

Despair In Love

Honore de Balzac

At the time when King Charles the Eighth took it into his head to decorate the castle of Amboise, they came with him certain workmen, master sculptors, good painters, and masons, or architects, who ornamented the galleries with splendid works, which, through neglect, have since been much spoiled.

At that time the court was staying in this beautiful locality, and, as everyone knows, the king took great pleasure in watching his people work out their ideas. Among these foreign gentlemen was an Italian, named Angelo Cappara, a most worthy young man, and, in spite of his age, a better sculptor and engraver than any of them; and it astonished many to see one in the April of his life so clever. Indeed, there had scarcely sprouted upon his visage the hair which imprints upon a man virile majesty. To this Angelo the ladies took a great fancy because he was charming as a dream, and as melancholy as a dove left solitary in its nest by the death of its mate. And this was the reason thereof: this sculptor knew the curse of poverty, which mars and troubles all the actions of life; he lived miserably, eating little, ashamed of his pennilessness, and made use of his talents only through great despair, wishing by any means to win that idle life which is the best all for those whose minds are occupied. The Florentine, out of bravado, came to the court gallantly attired, and from the timidity of youth and misfortune dared not ask his money from the king, who, seeing him thus dressed, believed him well with everything. The courtiers and the ladies used all to admire his beautiful works, and also their author; but of money he got none. All, and the ladies above all, finding him rich by nature, esteemed him well off with his youth, his long black hair, and bright eyes, and did not give a thought to lucre, while thinking of these things and the rest. Indeed they were quite right, since these advantages gave to many a rascal of the court, lands, money and all. In spite of his youthful appearance, Master Angelo was twenty years of age, and no fool, had a large heart, a head full of poetry; and more than that, was a man of lofty imaginings. But although he had little confidence in himself, like all poor and unfortunate people, he was astonished at the success of the ignorant. He fancied that he was ill-fashioned, either in body or mind, and kept his thoughts to himself. I am wrong, for he told them in the clear starlight nights to the shadows, to God, to the devil, and everything about him. At such times he would lament his fate in having a heart so warm, that doubtless the ladies avoided him as they would a red-hot iron; then he would say to himself how he would worship a beautiful mistress, how all his life long he would honour her, and with what fidelity he would attach himself to her, with what affection serve her, how studiously obey her commands, with what sports he would dispel the light clouds of her melancholy sadness on the days when the skies should be overcast. Fashioning himself one out of his imagination, he would throw himself at her feet, kiss, fondle, caress, bite, and clasp her with as much reality as a prisoner scampers over the grass when he sees the green fields through the bars of his cell. Thus he would appeal to her mercy; overcome with his feelings, would stop her breath with his embraces, would become daring in spite of his respect, and passionately bite the clothes of his bed, seeking this celestial lady, full of courage when by himself, but abashed on the morrow if he passed one by. Nevertheless, inflamed by these amorous advances, he would hammer way anew at his marble figures, would carve beautiful breasts, to bring the water into one's mouth at the sight of those sweet fruits of love, without counting the other things that he raised, carved, and caressed with the

chisels, smoothed down with his file, and fashioned in a manner that would make their use intelligible to the mind of a greenhorn, and stain his verdure in a single day. The ladies would criticise these beauties, and all of them were smitten with the youthful Cappara. And the youthful Cappara would eye them up and down, swearing that the day one of them gave him her little finger to kiss, he would have his desire.

Among these high-born ladies there came one day one by herself to the young Florentine, asking him why he was so shy, and if none of the court ladies could make him sociable. Then she graciously invited him to come to her house that evening.

Master Angelo perfumes himself, purchases a velvet mantle with a double fringe of satin, borrows from a friend a cloak with wide sleeves, a slashed doublet, and silken hose, arrives at the house, and ascends the stairs with hasty feet, hope beaming from his eyes, knowing not what to do with his heart, which leaped and bounded like a goat; and, to sum up, so much over head and ears in love, that the perspiration trickled down his back.

You may be sure the lady was a beautiful, and Master Cappara was the more aware of it, since in his profession he had studied the mouldings of the arms, the lines of the body, the secret surroundings of the sex, and other mysteries. Now this lady satisfied the especial rules of art; and besides being fair and slender, she had a voice to disturb life in its source, to stir fire of a heart, brain, and everything; in short, she put into one's imagination delicious images of love without thinking of it, which is the characteristic of these cursed women.

The sculptor found her seated by the fire in a high chair, and the lady immediately commenced to converse at her ease, although Angelo could find no other replies than "Yes" and "No," could get no other words from his throat nor idea in his brain, and would have beaten his head against the fireplace but for the happiness of gazing at and listening to his lovely mistress, who was playing there like a young fly in the sunshine. Because, which this mute admiration, both remained until the middle of the night, wandering slowly down the flowery path of love, the good sculptor went away radiant with happiness. On the road, he concluded in his own mind, that if a noble lady kept him rather close to her skirts during four hours of the night, it would not matter a straw if she kept him there the remainder. Drawing from these premises certain corollaries, he resolved to ask her favours as a simple woman. Then he determined to kill everybody--the husband, the wife, or himself--rather than lose the distaff whereon to spin one hour of joy. Indeed, he was so mad with love, that he believed life to be but a small stake in the game of love, since one single day of it was worth a thousand lives.

