brilliant primary of Triax moves pane by pane across the stained glass windows, dappling the apparatus with rainbows, Lord Pierrot tends his vats. They are coming along very nicely. Suspended in their rich brown soup of nutrients, the fibrous lengths of pale pink matter slowly twist and thicken. In his laboratory Lord Pierrot is accustomed to be happy. He will talk to his specimens, and fancies they reply, mutely, waving their rosy fronds. He will sing to them: no melancholy tangos here, but snatches of songs of love. His homunculi gather chirping and chuckling around Lord Pierrot's feet. They like to fetch him the curious, wriggling things they trap behind the wainscot at night. On any other day one might find them skipping along after as he glides from vat to vat with flasks of concentrate and slips of litmus paper. Alas, today his mood is quite ruined by this disgraceful display of his wife's. To break down! At the breakfast table! And for no reason at all. Sensing their master's displeasure, the homunculi retreat, cowering beneath the cabinets. Lord Pierrot slumps on the couch, fingering his black ring. At dinner that evening Lord Pierrot is relieved to find the table laid for one. Lady Dove, the intelligence informs him, is indisposed. She will dine in her room. There will be no need for him to attempt polite conversation, to conduct relations with his wife as though her shameful outburst of the morning had never happened. Instead he can concentrate on the pleasures of the palette, a fitting preliminary to the pleasures of other senses, other organs, he will shortly be enjoying in the company of Daphne Dolores. Night falls swiftly in the land of Anise, on the planet of Triax. The moon rises and blesses the park with its golden glaze. The heat does not subside. It grows, if anything, more oppressive. Thick clouds begin to mass in the sky. Lord Pierrot lingers a moment on the terrace, breathing deeply of the rich scents of hibiscus and false phlox. It is night, and the melancholy fit is

upon him. He gazes into space, remembering other nights on other worlds,
fresh, piquant worlds at the frontier of science.
On his way through the hot gardens, Lord Pierrot composes a poem on themes
of ripeness and decay. Once he looks back towards the house, and sees the
light at his wife's bedroom window. He sighs.
A blundering sourmoth flies into his face, battering him with its dusty great wings. Lord Pierrot brushes it aside without anger. Tonight, nothing
can disturb his mood. He is feeling acquiescent, resigned to his age and
the passing of time, accepting his place in the grand scheme of Nature.
He
can afford to be magnanimous, to his poor, suffering wife, and to the ignorant little creatures of the dark and stifling night. He puts the sourmoth into his poem.
Arrived, at last, at the lake, he summons his little boat and rides out across the gilded water. He sees the light burning in the window of the lodge, and yearns towards it. How he envies the simple life that Daphne Dolores leads there. That, he decides, is all one really wants: a lantern
and a humble wooden bed; a loaf of bread and an accordion. What need has
an old man of more? He could let all the rest go, the great house, the laboratories and libraries with all their oppressive weight of ambition and responsibility, history and posterity. True peace is to live simply,
in a little house by the water.
Lord Pierrot lands and climbs on his father's rock. He stands with arms akimbo, looking towards the door of the lodge. He waits for his paramour,
Daphne Dolores. She always hears his boat and comes running. He waits; but
she does not come.
Something is wrong. Perhaps she is ill. Perhaps she has been stolen away.
Lord Pierrot climbs down again from the rock. He goes to the lodge and stands outside, listening at the door. Should he knock? At the door of his
own property? What if he does, and alerts some brigand, some beast of prey
lurking within, poised with fell intent over the swooning form of his beloved?
Courageously Lord Pierrot reaches for the door and flings it open. The lamp is burning, and she is there, Daphne Dolores, lying naked on the
bed. She is, as always, alone.
She smiles at him, a fetching smile. 'Welcome to my house, Lord Pierrot,'
she says.
'Daphne Dolores!'
She reaches out her arms.
'Come to me,' she commands him.
Moving like one in a dream, he crosses to the bed and embraces her. She clutches him in a grip of desire. How urgently she caresses him. He hears
her breathing shallow and quick. He feels her heart pounding in her breast

