

I. A Fatal Gift

It is a misfortune of which no one complains, a danger that no one dreads, a scourge that no one avoids. The scourge, it is true, is only contagious in one fashion, by heredity—and even then its succession is not at all certain—but even so, it is a scourge, a fatality that always pursues you, throughout your life, an obstacle to everything. It is not an obstacle that you encounter, but much more than that; it is an obstacle that you carry with you, a ridiculous slice of luck that simpletons envy you; a favor of the gods that makes you a pariah among men; or, to put it more simply, a gift of nature that makes you a fool in society.

In sum, that misfortune, that danger, that scourge, that obstacle, that source of ridicule is...I'll wager that you won't guess, and yet, when you know what it is, you'll say: "That's true." When the inconveniences of the advantage have been demonstrated to you, you'll say: "I don't envy it anymore." That misfortune, then, is male beauty.

Take note here of a difference in gender. We say "the good fortune of being *belle*" but "the misfortune of being *beau*." We shall demonstrate the difference shortly.

Someone said somewhere: What is the disagreeable thing that everyone desires? That someone replied to himself: old age. We are saying: What is the scourge that everyone envies, and we are replying to ourselves: male beauty. But by beauty we mean veritable beauty, perfect beauty, ancient beauty, fatal beauty. What is generally known as a handsome man is not a beautiful man. The former escapes the fatality; he has a thousand conditions of happiness. Firstly, he is almost always stupid and smug; secondly, estates have been created expressly for his handsomeness. Being a handsome man is a *métier*.

The handsome man, properly speaking, can perhaps be happy as a hunter, with a green uniform and a feather in his cap. He can perhaps be happy as a master of arms, and find a thousand ineffable enjoyments of pride in his poses. He might be happy as a hairdresser. He might be happy as a drum major—oh, then he is very happy! He might also be happy as a general of the Empire at the Franconi theater,¹ and play King Joachim Murat delightfully. He might, finally, be happy as a model in the most famous studios, playing his part in the successes that our great masters owe to him, legitimating, so to speak, the gifts he has received from nature by consecrating them to the fine arts.

The handsome man can tolerate life; the handsome man can dream of happiness.

But the beautiful man, the Antinous, the Greek Amour, the ideal man, the man with the pure face, with correct lines and an antique profile, the young and perfectly beautiful man, angelically beautiful, fatally beautiful, must drag out a miserable existence on earth among the prudent fathers and the fearful husbands who proscribe him, and—which is more terrible still—the noble and aged Englishwomen who run after him.

For it is an incontestable and unfortunate verity that a beautiful young man is not always seductive, but is always compromising.

Perhaps, in a country less civilized than ours, beauty is a power; but here, in Paris, where advantages are conventional, real beauty is unappreciated; it is not in harmony with our customs; it is a splendor that has too great an effect, an advantage that causes too much embarrassment; beautiful men have gone out of fashion with historical tableaux.

Nowadays, our apartments only admit paintings that fit on an easel. Nowadays, our women only dream of the love of pages, and politeness has stolen a march on beauty.

Woe betide, therefore, the beautiful man!

Now, there was once an exceedingly beautiful young man who was sad. He was not at all proud of his beauty, and, unfortunately, he had intelligence enough to sense all its danger. He knew the world; he

¹ Antonio Franconi (1738-1836), the founder of the equestrian theater named the Cirque Olympique, had retired by 1831 and the original Cirque Olympique had closed in 1816, but his sons and grandsons followed the family tradition of staging spectacular military plays, invariably featuring dashing cavaliers.

had judged it wisely, and he experienced what every man experiences who knows the world: a bitter disgust and a profound discouragement. In maturity, that is known as repose, a return to port, a mild philosophy, but at twenty years of age, when life is beginning, to know where one is going is terrible.