The Florentine chiselled away at his statues, thinking of his evening, and thus spoiled many a nose thinking of something else. Noticing this, he left his work, perfumed himself, and went to listen to the sweet words of his lady, with the hope of turning them into deeds; but when he was in the presence of his sovereign, her feminine majesty made itself felt, and poor Cappara, such a lion in street, looked sheepish when gazing at his victim. This notwithstanding, towards the hour when desire becomes heated, he was almost in the lady's lap and held her tightly clasped. He had obtained a kiss, had taken it, much to his delight; for, when they give it, the ladies retain the right of refusal, but when they left it to be taken, the lover may take a thousand. This is the reason why all of them are accustomed to let it be taken. The Florentine has stolen a great number, and things were going on admirably, when the lady, who had been thrifty with her favours, cried, "My husband!"

And, in fact, my lord had just returned from playing tennis, and the sculptor had to leave the place, but not without receiving a warm glance from the lady interrupted in her pleasure. This was all his substance, pittance and enjoyment during a whole month, since on the brink of his joy always came the said husband, and he always arrived wisely between a point-blank refusal and those little sweet caresses with which women always season their refusals--little things which reanimate love and render it all the stronger. And when the sculptor, out of patience, commenced, immediately upon his arrival, the skirmish of the skirt, in order that victory might arrive before the husband, to whom, no doubt, these disturbances were not without profit, his fine lady, seeing desire written in the eyes of her sculptor, commenced endless quarrels and altercations; at first she pretended to be jealous in order to rail against love; then appeased the anger of the little one with the moisture of a kiss, then kept the conversation to herself, and kept on saying that her lover should be good, obedient to her will, otherwise she would not yield to him her life and soul; that a desire was a small thing to offer a mistress; that she was more courageous, because loving more she sacrificed more, and to his propositions she would exclaim, "Silence, sir!" with the air of a queen, and at times she would put on an angry look, to reply to the reproachs of Cappara: "If you are not as I wish you to be, I will no longer love you."

The poor Italian saw, when it was too late, that this was not a noble love, one of those which does not mete out joy as a miser his crowns; and that this lady took delight in letting him jump about outside the hedge and be master of everything, provided he touched not the garden of love. At this business Cappara became a savage enough to kill anyone, and took with him trusty companions, his friends, to whom he gave the task of attacking the husband while walking home to bed after his game of tennis with the king. He came to his lady at the accustomed hour when the sweet sports of love were in full swing, which sports were long, lasting kisses, hair twisted and untwisted, hand bitten with passion, ears as well; indeed, the whole business, with the exception of that especial thing which good authors rightly find abominable. The Florentine exclaims between two hearty kisses--

"Sweet one, do you love me more than anything?"

"Yes," said she, because words never cost anything.

"Well then," replied the lover, "be mine in deed as in word."

"But," said she, "my husband will be here directly."

"Is that the only reason?" said he.

"Yes."

"I have friends who will cross him, and will not let him go unless I show a torch at this window. If he complain to the king, my friends will say, they thought they were playing a joke on one of their own set."

"Ah, my dear," said she, "let me see if everyone in the house is gone to bed."

She rose, and held the light to the window. Seeing which Cappara blew out the candle,

seized his sword, and placing himself in front of the woman, whose scorn and evil mind he recognised.

"I will not kill you, madame," said he, "but I will mark your face in such a manner you will never again coquette with young lovers whose lives you waste. You have deceived me shamefully, and are not a respectable woman. You must know that a kiss will never sustain life in a true lover, and that a kissed mouth needs the rest. You have made my life forever dull and wretched; now I will make you remember forever my death, which you have caused. You shall never again behold yourself in a glass without seeing there my face also." Then he raised his arm, and held the sword ready to cut off a good slice of the fresh fair cheek, where still all the traces of his kiss remained. And the lady exclaimed, "You wretch!"

"Hold your tongue," said he; "you told me that you loved me better than anything. Now you say otherwise; each evening have you raised me a little nearer to heaven; with one blow you cast me into hell, and you think that your petticoat can save you from a lover's wrath--No!"

"Ah, my Angelo! I am thine," said she, marvelling at this man glaring with rage.

But he, stepping three paces back, replied, "Ah, woman of the court and wicked heart, thou lovest, then, thy face better than thy lover."

She turned pale, and humbly held up her face, for she understood that at this moment her past perfidy wronged her present love. With a single blow Angelo slashed her face, then left her house, and quitted the country. The husband not having been stopped by reason of that light which was seen by the Florentines, found his wife minus her left cheek. But she spoke not a word in spite of her agony; she loved her Cappara more than life itself. Nevertheless, the husband wished to know whence preceded this wound. No one having been there except the Florentine, he complained to the king, who had his workman hastily pursued, and ordered him to be hanged at Blois. On the day of execution a noble lady was seized with a desire to save this courageous man, whom she believed to be a lover of the right sort. She begged the king to give him to her, which he did willingly. But Cappara declaring that he belonged entirely to his lady, the memory of whom he could not banish entirely, entered the Church, became a cardinal and a great savant, and used to say in his old age that he had existed upon the remembrance of the joys tasted in those poor hours of anguish; in which he was, at the same time, both very well and very badly treated by his lady. There are authors saying afterwards he succeeded better with his old sweetheart, whose cheek healed; but I cannot believe this, because he was a man of heart, who had a high opinion of the holy joys of love.

This teaches us nothing worth knowing, unless it be that there are unlucky meetings in life, since this tale is in every way true. If in other places the author has overshot the truth, this one will gain for him the indulgence of the conclave or lovers.