as if with an emotion too large for that narrow cage.
'Daphne Dolores, my treasure!'
Lord Pierrot wonders if she is unwell.
Daphne Dolores laughs. 'Do you like my surprise?'
'But you are naked,' he says. He feels a twinge of annoyance at this:
she
knows it is always his pleasure to undress her when they meet.
She sets him at arm's length and looks into his eyes.
'I am pretending this is my house,' she says. 'I am mistress here. And
you
are my suitor.'
Her manner is intense, Daphne Dolores, her eyes amused at his
discomfiture. Lord Pierrot has never seen her like this before.
'I want you,' she says. Her voice is deep, suddenly, and thick with
passion. 'Now.'
She tears at his clothes, straining seams, snapping buttons from their
threads.
Lord Pierrot is alarmed. He tries to restrain her hands, but desire
lends
her strength. She fights him, attacks his gown again. He falls
sprawling
across the bed, laughing feebly. But he is not amused. He is an old
man,
and not accustomed to such violent handling. And from a woman! One of
his
women!
'Gently, my pet!' he cries. 'Gently!'
She takes no notice. She lunges at him, throwing herself on top of him
and
kissing him fiercely. Something must be wrong with her. The heat has
unhinged her. They are such sensitive creatures.
Lord Pierrot pushes weakly at her, at Daphne Dolores, striving to rise;
but she pushes him in return, turning him over on his back and
clambering
upon him. She grasps his baggy trousers, dragging them off and hurling
them into a corner.
This is not love, that sweet, sad, tender enchantment, Lord Pierrot
thinks
to himself as she tears off his gown; this is brute lust! What can he
do?
With all his women he has always been able to retain control, even in
the
giddy toils of desire. Daphne Dolores seems to have gone quite mad.
Mad,
it is true, with passion for him, for Lord Pierrot; but mad
nonetheless.
He is almost unmanned by dread, repelled by her undignified abandon.
Pinned beneath her writhing body, Lord Pierrot closes his eyes and
thinks
of her as she has always been before: soft, tender, yielding.
Daphne Dolores fastens her teeth in his nipple. Lord Pierrot cries out
in
protest. But she laughs and twists around above him, seeking every
moment
a new and more gratifying position.
Lord Pierrot thumbs his ring.
She sees him.
At once she rises up, straddling him in a way that makes him catch his
breath. She seizes his hand, and tugs at the ring.
'My dear!' gasps Lord Pierrot.

'Off!' she cries. 'Off with it!'
'No!' He covers the ring with his hand.
Daphne Dolores pauses, looking down at him with a wrathful gaze. 'I
hate
it. I hate everything that reminds me of her,' says Daphne Dolores.
'It was never hers,' Lord Pierrot says at once. 'What I told you was
untrue.'
Daphne Dolores arches her brows. Her curiosity is piqued. She keeps
hold
of his hand. She requires an explanation.
Glad of the respite from these exertions, Lord Pierrot gives her one.
'The ring was never a gift from Lady Dove,' he says, somewhat hoarsely.
'It is a family heirloom. A device of my great-great-grandfather's. He
was
a man of many enemies.'
With a flick of the secret hinge he shows her, concealed beneath the
square black stone, a needle steeped in a swift and fatal poison.
Concocted by the first wearer, that poison has been improved by his
subsequent heirs. Against it there is no appeal.
Lord Pierrot tells her of the apprehensions he suffered outside her
door.
'One sweep of my hand, my love, and there he would lie, your assailant,
paralysed and dying at your feet!'
Daphne Dolores examines the ring, the needle beneath the stone.
'And have you ever made use of it?' she asks, speaking low.
'Experimentally,' he tells her. 'On suitable local creatures.'
She laughs again. In her present mood such macabre prospects amuse her.
She flips shut the ring and, before he can prevent her, ducks her head
and
lightly kisses the square black stone.
She looks at him from under lowered brows, her lips still touching the
ring.
'On suitable creatures,' she repeats.
Then she is upon him once more, and there is nothing he can do while
she
has her way with him.
Lord Pierrot senses at last the stirring of desire. There is something
splendid, he recalls, about a woman towering over him thus, in an
access
of hunger and power. Unnatural? Is it truly so? There may be many
things
in Nature, he thinks; many hidden things. And did not Lady Dove excite
him
thus when they were wed?
She reminds him, Daphne Dolores, of his wife when she was young. They
all
do, all his women. He is prone, Lord Pierrot, to such sentiments.
He thrusts into her with rekindled appetite. The old voluptuary is not
defeated yet.
But even while she grinds and rocks upon him, yelping and growling like
an
animal in rut, the scientist in him considers: was there no warning of
this last night? No sign, no prior indication of this unprecedented
frenzy?
Lord Pierrot has always prided himself on the accuracy and good order
of
his memory. Even as they rise together towards their climax he recalls
how
Daphne Dolores disparaged his serenade, and opposed him when he made
reference to the melancholy matter of his age. And yes, he remembers

