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# Against Nature

Joris-Karl Huysmans

## Chapter 10

During the course of this malady which attacks impoverished races, sudden calms succeed an attack. Strangely enough, Des Esseintes awoke one morning recovered; no longer was he tormented by the throbbing of his neck or by his racking cough. Instead, he had an ineffable sensation of contentment, a lightness of mind in which thought was sparkingly clear, turning from a turbid, opaque, green color to a liquid iridescence magical with tender rainbow tints.

This lasted several days. Then hallucinations of odor suddenly appeared.

His room was aromatic with the fragrance of frangipane; he tried to ascertain if a bottle were not uncorked--no! not a bottle was to be found in the room, and he passed into his study and thence to the kitchen. Still the odor persisted.

Des Esseintes rang for his servant and asked if he smelled anything. The domestic sniffed the air and declared he could not detect any perfume. There was no doubt about it: his nervous attacks had returned again, under the appearance of a new illusion of the senses.

Fatigued by the tenacity of this imaginary aroma, he resolved to steep himself in real perfumes, hoping that this homeopathic treatment would cure him or would at least drown the persistent odor.

He betook himself to his dressing room. There, near an old baptistery which he used as a wash basin, under a long mirror of forged iron, which, like the edge of a well silvered by the moon, confined the green dull surface of the mirror, were bottles of every conceivable size and form, placed on ivory shelves.

He set them on the table and divided them into two series: one of the simple perfumes, pure extracts or spirits, the other of compound perfumes, designated under the generic term of bouquets.

He sank into an easy chair and meditated.

He had long been skilled in the science of smell. He believed that this sense could give one delights equal to those of hearing and sight; each sense being susceptible, if naturally keen and if properly cultivated, to new impressions, which it could intensify, coordinate and compose into that unity which constitutes a creative work. And it was not more abnormal and unnatural that an art should be called into existence by disengaging odors than that another art should be evoked by detaching sound waves or by striking the eye with diversely colored rays. But if no person could discern, without intuition developed by study, a painting by a master from a daub, a melody of Beethoven from one by Clapisson, no more could any one at first, without preliminary initiation, help confusing a bouquet invented by a sincere artist with a pot pourri made by some manufacturer to be sold in groceries and bazaars.

In this art, the branch devoted to achieving certain effects by artificial methods particularly delighted him.

Perfumes, in fact, rarely come from the flowers whose names they bear. The artist who dared to borrow nature's elements would only produce a bastard work which would have neither authenticity nor style, inasmuch as the essence obtained by the distillation of flowers would bear but a distant and vulgar relation to the odor of the living flower, wafting its fragrance into the air.

Thus, with the exception of the inimitable jasmine which it is impossible to counterfeit, all flowers are perfectly represented by the blend of aromatic spirits, stealing the very personality of the model, and to it adding that nuance the more, that heady scent, that rare touch which entitled a thing to be called a work of art.

To resume, in the science of perfumery, the artist develops the natural odor of the flowers, working over his subject like a jeweler refining the lustre of a gem and making it precious.

Little by little, the arcana of this art, most neglected of all, was revealed to Des Esseintes who could now read this language, as diversified and insinuating as that of literature, this style with its unexpected concision under its vague flowing appearance.

To achieve this end he had first been compelled to master the grammar and understand the syntax of odors, learning the secret of the rules that regulate them, and, once familiarized with the dialect, he compared the works of the masters, of the Atkinsons and Lubins, the Chardins and Violets, the Legrands and Piesses; then he separated the construction of their phrases, weighed the value of their words and the arrangement of their periods.

Later on, in this idiom of fluids, experience was able to support theories too often incomplete and banal.

Classic perfumery, in fact, was scarcely diversified, almost colorless and uniformly issuing from the mold cast by the ancient chemists. It was in its dotage, confined to its old alambics, when the romantic period was born and had modified the old style, rejuvenating it, making it more supple and malleable.

Step by step, its history followed that of our language. The perfumed Louis XIII style, composed of elements highly prized at that time, of iris powder, musk, chive and myrtle water already designated under the name of "water of the angels," was hardly sufficient to express the cavalier graces, the rather crude tones of the period which certain sonnets of Saint-Amand have preserved for us. Later, with myrrh and olibanum, the mystic odors, austere and powerful, the pompous gesture of the great period, the redundant artifices of oratorical art, the full, sustained harmonious style of Bossuet and the masters of the pulpit were almost possible. Still later, the sophisticated, rather bored graces of French society under Louis XV, more easily found their interpretation in the almond which in a manner summed up this epoch; then, after the ennui and jadedness of the first empire, which misused Eau de Cologne and rosemary, perfumery rushed, in the wake of Victor Hugo and Gautier, towards the Levant. It created oriental combinations, vivid Eastern nosegays, discovered new intonations, antitheses which until then had been unattempted, selected and made use of antique nuances which it complicated, refined and assorted. It resolutely rejected that voluntary decrepitude to which it had been reduced by the Malesherbes, the Boileaus, the Andrieuxes and the Baour-Lormians, wretched distillers of their own poems.

