Italian customs and character

Corinne: or Italy

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OSWALD'S indecisive nature, enhanced by his misfortunes, inclined him to be afraid of all irrevocable decisions. In his uncertainty he had not even dared to ask Corinne the secret of her name and fate, and yet his love for her grew stronger every day. He could not look at her without being moved; in company he could hardly bear to leave her side, even for a moment; she did not say a word that did not affect him; she had not a moment of sorrow or joy which was not mirrored in his own expression. But while admiring and loving Corinne, he recalled how little such a woman was in keeping with the English way of life, how different she was from his father's idea of a suitable wife for him, and what he said to Corinne was affected by the anxiety and constraint these thoughts aroused in him.

Corinne was only too well aware of this, but it would have cost her so much to break with Lord Nelvil that she herself avoided any decisive explanation between them, and as she was rather improvident by nature she was happy with the present such as it was, although it was impossible for her to know what the outcome would be.

She had cut herself off completely from society to devote herself to her feeling for Oswald. But finally, hurt by his silence about their future, she decided to accept an invitation to a ball where her company was greatly desired. Nothing matters less in Rome than people's coming and going in society as it suits them; it is the country where one is the least concerned with what elsewhere is called gossip. Everyone does what he likes without anyone asking questions, unless some obstacle to love or ambition is found in others. The Romans are no more concerned with the behaviour of their compatriots than with that of the visitors who come and go in their town, a meeting place for Europeans. When Lord Nelvil learned that Corinne was going to the ball, he was a little annoyed. For some time he thought he could see in her a melancholy temperament in sympathy with his own. Suddenly she seemed to him keenly interested in dancing, a talent she
excelled in, and her imagination seemed stimulated by the prospect of a party. Corinne was not a frivolous person, but each day she felt more dominated by her love for Oswald and she wanted to try and weaken its power. She knew from experience that reflection and sacrifices have less sway over passionate natures than diversions, and she thought that the sensible thing to do was not to conquer oneself according to the rules but as best one can.

In reply to Lord Nelvil’s reproaches for her decision, she said, 'But I must know if there is anything other than you in the world which might fill my life, if what I used to enjoy cannot still give me pleasure and if the feeling you arouse in me is to absorb every other interest and every other thought.' 'Do you want to stop loving me then?' replied Oswald. 'No,' answered Corinne. 'But only in domestic life can it be pleasant to feel dominated in this way by a single affection. Yet I need my talents, my wit, and my imagination to sustain the brilliant life I have adopted, and it does me harm, much harm, to love as I love you.' 'So you would not sacrifice for me this homage, this fame . . .' said Oswald. 'What does it matter to you,' said Corinne, 'to know if I would sacrifice them for you? Since we are not destined for each other, we must not destroy for ever the kind of happiness I must content myself with.' Lord Nelvil made no reply, because, to express his feelings, he also had to say what plan these feelings inspired in him, and his heart did not yet know. So, with a sigh he said nothing and followed Corinne to the ball even though he found it very painful to go.

It was the first time since his great misfortune that he had come to a large gathering and the din of a party aroused such a feeling of sadness in him that he stayed a long time in an ante-room, his head in his hands, and not even trying to see Corinne dance. He listened to the dance music which, like all music, makes one dream though it seems intended only for gladness. Count d'Erfeuil arrived, quite delighted with a ball, with a party, with a large company which at last reminded him a little of France. 'I did what I could to find some interest in those ruins so much talked about in Rome,' he said to Lord Nelvil. 'I see nothing beautiful in all that. It is just a prejudice to admire those thorn-covered ruins. I shall give my opinion when I go back to Paris, for it is time to put an end to Italy's prestige. There is not a monument intact in Europe today which is not worth more than those stumps of columns, than those bas-reliefs blackened by time that can
be appreciated only with a lot of scholarly knowledge. A pleasure that has to be gained by so much study does not seem to me very great in itself, for to be delighted by the sights of Paris no one needs to grow pale over books.' Lord Nelvil made no answer. Count d'Erfeuil again asked him what impression Rome had made on him. 'The middle of a ball', said Oswald, 'is not the right time to talk seriously, and you know I cannot talk in any other way.' 'All right,' replied Count d'Erfeuil. 'I am more cheerful than you, I agree, but who knows if I am not wiser? Believe me, there is a lot of philosophy in my apparent frivolity; that's how you should take life.' 'Perhaps you are right,' replied Oswald. 'But it is because of your temperament, and not because you have thought about the matter, that you are like that, and that is why your style of life suits only you.'