now

how she revealed her hatred for Lady Dove, trying to keep him from his lawful place beside his invalid wife. She clutched him by the hair! And

he

thought nothing of it!

It was love, Lord Pierrot understands as Daphne Dolores falls upon him

in

her sensuous spasm. Love, that delusive, obliterating passion: only

love

could make so experienced, so wise a man so blind.

Daphne Dolores lies lathered and gasping on his chest. But Lord

Pierrot,

he is not yet spent. He heaves at her, stroking distractedly at her

hair.

She lifts her head, Daphne Dolores, from under his hand. She lifts her hips, and withdraws.

'My love!' cries Lord Pierrot, aghast.

She kneels up once more, straddling him, toying with him. Her eyes are languid now, her movements satiated.

Yet he is not done, Lord Pierrot.

And nor, it seems, is she, Daphne Dolores.

She speaks. 'Take me up to the house,' she says.

'But my sweet!'

She ignores his protest.

'Take me to the house,' she says again. 'Let me be mistress there.'

Lord

Pierrot is astounded. This is absolutely counter to the first rule,

that

she must never interfere in his domestic arrangements. Daphne Dolores

has

abandoned all sense of place and propriety.

Then he smiles.

Is his spirit dead, his blood quite cold? Is he not still Lord Pierrot, the libertine of Fomalhaut, the rakehell of the Innovators? And is she

not

Daphne Dolores, creature of his passion?

He flings his arms about her slender waist. 'Yes, my love, you are

right.

Let us be wild! Let us be free of trammelling checks and consciences!

Let

us go where love bids!' He chortles. 'Oh, my darling, my mistress, I

must

say: how cunningly you teach me!'

Together the lovers scramble from the bed and out into the clouded

night.

Barefoot and naked they run down to the rock where the dependable

little

boat has moored itself. They climb aboard, Lord Pierrot sitting astern with Daphne Dolores sprawled between his shrunken thighs. He gives the command to steer for the shore.

As they ride, Lord Pierrot looks behind them. The moon is still hidden, and all the stars.

He strokes the short, soft hair of Daphne Dolores. Perhaps she will be calmer now, more docile since slaking her lust. No -- she turns energetically in his arms, nuzzling forcefully at him, almost upsetting the little boat.

'Will you take me to the house?' she asks again.

'To the very heart of the house,' he promises.

They cross the lake. Lord Pierrot passes by the boathouse and puts

ashore

at the abandoned grotto. Leading Daphne Dolores by the hand he scales the bank, and slips between the statues of the Astral Graces, each of which wears his mother's face. Along crazed paths, between straggling rhododendrons the couple hasten, circumventing the garden by an obscure route that brings them out at last on the croquet lawn. The east wing looms ahead, its windows glittering darkly.

Suddenly Daphne Dolores stops. Lord Pierrot knows she remembers his instruction, that she is never to come near the house itself. She stands

naked and panting on the croquet lawn, seeking her lover's face in frenzied, mute appeal.

'Come, my darling,' Lord Pierrot bids her in a secretive tone. 'Let us within. We shall baffle Lady Dove with our boldness.'

All at once he hears a dreadful sound.

'Pierre! Pi-erre!'

It is his wife. It is Lady Dove, materialising as if at the merest mention

of her name. She has left her bed and come blundering into the garden in

her nightgown. Lord Pierrot hears her now smashing towards them through the undergrowth, bellowing for him like a panic-stricken heifer.

Does she suspect? Has she seen them? Or is she sick, and roaming in her sleep? Perhaps, of all things, her premonition has come true: the full moon has unsettled her brain. It is a night for the madness of women.