But this language had not remained stationery since the period of 1830. It had continued to evolve and, patterning itself on the progress of the century, had advanced parallel with the other arts. It, too, had yielded to the desires of amateurs and artists, receiving its inspiration from the Chinese and Japanese, conceiving fragrant albums, imitating the *Takeoka* bouquets of flowers, obtaining the odor of *Rondeletia* from the blend of lavender and clove; the peculiar aroma of Chinese ink from the marriage of patchouli and

camphor; the emanation of Japanese *Hovenia* by compounds of citron, clove and neroli.

Des Esseintes studied and analyzed the essences of these fluids, experimenting to corroborate their texts. He took pleasure in playing the role of a psychologist for his personal satisfaction, in taking apart and re-assembling the machinery of a work, in separating the pieces forming the structure of a compound exhalation, and his sense of smell had thereby attained a sureness that was all but perfect.

Just as a wine merchant has only to smell a drop of wine to recognize the grape, as a hop dealer determines the exact value of hops by sniffing a bag, as a Chinese trader can immediately tell the origin of the teas he smells, knowing in what farms of what mountains, in what Buddhistic convents it was cultivated, the very time when its leaves were gathered, the state and the degree of torrefaction, the effect upon it of its proximity to the plum-tree and other flowers, to all those perfumes which change its essence, adding to it an unexpected touch and introducing into its dryish flavor a hint of distant fresh flowers; just so could Des Esseintes, by inhaling a dash of perfume, instantly explain its mixture and the psychology of its blend, and could almost give the name of the artist who had composed and given it the personal mark of his individual style.

Naturally he had a collection of all the products used by perfumers. He even had the real Mecca balm, that rare balm cultivated only in certain parts of Arabia Petraea and under the monopoly of the ruler.

Now, seated in his dressing room in front of his table, he thought of creating a new bouquet; and he was overcome by that moment of wavering confidence familiar to writers when, after months of inaction, they prepare for a new work.

Like Balzac who was wont to scribble on many sheets of paper so as to put himself in a mood for work, Des Esseintes felt the necessity of steadying his hand by several initial and unimportant experiments. Desiring to create heliotrope, he took down bottles of vanilla and almond, then changed his idea and decided to experiment with sweet peas.

He groped for a long time, unable to effect the proper combinations, for orange is dominant in the fragrance of this flower. He attempted several combinations and ended in achieving the exact blend by joining tuberose and rose to orange, the whole united by a drop of vanilla.

His hesitation disappeared. He felt alert and ready for work; now he made some tea by blending cassie with iris, then, sure of his technique, he decided to proceed with a fulminating phrase whose thunderous roar would annihilate the insidious odor of almond still hovering over his room.

He worked with amber and with Tonkin musk, marvelously powerful; with patchouli, the most poignant of vegetable perfumes whose flower, in its habitat, wafts an odor of mildew. Try what he would, the eighteenth century

obsessed him; the panier robes and furbelows appeared before his eyes; memories of Boucher's *Venus* haunted him; recollections of Themidor's romance, of the exquisite Rosette pursued him. Furious, he rose and to rid himself of the obsession, with all his strength he inhaled that pure essence of spikenard, so dear to Orientals and so repulsive to Europeans because of its pronounced odor of valerian. He was stunned by the violence of the shock. As though pounded by hammer strokes, the filigranes of the delicate odor disappeared; he profited by the period of respite to escape the dead centuries, the antiquated fumes, and to enter, as he formerly had done, less limited or more recent works.

He had of old loved to lull himself with perfumes. He used effects analogous to those of the poets, and employed the admirable order of certain pieces of Baudelaire, such as *Irreparable* and *le Balcon*, where the last of the five lines composing the strophe is the echo of the first verse and returns, like a refrain, to steep the soul in infinite depths of melancholy and languor.

He strayed into reveries evoked by those aromatic stanzas, suddenly brought to his point of departure, to the motive of his meditation, by the return of the initial theme, reappearing, at stated intervals, in the fragrant orchestration of the poem.