Count d'Erfeuil heard Corinne's name mentioned in the ballroom, so he went in to find out what it was all about. Lord Nelvil went as far as the door and saw Prince d'Amain, a very handsome Neapolitan, ask Corinne to be his partner in the Tarantella, a graceful and original dance from Naples. Corinne's friends also asked her to do so. She agreed without being asked twice; that rather surprised Count d'Erfeuil, accustomed as he was to the refusals which usually precede acceptance. But in Italy that kind of charming behaviour is unknown and people simply think they please society more by eagerly doing what is asked. Corinne would have invented this natural behaviour if it had not already been the custom. Her ball gown was light and elegant; her hair was gathered into a silken net in the Italian style and her eyes expressed a keen pleasure which made her more desirable than ever. Stirred and struggling against himself, Oswald was annoyed at being fascinated by charms he should be complaining of, since, far from trying to please him, it was almost to escape from his influence that Corinne was making herself so captivating. But who can resist the attractions of gracefulness? Even if it were disdainful, it would still be all powerful, and that was certainly not Corinne's nature. She caught sight of Lord Nelvil and blushed; as she looked at him, there was an entrancing sweetness in her eyes.

As he danced, Prince d'Amalfi accompanied himself with castanets. Before starting, Corinne gracefully waved to the assembled company with her two hands and, turning lightly round, took the tambourine Prince d'Amalfi was holding out to her. Shaking her tambourine in the air she began to dance, and in all her movements there was a graceful
litheness, a modesty mingled with sensual delight, giving some idea of the power exercised by the temple dancing girls over the Indian imagination. They are, as it were, poets in their dancing, expressing so many different feelings by their ritual steps and the charming tableaux they present to the eye. Corinne knew so well all the poses depicted by the ancient painters and sculptors that, with a slight movement of the arms, placing her tambourine now above her head, now in front of her with one hand while the other ran along the bells with incredible skill she brought to mind the dancing girls of Herculaneum* and aroused, one after another, a host of new ideas for drawing and painting.  

It was not at all like French dancing, so remarkable for its elegant and difficult steps; it was a talent much more closely linked to imagination and feeling. The character of the music is expressed in turn by the precision and gentleness of the movements. As she danced, Corinne made the spectators experience her own feelings, as if she had been improvising, or playing the lyre, or drawing portraits. Everything was language for her; as they looked at her, the musicians made greater efforts to make their art fully appreciated, and at the same time an indefinable passionate joy, and imaginative sensitivity, stimulated all the spectators of this magical dance, transporting them into an ideal existence which was out of this world. 

There is a moment in this Neapolitan dance when the woman kneels, while the man dances around her not as a master but as a conqueror. How charming and dignified Corinne was at that moment! How queenly she was as she knelt! And when she got up, playing her instrument, her cymbal high in the air, she appeared animated by an enthusiasm for life, youth, and beauty which seemed to give an assurance that to be happy she needed no one else. Alas, that was not the case, but Oswald feared it was so and sighed as he admired Corinne, as if every one of her successes had separated him from her. At the end of the dance, it is the man's turn to fall on his knees and it is the woman who dances around him. At that moment, Corinne surpassed herself, if that were possible. Her steps were so light, as she traced the same circle two or three times, that her feet, clad in light buskins, flew, swift as lightning, over the floor, and when, shaking her tambourine, she raised one of her hands and with the other signed to Prince d'Amalfi to get up, all the men were tempted to kneel like him, all except Lord Nelvil, who moved a few steps backwards, and Count d'Erfeuil, who
walked a few steps forwards to congratulate Corinne. As for the Italians who were there, they were not thinking of drawing attention to themselves by their enthusiasm; they abandoned themselves to it because they felt it. They are not sufficiently used to society and the vanity it arouses to be concerned about the effect they produce; they never let themselves be distracted from their pleasure by vanity, nor from their goal by applause.

Corinne was delighted with her success and, thanking everyone with unaffected charm, she good-naturedly allowed her pleasure to show. But what concerned her most of all was her desire to make her way through the crowd to reach the door Oswald was leaning against. She reached it at last and paused for a moment, expecting him to say a word. 'Corinne,' he said, trying to conceal his emotion, his fascination, and his suffering. 'Corinne, what great homage, what great success! But amongst all these admirers and enthusiasts, is there a brave, reliable friend? Is there a lifelong protector? And should the empty uproar of applause be enough for a heart like yours?'

CHAPTER II

THE crowd prevented Corinne from replying to Lord Nelvil. People were going for supper and every cavaliere servente* hastened to sit down beside his lady. A lady visitor came in and could not find a seat; no one, except Lord Nelvil and Count d'Erfeuil, offered her his own. It was not out of discourtesy, nor selfishness, that no Roman had got up. But the great Roman nobleman's idea of honour and duty is not to leave his lady's side even for a moment. Some who could not find seats stood behind their ladies, ready to attend to their slightest needs. The ladies spoke only to their escorts; gentlemen visitors wandered in vain around the circle; no one had anything to say to them. Women in Italy do not know what coquetry is, what in love is only satisfied pride. They want to please only the man they love; there is no seduction of the mind before that of the heart and eyes; the most sudden beginnings are sometimes followed by sincere devotion and even by a long faithful attachment. In Italy, infidelity is more severely blamed in a man than in a woman. Three or four men with different functions follow the same lady, who, sometimes without even taking the trouble to mention their names to her host, takes them with her; one is the favourite, another is the man who aspires to be so, the third is
called the sufferer (*il patito*). He is completely scorned; but he is allowed to play the part of ardent admirer; and all these rivals live peacefully together. Only the lower classes have still retained the custom of using daggers. In this country, there is a strange mixture of simplicity and corruption, of deceit and truth, of good nature and vengeance, of weakness and strength, which can be explained by careful observation. The fact that nothing is done out of vanity explains the good qualities, and the bad ones develop because a great deal is done out of self-interest, be it concerned with love, ambition, or wealth.