Lady Dove is coming nearer. Lord Pierrot sees her monstrous shape bobbing

in the darkness beneath the shade trees.

Silently giving thanks for the iron self-discipline, the blood and breeding of the Pierrots that enable him to keep his head even through

the ordeal of such a night, Lord Pierrot puts his fingers to the moist lips

of Daphne Dolores, commanding her to silence. He points across the croquet lawn to the flowerbeds. They will confuse Lady Dove. She will not think to

seek them that way.

Daphne Dolores drops Lord Pierrot's hand. She sprints away across the Triacian grass, Lord Pierrot panting after.

Trampling the blooms so carefully laid out by Lord Pierrot's horticulturion,

they burst into the arbour leaving Lady Dove behind, still stumbling through the shrubbery. Arriving at the door of the conservatory they

hear a faint, disconsolate moo, a distant sound of breaking branches.

Inside, the house begins, without asking, to raise the lights. Lord Pierrot countermands it. Daphne Dolores does not notice. She hardly

pauses to admire the glories of the Sirian frescoes. She kisses Lord Pierrot vigorously and pulls him into the gloomy passageway and along the hall, where the butler rolls out to greet them.

It scans them with a brief burst of invisible light. 'Good evening, sir and madam,' it says, in its buzzing voice. 'May I take your coats?'

Daphne Dolores laughs uproariously, heedlessly. Her laughter echoes in the rafters.

'Let us go up, my love,' Lord Pierrot bids her. 'To my chamber.'

Again she contradicts him, her blue eyes shining with joyous anticipation.

'No, dear heart,' she insists, 'to your laboratory! Did you not tell me

that Lady Dove never sets foot there?'

With a private, wistful smile, Lord Pierrot congratulates her on her stratagem. 'An excellent choice, my precious!'

Ignoring the attentive automaton, they jump into the shaft and float up

to

the level of the laboratories.

Here too Daphne Dolores strides ahead, as if she knows the way. She was here once before; perhaps, unconsciously, in some infant part of her brain, she remembers it. She sweeps through the catalogue room, where

all

knowledge lies sleeping in banks of deep cold drawers. In the

mechanatory,

beneath the great bleached skeletons of Lord Pierrot's first automata,

she

runs her white hand carelessly across the rack of obsolete implements,

the

tarnished rods and serried claws that recall his years of service in

the

Innovation Corps. She does not spare a glance for the cabinets of the salon zoologique with their stiff, staring specimens of every kind of fauna, natural and otherwise, as they reckon these things on the planet Triax.

Pierrot is pleased to follow her. Her haste gladdens his old and disappointed heart. He is grateful that, in the dark, she fails to

notice

the lines of mannequins above her head, encased in glass along the

wall.

Each is clad in some cast-off of the younger, slimmer Lady Dove; yes,

even

back to the yellow sundress and matching gloves that she wore on their trip to the moon. It would not do to let Daphne Dolores see those

clothes;

nor the figures that wear them. They might disturb her.

'Ah!' cries Daphne Dolores then. She has reached the last laboratory.

She

stands amid the vats, gazing about in wonder and delight.

Behind her, Lord Pierrot slips into the curtained alcove for a gown. As

he

plucks one from the hook and wraps it around his nakedness, the

homunculi

stir in their nest of rags. Lord Pierrot hastily silences their

querulous

cheeping, dropping a cloak over them. He steps back into the

laboratory.

The stained glass windows are black and opaque in the occluded night.

The

only light in the cluttered chamber is a faint glow of phosphorescence from the things in the vats. It highlights the slick bubbles of

alembics

and retorts, the dusty brass barrel of a giant microscope. There is a lingering scent of formaldehyde and rotting orange peel.

Lord Pierrot sees Daphne Dolores padding barefoot from vat to vat,

trying

to discern what each holds. Some are mere seeds yet, little spatters of darkness in the broth. Others are burgeoning, dendritic: a tubular stem with floppy branches above and below. Daphne Dolores has reached one so far grown as to be spinning a slick integument about itself, like a protective cocoon. Its members are well defined.

The largest tank stands alone in the corner beneath a sagging bank of shelves. The waters of that one, Lord Pierrot knows, are empty.