He actually wished to saunter through an astonishing, diversified landscape, and he began with a sonorous, ample phrase that suddenly opened a long vista of fields for him.

With his vaporizers, he injected an essence formed of ambrosia, lavender and sweet peas into this room; this formed an essence which, when distilled by an artist, deserves the name by which it is known: "extract of wild grass"; into this he introduced an exact blend of tuberose, orange flower and almond, and forthwith artificial lilacs sprang into being, while the linden-trees rustled, their thin emanations, imitated by extract of London tilia, drooping earthward.

Into this *decor*, arranged with a few broad lines, receding as far as the eye could reach, under his closed lids, he introduced a light rain of human and half feline essences, possessing the aroma of petticoats, breathing of the powdered, painted woman, the stephanotis, ayapana, opopanax, champaka, sarcanthus and cypress wine, to which he added a dash of syringa, in order to give to the artificial life of paints which they exhaled, a suggestion of natural dewy laughter and pleasures enjoyed in the open air.

Then, through a ventilator, he permitted these fragrant waves to escape, only preserving the field which he renewed, compelling it to return in his strophes like a ritornello.

The women had gradually disappeared. Now the plain had grown solitary. Suddenly, on the enchanted horizon, factories appeared whose tall chimneys flared like bowls of punch.

The odor of factories and of chemical products now passed with the breeze which was simulated by means of fans; nature exhaled its sweet effluvia amid this putrescence.

Des Esseintes warmed a pellet of storax, and a singular odor, at once repugnant and exquisite, pervaded the room. It partook of the delicious fragrance of jonquil and of the stench of gutta serena and coal oil. He disinfected his hands, inserted his resin in a hermetically sealed box, and the factories disappeared.

Then, among the revived vapors of the lindens and meadow grass, he threw several drops of new mown hay, and, amid this magic site for the moment despoiled of its lilacs, sheaves of hay were piled up, introducing a new season and scattering their fine effluence into these summer odors.

At last, when he had sufficiently enjoyed this sight, he suddenly scattered the exotic perfumes, emptied his vaporizers, threw in his concentrated spirits, poured his balms, and, in the exasperated and stifling heat of the room there rose a crazy sublimated nature, a paradoxical nature which was neither genuine nor charming, reuniting the tropical spices and the peppery breath of Chinese sandal wood and Jamaica hediosmia with the French odors of jasmine, hawthorn and verbena. Regardless of seasons and climates he forced trees of diverse essences into life, and flowers with conflicting fragrances and colors. By the clash of these tones he created a general, nondescript, unexpected, strange perfume in which reappeared, like an obstinate refrain, the decorative phrase of the beginning, the odor of the meadows fanned by the lilacs and lindens.

Suddenly a poignant pain seized him; he felt as though wimbles were drilling into his temples. Opening his eyes he found himself in his dressing room, seated in front of his table. Stupefied, he painfully walked across the room to the window which he half opened. A puff of wind dispelled the stifling atmosphere which was enveloping him. To exercise his limbs, he walked up and down gazing at the ceiling where crabs and sea-wrack stood out in relief against a background as light in color as the sands of the seashore. A similar *decor* covered the plinths and bordered the partitions which were covered with Japanese sea-green crepe, slightly wrinkled, imitating a river rippled by the wind. In this light current swam a rose petal, around which circled a school of tiny fish painted with two strokes of the brush.

But his eyelids remained heavy. He ceased to pace about the short space between the baptistery and the bath; he leaned against the window. His dizziness ended. He carefully stopped up the vials, and used the occasion to arrange his cosmetics. Since his arrival at Fontenay he had not touched them; and now was quite astonished to behold once more this collection formerly visited by so many women.

The flasks and jars were lying heaped up against each other. Here, a porcelain box contained a marvelous white cream which, when applied on

the cheeks, turns to a tender rose color, under the action of the air--to such a true flesh-color that it procures the very illusion of a skin touched with blood; there, lacquer objects incrustated with mother of pearl enclosed Japanese gold and Athenian green, the color of the cantharis wing, gold and green which change to deep purple when wetted; there were jars filled with filbert paste, the serkis of the harem, emulsions of lilies, lotions of strawberry water and elders for the complexion, and tiny bottles filled with solutions of Chinese ink and rose water for the eyes. There were tweezers, scissors, rouge and powder-puffs, files and beauty patches.