Distinctions of rank are not usually deemed important in Italy. This is not because of any philosophical considerations, but because Italians' easygoing natures and their informality make them less liable to aristocratic prejudices; since society does not set itself up as a judge of anything, it allows everything.

After supper, everyone began to gamble. Some women played games of chance, others very silently played whist, and not a word was uttered in the room which, but a short while ago, had been so noisy. Southern peoples often go from great excitement to complete repose. Idleness together with the most tireless activity is yet another of the contrasts in their characters. In everything they are people you must be wary of judging at first sight, for the most contradictory virtues and vices are to be found in them. If at one moment you see them acting prudently, it is possible that in another they may turn out to be the most daring of men. If they are idle, it is perhaps because they are resting after doing something or are preparing to act again. In a word, they lose no spiritual strength in society, but gather it all up within them for crucial situations.

At the Roman gathering Oswald and Corinne went to, some men were losing enormous sums gambling, without it being at all noticeable in their faces; but these very same men would have had the liveliest expressions and the most animated gestures if they had been relating some unimportant facts. But when passions reach a certain degree of violence, they are afraid of witnesses and almost always are veiled in silence and immobility.

Lord Nelvil was still bitterly resentful of what he had seen at the ball. He thought that the Italians and their lively way of expressing enthusiasm had, momentarily at least, turned Corinne's interest away from him. This caused him great unhappiness, but his pride counselled him to hide it or to express it only by showing scorn for the
voices that were flattering his brilliant friend. He was invited to join
in the gambling but he refused. So did Corinne, and she beckoned
to him to come and sit beside her. Oswald was afraid of compromis-
ing Corinne by spending the evening alone with her in full view of
the whole company. 'Do not worry,' she said. 'No one will bother
about us. It is normal here to do only what one wants to do in com-
pany; there is no settled convention, no special consideration re-
quired. Courtesy and goodwill suffice and no one expects people to
inconvenience themselves for each other. Liberty such as you under-
stand it in England certainly does not exist in this country, but
people enjoy complete social independence.' 'That is to say,' replied
Oswald, 'that people have no respect for morals.' 'At least,' interrupted
Corinne, 'there is no hypocrisy. M. de La Rochefoucauld* said: The
least failing of a woman of loose morals is to have loose morals. Indeed,
whatever their failings, Italian women do not resort to lies, and if mar-
riage is not sufficiently respected, it is with the agreement of both hus-
band and wife.'

'It is not sincerity but indifference to public opinion that is the
reason for this kind of frankness,' replied Oswald. 'When I came here
I had a letter of recommendation to a princess. I gave it to my
local servant to take to her; he said, Monsieur, this letter will be of
no use to you at the moment, for the princess is not seeing anyone, she is
INNAMORATA. And this state of being INNAMORATA was announced
like any other situation in life; moreover the publicity is not excused
by any exceptional passion, for several attachments, all equally well
known, follow each other. Women are so open about it all that they
admit their affairs with less embarrassment than our women would
have in talking about their husbands. It is easy to believe there is no
deep feeling or sensitivity in such shameless fickleness. So, in this coun-
try where people think only of love, there is not a single novel because
love develops so rapidly and publicly that it does not lend itself to
any kind of development, and to give a true picture of people's behav-
iour, you would have to start and finish on the same page. Forgive me,
Corinne,' exclaimed Lord Nelvil, noticing the distress he caused her.
'You are Italian and my knowledge of that ought to make me less out-
spoken. But one of the reasons for your incomparable grace is that it
combines all the charms characteristic of different countries. I do not
know in which country you were brought up, but you certainly have
not spent all your life in Italy; perhaps it was even in England . . .
Oh, Corinne, if that were so, how could you have left that haven of modesty and sensitivity to come here, where not only virtue but even love is so little understood? People breathe it in the atmosphere, but does it enter into the heart? The poetry in which love plays such a great part is full of charm and imagination; it is embellished by brilliant, vivid, colourful, and sensual imagery, but where will you find the melancholy, tender feeling which pervades our poetry? What could you compare to the scene of Belvidera and her husband in Otway?* to Romeo in Shakespeare? Finally, above all, to Thompson's* admirable verses in his song of spring, when he depicts in such noble and touching language happiness and love in marriage? Is there a marriage like that in Italy? And can love exist where there is no domestic happiness? Is it not this happiness which is the objective of the heart's passion, as possession is the aim of the passion of the senses? Are not all young, beautiful women alike, if qualities of heart and mind do not fix one's preference? And what do these qualities make us wish for? Marriage, that is to say, complete partnership of feelings and thoughts. Illegitimate love, when, unfortunately, it exists in our country, is still a reflection of marriage, if I may put it that way. People look in it for the intimate happiness they have not been able to enjoy at home, and infidelity itself is more moral in England than marriage in Italy.'