As Daphne Dolores goes to peer into its slimy depths, the moon of Triax suddenly heaves itself from behind a bulwark of cloud and sheds light into the laboratory. All the coloured panes flare up at once like a curtain of cold jewels. Daphne Dolores turns about. She catches sight of Lord Pierrot standing there in his white gown, and cries out in pleasure. 'My love!' calls Daphne Dolores. 'You have become a very harlequin!' Lord Pierrot looks down at himself and chuckles. He is illuminated, as if by the rainbow-coloured primary of an unknown world, daubed from head to toe with carmine and gold and viridian. All down his gown the smears of acids and enzymes show up as harshly as though they were stains of rust or blood. From beneath the coloured window comes a cry. 'Pierre!' Lord Pierrot crosses the floor and cautiously peeps out. Lady Dove is there, still tangled in the bushes, swiping blindly at the moonlight with her huge arms. Daphne Dolores laughs. 'Will you not take care of her?' she asks. 'Take care of her?' repeats Lord Pierrot. 'Release her from her misery.' She nods at his hand, at the fatal ring. Lord Pierrot looks at his ring as if he has never seen it before. He marvels at the audacity of Daphne Dolores, at the daring and ambition she has concealed from him all this while. Her spirit is a match for his own. He sighs. He opens the ring, inspects the reservoir. 'Let us be sure,' he says. 'I should not wish her to suffer even a moment.' He closes his eyes, suppressing a shudder of emotion, of potent memory; and opens them again. 'I have some fresh distilled. On that shelf up there, in the corner.' Daphne Dolores turns to look at the shadowy ranks of vials and flasks that have bowed the shelves. Lord Pierrot, feeling behind the couch, fetches out a slender staff of glass a yard long, with a brass ferrule. A homunculus scrabbles briefly from under the valance. He shoos it back out of sight. Daphne Dolores leans across the vat, stretching up to the bottles. She cannot reach. She lifts herself up and puts one knee carefully on the rim. The coloured light streaks her tiny buttocks. 'Oh, I can't get it,' she complains. 'Come and help me.' Lord Pierrot comes and stands behind her. He puts one long, thin arm around her naked waist, hugging her body to him as if to steady her on her precarious perch. Her flesh is warm in his embrace. With the other arm he reaches over her shoulder for the flask. Their faces are very close together. Daphne Dolores turns her head and kisses Lord Pierrot on the lips. 'Pi-erre!!!' moans the stricken woman beneath the window.

Daphne Dolores gives a little laugh and slips her tongue between her lover's teeth.

Lord Pierrot thrusts forward with his shoulder.

Daphne Dolores is small and slight, like all his women. With a cry and

a

splash, she topples into the tank.

The questionable fluid at once froths pink, surging high and closing avidly about her delectable limbs. It spatters Lord Pierrot's motley

gown,

and he steps quickly backwards.

In the spume he catches a final glimpse of Daphne Dolores, bobbing up:

her

startled eyes, her open mouth. He raises his glass staff, plants its

brass

tip between her breasts, and thrusts her down.

From her little ears, her nose, her perfect lips, bubbles flurry. Lord Pierrot waits patiently until they cease.

Whispering, the homunculi scuttle from their corners and come to stand around him in a flock, holding hands and craning their necks. They lift one another up to the glass.

Lord Pierrot does not rebuke them. The moment is too solemn. Wiping the staff on his sleeve, he turns away and opens the window, admitting a

wave

of hot, dank air.

Lord Pierrot sighs. The melancholy fit is upon him once again, as

always

when he has made the great renunciation. One by one he raises them; and one by one they become unstable, unreasonable, and have to be stilled.

Must it be ever thus?

He gazes out of the window into the thick and tangled garden. By the

light

of the yellow moon of Triax he sees his wife, Lady Dove, standing

below,

her nightdress in tatters, twigs and leaves in her hair. She looks up

and

recognises him. A scowl crosses her bloated face. 'Pierre!' she shouts.

Fatigued, unhappy, Lord Pierrot orders the intelligence to send his taxidermatron. Then he goes out through the salon, passing beneath the line of his daughters, going to seek forgiveness once again of Lady

Dove.

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