He handled this collection, formerly bought to please a mistress who swooned under the influence of certain aromatics and balms,--a nervous, unbalanced woman who loved to steep the nipples of her breasts in perfumes, but who never really experienced a delicious and overwhelming ecstasy save when her head was scraped with a comb or when she could inhale, amid caresses, the odor of perspiration, or the plaster of unfinished houses on rainy days, or of dust splashed by huge drops of rain during summer storms.

He mused over these memories, and one afternoon spent at Pantin through idleness and curiosity, in company with this woman at the home of one of her sisters, returned to him, stirring in him a forgotten world of old ideas and perfumes; while the two women prattled and displayed their gowns, he had drawn near the window and had seen, through the dusty panes, the muddy street sprawling before him, and had heard the repeated sounds of galoches over the puddles of the pavement.

This scene, already far removed, came to him suddenly, strangely and vividly. Pantin was there before him, animated and throbbing in this greenish and dull mirror into which his unseeing eyes plunged. A hallucination transported him far from Fontenay. Beside reflecting the street, the mirror brought back thoughts it had once been instrumental in evoking, and plunged in revery, he repeated to himself this ingenious, sad and comforting composition he had formerly written upon returning to Paris:

"Yes, the season of downpours is come. Now behold water-spouts vomiting as they rush over the pavements, and rubbish marinates in puddles that fill the holes scooped out of the macadam.

"Under a lowering sky, in the damp air, the walls of houses have black perspiration and their air-holes are fetid; the loathsomeness of existence increases and melancholy overwhelms one; the seeds of vileness which each person harbors in his soul, sprout. The craving for vile debaucheries seizes austere people and base desires grow rampant in the brains of respectable men.

"And yet I warm myself, here before a cheerful fire. From a basket of blossoming flowers comes the aroma of balsamic benzoin, geranium and the whorl-flowered bent-grass which permeates the room. In the very month of November, at Pantin, in the rue de Paris, springtime persists. Here in my

solitude I laugh at the fears of families which, to shun the approaching cold weather, escape on every steamer to Cannes and to other winter resorts.

"Inclement nature does nothing to contribute to this extraordinary phenomenon. It must be said that his artificial season at Pantin is the result of man's ingenuity.

"In fact, these flowers are made of taffeta and are mounted on wire. The springtime odor filters through the window joints, exhaled from the neighboring factories, from the perfumeries of Pinaud and Saint James.

"For the workmen exhausted by the hard labors of the plants, for the young employes who too often are fathers, the illusion of a little healthy air is possible, thanks to these manufacturers.

"So, from this fabulous subterfuge of a country can an intelligent cure arise. The consumptive men about town who are sent to the South die, their end due to the change in their habits and to the nostalgia for the Parisian excesses which destroyed them. Here, under an artificial climate, libertine memories will reappear, the languishing feminine emanations evaporated by the factories. Instead of the deadly ennui of provincial life, the doctor can thus platonically substitute for his patient the atmosphere of the Parisian women and of boudoirs. Most often, all that is necessary to effect the cure is for the subject to have a somewhat fertile imagination.

"Since, nowadays, nothing genuine exists, since the wine one drinks and the liberty one boldly proclaims are laughable and a sham, since it really needs a healthy dose of good will to believe that the governing classes are respectable and that the lower classes are worthy of being assisted or pitied, it seems to me," concluded Des Esseintes, "to be neither ridiculous nor senseless, to ask of my fellow men a quantity of illusion barely equivalent to what they spend daily in idiotic ends, so as to be able to convince themselves that the town of Pantin is an artificial Nice or a Menton.

"But all this does not prevent me from seeing," he said, forced by weakness from his meditations, "that I must be careful to mistrust these delicious and abominable practices which may ruin my constitution." He sighed. "Well, well, more pleasures to moderate, more precautions to be taken."

And he passed into his study, hoping the more easily to escape the spell of these perfumes.

He opened the window wide, glad to be able to breathe the air. But it suddenly seemed to him that the breeze brought in a vague tide of bergamot with which jasmine and rose water were blent. Agitated, he asked himself whether he was not really under the yoke of one of those possessions exercised in the Middle Ages. The odor changed and was transformed, but it persisted. A faint scent of tincture of tolu, of balm of Peru and of saffron, united by several drams of amber and musk, now issued from the sleeping village and suddenly, the metamorphosis was effected, those scattered



elements were blent, and once more the frangipane spread from the valley of Fontenay as far as the fort, assailing his exhausted nostrils, once more shattering his helpless nerves and throwing him into such a prostration that he fell unconscious on the window sill.