These harsh words wounded Corinne deeply. Getting up immediately, her eyes full of tears, she left the room and suddenly went home. Oswald was in despair at having offended Corinne, but his irritation at her success at the ball could be seen in the words that had just escaped him. He followed her home but she refused to speak to him. He returned the next day but again to no avail; her door was closed. It was not like Corinne to persist in refusing to see Lord Nevil, but she had been grievously upset by the opinion he had expressed on Italian women, and it was because of that very opinion that she made it a rule to hide, if she could, the feeling which was carrying her away.

For his part Oswald thought that Corinne was not behaving in this situation with her natural straightforwardness, and his displeasure at what had happened at the ball became even stronger; it aroused his inclination to fight against the feeling he dreaded. His principles were strict, and the mystery which surrounded the past of the woman he loved pained him greatly. He thought Corinne's ways were charming but sometimes stimulated a little too much by a dominating desire
to please. He found her speech and bearing noble and reserved, but her opinions too lenient. In a word, Oswald was a man captivated and swept away but retaining within himself an opponent who was fighting against his feelings. Such a situation often provokes bitterness. You are annoyed with yourself and with others. You suffer but have a kind of need to suffer still more, or at least to provoke a violent explanation which would bring about the complete victory of one or other of the two feelings which are rending the heart.

It was in this frame of mind that Lord Nelvil wrote to Corinne. His letter was bitter and inappropriate. He knew it, but conflicting emotions drove him to send it. His struggles made him so unhappy that, whatever the cost, he wanted anything which would put an end to them.

A rumour he did not believe, but which Count d'Erfeuil had come to relate, may have led him to use even sharper language. They were saying in Rome that Corinne would marry Prince d'Amalfi. Oswald knew quite well that she did not love the Prince and was bound to think that the ball was the sole reason for this news. But he persuaded himself that she had received Amalfi at her home on the morning of the day when he had not himself been able to gain admission. Too proud to express a feeling of jealousy, he satisfied his secret annoyance by denigrating the nation which, to his great distress, he saw Corinne preferred.

CHAPTER III

Oswald's letter to Corinne

24 January 1795

'You refuse to see me. You are offended by our conversation of the day before yesterday. Presumably you propose in future to admit to your home only your compatriots; apparently you wish to atone for the wrong you did in receiving a man from another nation. Far from repenting, however, of speaking to you sincerely about Italian women, you whom in my fantasies I wanted to think of as English, I shall dare to reiterate even more strongly that you will find neither happiness nor dignity if you wish to choose a husband from the society around you. Among the Italians I do not know one who might be worthy of you; there is not one whose connection would do you
honour, whatever title he bestowed on you. In Italy, the men are worth much less than the women, for they have the women's faults as well as their own. Will you convince me that they are capable of love, these dwellers in the South who take such care to avoid trouble and are so determined to pursue happiness? Did you not see last month, at the theatre, a man who had lost his wife the week before, and a wife he said he loved—you told me so yourself? Here people want to get rid both of the dead and of the idea of death as soon as possible. The funeral ceremonies are performed by the priests, just as the attentions of love are carried out by the cavaliers servente. The rites and customs are all prescribed in advance; grief and passionate love have no part to play. Lastly, and this above all destroys love, men inspire no kind of respect in women, who are not at all grateful to them for their submissiveness, because the men have no strength of character and no serious occupation in life. For nature and the social order to be revealed in all their beauty, man must be the protector and the woman the protected. But the protector must adore the weakness he defends and respect the impotent divinity who, like the Roman household gods, brings happiness to his home. One is inclined to think that in this country women are the sultan and men the harem.

'Men's characters have the gentleness and flexibility of women's. An Italian proverb says: *He who knows not how to feign, knows not how to live.* Is that not a woman's proverb? And indeed, in a country where there are no military careers nor free institutions, how would a man be able to acquire dignity and strength? So they turn all their minds to being clever; they play life like a game of chess, in which success is everything. All that remains to them of memories of antiquity is grandiloquent language and external splendour. But beneath this superficial grandeur you often see the most vulgar tastes and the most miserable neglect of domestic life. Is that the nation you should prefer to all others, Corinne? Is that the one whose noisy applause is so necessary to you that you feel every other fate is silent beside these resounding bravos? Who could hope to make you happy by snatching you away from this hubbub? You are a person one cannot imagine, with deep feelings but frivolous tastes; your proud soul makes you independent and yet you are enslaved by the need for distractions; you are capable of loving one man alone, but you need them all. You are a sorceress who alternately makes people anxious and reassures them, who appears sublime and suddenly disappears from the sphere where you
are alone to mingle with the crowd. Corinne, Corinne, I cannot but fear you as I love you!