What does it matter to a traveler who is reaching the end of his journey if he is robbed at the moment of arrival? What does it cost him? His baggage was useless, his purse exhausted, his cloak ragged, his provisions had run out. The loss is slight; he laughs at it. In any case, he is expected at home and the voyage is over. But woe betide the man who is robbed in the middle of his journey, who finds himself obliged to continue his journey devoid of help, with no cloak, no staff and no money! Oh, that man is miserable; he is discouraged; he stops; he forgets the goal of his journey, and if Providence does not come to his aid, he will allow himself to die of hunger in a ditch beside the road.

There are young men of twenty who have gout; there are others who have experience; the latter are the more unfortunate.

How, then, had that young man come by that elevation of thought, that sadness of mind? All of it stemmed from his beauty.

Intelligence coming from beauty! Oh, that's new!

It's true, though. Everything that isolates us magnifies us; sublime beauty is a superiority like any other, and every superiority is an exile.

I'll tell you this: that poor young man found himself isolated because he was too beautiful; he felt sad because he was isolated; and by degrees, he became an intelligent and distinguished man because he had been sad and misunderstood. Dolor is the culture of the soul, it is what fertilizes it; a heart irrigated by tears is fecund. A generous chagrin is omnipotent; it gives genius to patience, courage to weakness, and reason to youth; it can also give, in its munificence, intelligence to a beautiful man.

II. The First Obstacle

There is another misfortune that no one talks about, but which nevertheless does harm in the world, and that is to be saddled for life with a pretentious baptismal name.

The poor young man had that source of ridicule too. His name was Tançrède!²

His father, a brave officer on half-pay and a Voltairean of the first rank, had given him that name in honor of his God, and that man's sole regret was that he did not have a daughter to call Aménaïde.

Tançrède Dorimont bore simultaneously a name of tragedy and an old name of comedy, and furthermore, was made like the hero of a romance!³

Recommend to a banker, a notary, or the chief bureaucrat of some Ministry or other, a gentleman named Tançrède Dorimont, who is as handsome as an angel? I ask you, is that reasonable?

"We can't do anything with that self-infatuated fop," those honest men would say—for prejudices against beauty and intelligence are as strong now as prejudices against nobility, and a man of intelligence finds himself forced nowadays to take as much trouble to hide his advantages as he would once have taken to show them off.

If Tançrède had had a fortune he would not have perceived his misfortune. Everything is permitted to a rich man. Except for being rich, he is forgiven for everything. But for someone who has to make his own fortune, certain sources of ridicule are misfortunes.

How can an unsavory, ugly individual who is bald, with tinted spectacles and black teeth be persuaded that a young man as beautiful as Apollo, whose name is Tançrède, is not a fop, an impertinent fellow, a bit of a devil, a dandy and an idler? And how, then, can one make one's fortune when one is as beautiful as Apollo and has to deal, all the time, with unsavory, ugly men who are bald, with tinted spectacles and black teeth, and, what is more, all kinds of prejudices against you?

When he arrived in Paris, Tançrède had gone in person to Monsieur Nantua's in order to hand in a letter of recommendation to the rich banker in question, which someone had given to him. He had added to that letter a visiting card bearing his address. The following day, Monsieur Nantua had written him a very amiable note with his own hand, in which he invited him to call on him in the course of the day. The most obliging offers of service made that note a pledge of honor; to be protected by Monsieur Nantua was already an honor.

All was going well. Radiant with hope, Tançrède had a bath, had his hair cut, put on his best suit and headed for the dwelling of the man he was already calling his benefactor. The imprudent fellow was counting on his beautiful face to capture the benevolence of the banker, not because it was beautiful but because it was reminiscent of the charming face of his mother, and Tançrède knew that that resemblance would not be indifferent to Monsieur Nantua, an old admirer of Madame Dorimont.

Monsieur Nantua had just received some very important news that had disrupted all his plans when Tançrède came in, but Monsieur Nantua, like all men who engage in important affairs, did not like to seem busy.