'Oswald'

When Corinne read this letter she was offended by the bitter prejudice Oswald expressed against her nation. She had, however, the happiness of realizing that he was annoyed by the ball and by her refusal to receive him after the conversation at supper. This reflection slightly mitigated the painful impression his letter had made on her. She hesitated for a while, or at least she thought she hesitated, about the way she should behave towards him. Her feelings urged her to see him again, but she found it very painful that he could imagine she wanted to marry him, although their fortunes were at least equal and by revealing her name she could show it was in no way inferior to Lord Nelvil's. Nevertheless, the unusual and independent way of life she had adopted was bound to make her disinclined to marry, and she would certainly have rejected the idea if her feelings had not made her blind to all she would have to suffer in marrying an Englishman and renouncing Italy.

You can abandon pride in all affairs of the heart. But as soon as conventions or worldly interests are presented as obstacles in any way, as soon as you can suppose that the loved one would make any kind of sacrifice in being united to you, it is no longer possible to show him your feelings as far as that is concerned. Nevertheless, as she could not make up her mind to break with Oswald, Corinne wanted to convince herself that henceforth she would be able to see him and conceal the love she felt for him. So it was with this in mind that in her letter she restricted herself to replying only to his unjust accusations against the Italian nation, and to reasoning with him about this matter as if it were the only one that interested her. Perhaps the best way for a woman of superior mind to regain her self-control and dignity is to retreat into the haven of intellectual activity.

Corinne to Lord Nelvil

25 January 1795

'If your letter affected only me, my Lord, I would not try to justify myself. It is so easy to know my character that anyone who does not understand me on his own would understand me no better from the explanation I would give. Believe me, the virtuous reserve of
Englishwomen and the graceful artfulness of Frenchwomen often serve to conceal half of what is going on in their hearts. What you chose to attribute to sorcery in me is an unrestrained temperament which sometimes exhibits opposing feelings and divergent thoughts without endeavouring to make them agree with each other, for such agreement, when it exists, is nearly always artificial and most sincere characters are inconsequential. It is not of myself, however, that I want to speak, but of the unfortunate nation which you attack so cruelly. Could it be my affection for my friends which has aroused this bitter resentment in you? You know me too well to be jealous of them, and I am not proud enough to believe that such a feeling would make you unjust to the extent that you are. What you say about the Italians is what all foreigners say, what must strike them at first sight. But you must probe more deeply to judge this country, which at different periods has been so great. How comes it then that this nation was the most military of all under the Romans, the most jealous of its liberty in the medieval republics, and in the sixteenth century the most famous for literature, science, and the arts? Has it not sought distinction in every way? And if now it is no longer distinguished, why would you not blame its political situation, since in other circumstances it has shown itself to be so different from what it is now?

'I do not know if I am deceiving myself but the failings of the Italians only arouse in me a feeling of pity for their fate. In every age, foreigners have conquered and torn apart this beautiful country, the goal of their permanent ambition; and yet foreigners bitterly reproach this nation with the failings of nations that have been conquered and torn apart! Europe has received the arts and the sciences from the Italians, and now that it has turned their own gifts against them it still often disputes the last glory that is allowed to nations without military power or political liberty, the glory of the sciences and the arts.

'It is so true that governments make the character of nations that in this same Italy you can see remarkable differences in behaviour between the different states of which it is composed. The Piedmontese, who used to form a national entity on their own, are more militarily minded than the rest of Italy; the Florentines, who have known liberty or liberal-minded princes, are enlightened and gentle; the Venetians and the Genoese have shown a capacity for political thought because they have a republican aristocracy; the Milanese are more sincere, because the northern nations have for a long time been
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bringing them that quality; the Neapolitans could easily become bellicose, because for several centuries they have been united under a government which is very imperfect but is at least their own. The Roman nobility, having nothing to do either militarily or politically, is bound to be ignorant and lazy, but the minds of the churchmen, who have a career and an occupation, are much more developed than those of the nobles. As the papal government does not admit of any distinctions of birth, there is, as a result, a kind of liberality, not in ideas, but in habits, which makes Rome a very pleasant place in which to live for all who no longer have the ambition or the possibility of playing a role in the world.

'The peoples of the South are more easily moulded by their institutions than are the peoples of the North. Their indolence soon becomes resignation, and nature offers them so many delights that they are easily consoled for the advantages society refuses them. There is certainly a lot of corruption in Italy, and yet civilization there is much less polished than in other countries. Despite their intellectual subtlety, you could find something almost primitive about this people; their subtlety is like a hunter's in the art of surprising his prey. Indolent peoples easily become cunning; they are used to being gentle and so, when necessary, learn to hide even their anger. It is always by their normal behaviour that they manage to conceal an unusual incident.

'ITALIANS ARE SINCERE AND LOYAL IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS. Self-interest and ambition influence them greatly, but not pride or vanity; distinctions of rank make very little impression on them. There is no society life, no salon, no fashion, no little daily means of making an impression by paying attention to details. They have no such usual sources of deceit and envy. When they deceive their enemies and their rivals, it is because they consider themselves at war with them, but in peace they are unaffected and sincere. It is this very sincerity which is the cause of the scandal you complain of. Women hear constant talk of love, live amongst the allurements and examples of love, do not hide their feelings, and bring a kind of innocence, as it were, even into their coquetry; nor do they dread ridicule, particularly the kind that society can inflict. Some are so ignorant that they do not know how to write, and publicly admit it. They answer a morning note with a reply from their lawyer (*il paglietto*) on large paper in a legal style. But, on the other hand, amongst educated women you will see some
who teach in the academies and give public lectures, wearing black sashes; and if you were inclined to laugh at that, people would reply:

*Is there any harm in knowing Greek? Is there any harm in working for a living! So why are you laughing at something so simple?*

'Lastly, my Lord, may I touch on a more sensitive subject? Shall I try to show you why the men are often so little interested in military matters? They readily put their lives at stake for love and hatred, and dagger blows exchanged in that cause neither astonish nor intimidate anyone. They do not fear death when natural passions require them to brave it. But, it must be admitted, they prefer life to political interests, which barely touch them because they have no fatherland. Often, too, chivalric honour has little sway over a nation in which public opinion and the society that makes it do not exist. When all public authorities are so disorganized, it is quite natural that women should acquire a great ascendancy over men, and perhaps they have too much to make respect and admiration for men possible for them. Nevertheless, men's behaviour towards women is extremely sensitive and devoted. In England, domestic virtues constitute the glory and happiness of women, but if there are countries where love continues to exist outside the sacred bonds of marriage, Italy is the one, of all those countries, in which women's happiness is best fostered. There men have made a morality for immoral relationships, but at least they have been fair and generous in sharing obligations. When they break the bonds of love, they consider themselves more blameworthy than women because women have made more sacrifices and lost more. They think that, before the tribunal of the heart, the most guilty are those who do the most harm. When men do wrong, it is out of hardness; when women do wrong, it is out of weakness. Society which is both strict and corrupt, that is to say, pitiless for faults when they bring misfortunes, must be more severe for women, but in a country where there is no society, natural kindness has more influence.

'I would agree that thoughts of reputation and dignity are much less powerful and even less well known in Italy than elsewhere. The reason for this is that there is no society or public opinion, but in spite of all that has been said about the perfidiousness of the Italians, I maintain that Italy is one of the countries in the world where the most good nature is to be found. That good nature is so great in everything pertaining to vanity that, although foreigners have said worse things about Italy than about any other country, there is none where
they are received more cordially. Italians are reproached with being too inclined to flattery but it must be admitted that most of the time it is not from calculation, but only from the desire to please, that they use many charming expressions, inspired by a genuine goodwill; and these expressions are not belied by their normal behaviour. Yet, would they be faithful to friendship in extraordinary circumstances if, for its sake, they had to face danger and adversity? A few, I agree, very few, would be capable of doing so, but it is not only to Italy that that remark is applicable.

'Italianas are as indolent as orientals in their daily lives, but no men are more persistent or active once their passions are aroused. And these very same women, too, whom you see as indolent as harem odalisques, are suddenly capable of very devoted deeds. There are mysteries in the character and imagination of Italians, and you will find in them, in turn, unexpected marks of generosity and friendship or dark and fearsome proofs of hatred and vengeance. Here there is no rivalry to achieve anything. Life is nothing more than a dream-filled sleep under a beautiful sky. But give these men an objective, and you will see them learn and understand everything. It is the same with the women. Why should they educate themselves when most men would not understand them? In cultivating their minds, they would isolate their hearts. But these same women would very quickly become worthy of a superior man if that superior man was the object of their affections. Everything is asleep here, but in a country where the great interests are dormant, rest and indifference are more noble than futile activity about little things.

'Literature itself ceases to flourish where ideas are not renewed by the strong and varied activity of life. Yet in what country more than in Italy have people shown admiration for literature and art? History teaches us that Popes, princes, and peoples have rendered the most striking homage in all ages to distinguished painters, poets, and writers.\(^\text{15}\) I admit, my Lord, that this enthusiasm for talent is one of the main reasons for my attachment to this country. You do not find here the blase imagination, the discouraging mentality, or the tyrannical mediocrity which elsewhere are able to torment or stifle natural genius so effectively. An idea, a feeling, a felicitous expression, ignite a spark, as it were, amongst the listeners. Precisely because talent occupies the highest rank here, it arouses a great deal of envy. Pergolesi\(^*\) was murdered for his *Stabat*; Giorgione\(^*\) armed himself with...
a breastplate when he was obliged to paint in a public place. But the violent jealousy which talent inspires in us is aroused by power elsewhere. This jealousy does not degrade its object; this jealousy can hate, proscribe, and kill, and though it is always mixed with the fanaticism of admiration, while persecuting genius, it still stimulates it. Finally, when you can see so much life in such a narrow sphere, in the midst of so many obstacles and restrictions of every kind, it seems to me that you cannot help taking a great interest in this people, which greedily breathes in the little air that imagination allows to infiltrate through the barriers enclosing it.

'I shall not deny that those barriers are such that in Italy men rarely acquire the dignity and pride characteristic of free, military nations. If you like, my Lord, I shall even admit that the character of those nations might arouse more enthusiasm and love in women. But might it not also be possible that a brave, noble, strictly moral man could combine all the qualities which inspire love without possessing those which promise happiness?'