It is a remarkable thing that futile people, who are only involved in miserable, petty affairs, have the pretention of never having a moment to themselves; they are buried by enormous stacks of paper, they cannot sleep, they eat on the run, they kiss their wives while putting on their gloves and only trim their

² *Tançrède* (1702) is the title of an operatic tragedy by André Campra, with a libretto by Antoine Danchet, based on an episode in Tommaso Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), which was further adapted as a play by Voltaire in 1760. The latter, in its turn, formed the basis of Rossini's opera *Tancredi* (1813). *Gerusalemme liberata* was a standard text in French schools through the 19th century, which helped to maintain the appeal of all three works. The author undoubtedly has the 1760 play in mind; it introduced the name Aménaïde, cited in the next paragraph along with Voltaire, as that of the hero's innamorata.

³ There is more than one character named Dorimont featured in French theater of the period, but the character the author has in mind is probably the one in Emmanuel Dupaty's 1806 comedy *La Jeune mère ou Les Acteurs de société*.

beards once a week; in brief, they exhaust themselves in appearing to be occupied, in order to give themselves credit.

Very busy men, on the contrary, have the pretention of always being free; they behave like idle aristocrats; they pose as little Caesars dictating several letters at the same time in a nonchalant and distracted fashion, while taking a cup of tea or chocolate. Their mania is having no idea how they came to be millionaires.

We are not talking about those whose activity is indefatigable, who undertake more projects than they can possibly handle. Those men do not even have the time to have pretentions.

The man with whom we are concerned was one of those who does not want to appear busy. He was searching with a great deal of attention for a piece of a paper—a note, a report, what do I know?—riffing anxious through the documents in a file, but he did not want to appear to be attaching too much importance to that search. Nor did he want to be interrupted for a moment. All that was difficult, and this was the consequence:

His eyes were avidly pursuing, through all those various pieces of a paper, the name, the date or the figure that he wanted to find, while his semi-attentive ear strove to follow the conversation.

Monsieur Dorimont was announced.

“Show him in.”

“You’re punctual,” said the banker to the young man, without raising his head. “Very good—that’s a good sign. I said eleven o’clock; eleven has just chimed, and here you are. That’s good; I like precision. In business, precision is a virtue.”

“I wouldn’t have pardoned myself for making a man whose moments must be precious wait for a minute,” replied the naïve Tancrède, who thought he was saying something agreeable. Not at all: it was a blunder twice over, firstly in supposing that the millionaire would have deigned to wait, and secondly in suggesting to Monsieur Nantua that he thought he was always busy.

“In truth, my moments are no more precious than yours. I’m never doing anything. But warm yourself, I beg you. I’ll be with you in an instant.”

Tancredè went to the fireplace and remained silent.

“Is Madame your mother still in Blois?” asked Monsieur Nantua, still reading his papers.

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Do you know English?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“She hasn’t remarried? A widow at twenty-six!”

“No, Monsieur.”

“And German? Do you know a little German?”

“Yes, Monsieur. I know a little Spanish too; I speak it well enough to travel agreeably in Spain,” said the wily young man, who was aware of the extent to which money men have abused the peninsula.

“Oh, you know Spanish too? How knowledgeable you are! You haven’t been brought up in Paris?”

Tancredè could not help smiling at the naivety of that epigram. “No, Monsieur,” he said. “I was brought up in Geneva. I’ve only been at the Collège Henri IV for two years.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

The banker looked up at those words, and darted a rapid glance at Tancredè, but Tancredè had his head turned at that moment, and his face was not visible.

“You’re tall for your age,” said Monsieur Nantua, laughing. Then he thought: *The young man has a very distinguished appearance; I like him. Besides which, I’d like to oblige his mother...oh, the lovely woman...if I’d been rich in those days...!*

“Well, it’s agreed,” he said. “Tomorrow you’ll come here as a member of the household. You know Spanish? That’s good—very good; I believe I can use you. That’s very good...” He suddenly interrupted himself, and cried: “Ah!” Then he fell silent, and started running an anxious eye over the piece of paper he had just found.