'CORINNE'

CHAPTER IV

FOR a second time Corinne's letter made Oswald repent of having thought of breaking away from her. The spirited dignity and the commanding gentleness with which she had refuted the harsh words he had allowed himself touched him and filled him with admiration. So great, so simple, so true a superiority seemed to him above all ordinary rules. He certainly still felt that Corinne was not the weak, shy, woman, unsure of everything but her feelings and duties, whom, in his imagination, he had chosen for his life's companion. The memory of Lucile, as he had seen her at the age of twelve, was more in accord with this idea, but could one make any comparison with Corinne? Could the usual laws and rules be applied to someone who in herself combined so many different qualities linked by genius and sensitivity? Corinne was a natural miracle, and was not the miracle working on Oswald's behalf when he could take pride in interesting such a woman? But what was her name, what her destiny, what would her plans be, if he declared his intention of marrying her? Everything was still unclear and, although Oswald's enthusiasm for Corinne convinced him that he had decided to marry her, the thought that Corinne's life
had not been quite above reproach, and that his father would certainly have disapproved of such a marriage, often thoroughly upset him again and made him extremely troubled.

He was not as prostrate with grief as in the days when he did not know Corinne, but neither did he feel the kind of calm which can exist even in the midst of repentance, when one's whole life is devoted to the expiation of a great fault. Formerly he was not afraid of giving himself up to his memories, however bitter they were; now he was afraid of those long, deep, reveries which would have made him aware of what was happening in the depths of this heart. He was, however, getting ready to visit Corinne to thank her for her letter and to obtain her forgiveness for the one he had written when he saw Mr Edgermond, a relative of young Lucile, come into his room.

He was a worthy English gentleman, who had lived most of his life in Wales, where he owned a property. He had the principles and the prejudices which, in every country, are used to maintain things as they are, and it is a benefit when these things are as good as human reason allows. Men like Mr Edgermond, that is to say, partisans of the established order, although firmly and even obstinately attached to their customs and way of looking at things, ought to be considered as enlightened and reasonable.

Lord Nelvil started when he heard Mr Edgermond announced in his apartment. It seemed to him that all his memories were presenting themselves at the same time. But presently it occurred to him that Lady Edgermond, Lucile's mother, had sent her relative to re-proach him, thus trying to restrict his independence. This thought restored all his determination and he received Mr Edgermond extremely coldly. He was all the more wrong to receive him in this way, as Mr Edgermond had nothing at all in mind concerning Lord Nelvil. He was travelling in Italy for his health, taking a lot of exercise, hunting, and drinking to the health of King George and Old England. He was the finest gentleman in the world, and he even had more wit and education than his way of life would have led one to believe. Above all he was English, not only as he ought to be but also as one would have preferred him not to be. Everywhere he followed the customs of his own country, living only with Englishmen and never mixing with foreigners, not out of contempt, but out of a kind of reluctance to speak foreign languages, and a shyness, even at the age of fifty, which made it difficult for him to make new acquaintances.
'I am delighted to see you,' he said to Lord Nelvil. 'I am going to Naples in a fortnight. Will you be there? I hope so, for I have not long to stay in Italy. My regiment is due to set sail soon.' 'Your regiment,' repeated Lord Nelvil, and he blushed, as if he had forgotten that he had a year's leave as his regiment was not due to be called up any earlier. But he blushed to think that Corinne might perhaps make him forget even his duty. 'Your own regiment,' continued Mr Edgermond, 'will not be called up for a while yet, so get your health back here without worrying. Before leaving, I saw my young cousin whom you are interested in. She is more charming than ever, and when you return in a year's time I am sure she will be the most beautiful woman in England!' Lord Nelvil said nothing and Mr Edgermond too fell silent. Laconically but pleasantly, they exchanged a few more remarks and Mr Edgermond was about to leave when he turned round and said, 'By the way, my Lord. You can do me a favour. I am told you know the celebrated Corinne, and although, usually, I do not like meeting new people, I am very curious to know what she is like.' 'I shall ask permission from Corinne to bring you to her home, since you would like to go,' replied Oswald. 'Do please arrange for me to see her on a day when she will improvise, sing, or dance for us.' 'Corinne does not show off her talents like that to strangers. She is a woman who is your and my equal in every respect.' 'Forgive my mistake,' replied Mr Edgermond; 'since she is known only by the name of Corinne, and at the age of twenty-six she lives quite alone without anyone else of her family, I thought that she supported herself by her talents and would be glad to take the opportunity of making them known.' 'Her fortune is quite independent,' replied Lord Nelvil sharply, 'and her heart even more so.' Mr Edgermond immediately stopped talking about Corinne and was sorry he had mentioned her when he saw that Oswald was interested in her. The English are the most discreet and considerate men in the world in everything connected with sincere affections.