In the meantime, the young man said to himself: *I'm astonished that Monsieur Nantua, such a great admirer of my mother, hasn't been struck by my resemblance to her.*

In the modesty of his attitude, Tançrède had not perceived that the banker had not yet looked at him.

Finally, Monsieur Nantua stood up. His face was radiant; he had found the information he wanted, and everything whose accomplishment he was meditating would become possible with that document.

Hope produces benevolence and generosity in noble natures; it is only envious and mediocre hearts that tighten and close up at the approach of good fortune.

Monsieur Nantua, suddenly rediscovering the chance of executing an important project that the sudden emergence of an obstacle had momentarily disrupted, felt that he was in one of those benevolent states of mind in which one likes to do good, not for the pleasure of doing good in itself, but in order to share with someone else the joy that one is feeling. It is not a happy man that one desires, but a mind excited to contentment in order that its disposition might harmonize with ours. It is a guest that we are inviting to a banquet offered to us, whom we are intoxicating in order that he might share our pleasure and that the meal might be more joyful.

"My word, you're in luck," said Monsieur Nantua, approaching the fireplace, "For here's the very affair..."

Monsieur Nantua suddenly interrupted himself; his gaze remained fixed, as if by enchantment, on Tançrède's face. For a few moments, the banker remained silent; immobile, he contemplated his young protégé.

That's the resemblance having its effect, Tançrède thought. *That's good; if the man takes me under his wing, I'm saved. How he's looking at me!*

Monsieur Nantua was still examining Tançrède, and a thousand diverse thoughts were passing through his mind.

To begin with, the appearance of the beautiful young man charmed him like the appearance of a beautiful painting: that perfect beauty, in the full flush of youth, had something delightful about it, which flattered the gaze. Then again, there was such a striking resemblance to a lovely woman that he had been afraid to love. All those impressions spoke in Tançrède's favor at first; noble and powerful nature had its rights, momentarily—but then came the reaction of society, and mundane considerations had their turn.

Damn! thought Monsieur Nantua. *I don't want an Adonis like that in my house. If my daughter, who is already so romantic, saw him...! Oh, good God, that's all I need. He's as poor as a church mouse—he's not the son-in-law I need...not to mention that these good-looking fellows are always stupid and idle.*

"I'm amazed," he said, in order to explain his long silence. "I can't weary of looking at you, so striking is the resemblance to your mother."

"People often tell me that," Tançrède replied—and he suddenly felt sad. His confidence vanished, but he could not tell what it was that had driven it away.

The fact is that Monsieur Nantua had not put into the pronunciation of those words the inflection that he ought to have put into them. His accent was cold, his manner embarrassed; in sum, everything about him betrayed the sudden change that had occurred in his plans with regard to his protégé.

"Half past eleven already!" exclaimed Monsieur Nantua, looking at the clock.

"I'll leave you," said Tançrède, immediately heading for the door. Then he stopped, not daring to say: *I shall have the honor of taking your orders tomorrow.*

Monsieur Nantua divined his thought. "Until tomorrow, at ten o'clock," he said—but he said it strangely; it sounded like a lie.

Tançrède went away discouraged. Why? He did not know; but he had a presentiment, divining that the protection of the rich banker was no longer acquired, that he was not going to be a member of the household, and that it would be necessary, in spite of his benevolence, to turn his sights in another direction.

And that evening, Tançrède received an infinitely polite and gracious letter from Monsieur Nantua, in which Monsieur Nantua expressed his regret at not being able, for reasons independent of his will, to give Monsieur Dorimont the employment that he had initially promised him, adding, nevertheless, that in

the desire to be useful to him, he had recommended him to one of his friends, who would do for him all that he had desired to do.

The next day, Tancredi was introduced into the home of that friend, Monsieur Poirceau, the director of a new fire insurance company.