Mr Edgermond went away. Lord Nelvil, left alone, could not help exclaiming in his emotion, 'I must marry Corinne, I must be her protector so that, in future, no one can make any mistake about her. I shall give her the little I can give, a rank, a name, while she will lavish on me all the joys that she alone in the world can bestow.' It was in this frame of mind that he hurried to go to Corinne's, and never did he enter her house with a sweeter feeling of hope and love. But
in a natural feeling of shyness and to put himself at ease, he began
the conversation by speaking of unimportant things, and amongst them
was the request to bring Mr Edgermond to see her. At the mention
of his name, Corinne was visibly upset and, in a voice filled with emo-
tion, refused Oswald's request. He was completely taken aback and
said, 'I thought that, in a house where you receive so many people,
the fact that he is my friend would not be a reason for excluding him.'
'Do not be offended, my Lord,' replied Corinne. 'Believe me, I must
have very powerful reasons for not agreeing to what you want.' 'And
will you tell me those reasons?' asked Oswald. 'Impossible,' cried
Corinne, 'impossible!' 'And so,' said Oswald . . . but as the violence of
his emotion rendered him speechless, he made to go. Then Corinne,
in tears, said to him in English: 'In God's name, unless you want to
break my heart, do not go.'

Oswald was deeply moved by Corinne's words and her tone of voice,
and he sat down again some distance away from her, his head rest-
ing against an alabaster vase which lit up her room. Then suddenly
he said, 'Cruel woman, you see that I love you, you see that twenty
times a day I am ready to offer you my hand and my life, and you
do not want to tell me who you are! Tell me, Corinne, tell me,' he
repeated, putting out his hand to her with the most touching expres-
sion of feeling. 'Oswald,' cried Corinne, 'Oswald, you do not know
how you are hurting me. If I were crazy enough to tell you every-
ting, if I were, you would no longer love me.' 'Good God,' he replied,
'then what have you to disclose?' 'Nothing which makes me un-
worthy of you; but chance events, differences between our tastes and
opinions which once existed, which would no longer exist. Do not
insist that I make myself known to you. One day perhaps, one day,
if you love me enough, if... Oh, I do not know what I am saying,'
continued Corinne, 'but do not desert me before hearing me. Promise
me in the name of your father who lives in heaven.' 'Do not pronounce
that name,' cried Lord Nelvil. 'Do you know if he unites us or sep-
arates us? Do you believe he would consent to our union? If you believe
he would, swear it to me and I shall no longer be anxious and torn
apart. One day I shall tell you what my sad life has been, but for the
moment, see what state I am in, what a state you put me in.' And,
indeed, his brow was bathed in a cold sweat, his face was pale, and
his lips trembled as, with difficulty, he articulated these last words.
Corinne sat down beside him and, holding his hands in hers, gently
restored his composure. 'My dear Oswald,' she said, 'ask Mr Edgermond if he has ever been in Northumberland, or at least, if he has, it has only been in the last five years. Only in that case can you bring him here.' At these words Oswald looked intently at Corinne. She cast down her eyes and said nothing. Lord Nelvil answered, 'I shall do as you command,' and he left.

Back in his own apartment, he exhausted himself in making conjectures about Corinne's secrets. It seemed clear to him that she had spent a lot of time in England and that her name and family must be known there. But what was the reason for her concealing them, but why had she left England if she had been settled there? These different questions worried Oswald greatly. He was convinced that nothing bad could be discovered in Corinne's life, but he was afraid of a combination of circumstances which might make her guilty in the eyes of others; and what he dreaded most for her was the disapproval of England. He felt strong enough to defy the disapproval of any other country, but the memory of his father was so closely linked in his thoughts with his native land that the two feelings enhanced each other. Oswald learned from Mr Edgermond that he had been in Northumberland for the first time the previous year and promised to take him that very evening to Corinne's house. He arrived first, to warn her of Mr Edgermond's preconceived ideas about her, and asked her to make him realize by her cold, reserved behaviour how mistaken he was.

'If you will allow me,' replied Corinne, 'I shall behave towards him as I do towards everybody. If he wants to hear me, I shall improvise for him. In short, I shall be my usual self, but I think, nevertheless, that he will perceive my inner worth just as well in my natural behaviour as if I assumed an affected constraint.' 'Yes, Corinne,' replied Oswald. 'Yes, you are right. Oh, how wrong would be the man who would want to change in any way your wonderful disposition!' At that moment, Mr Edgermond and the rest of the company arrived. At the beginning of the evening, Lord Nelvil, sitting beside Corinne, and showing an interest suggestive of both the protector and the man in love, said everything that could bring out her merits. He showed her a respect intended less for his own satisfaction than to command the consideration of others, but he was soon delighted to find that all his worries were groundless. Corinne won over Mr Edgermond completely. She won him over, not only by her wit and charm, but by
inspiring in him the feeling of respect that sincere characters always arouse in honest characters. So when he dared to ask her to let him hear her on a subject of her choice, he asked for that favour with as much respect as eagerness. She agreed without a moment's hesitation, and thus could show that the worth of this favour was quite separate from the difficulty of obtaining it. But she was so anxious to please a compatriot of Oswald's, a man who, by the esteem in which he was deservedly held, could, in speaking of her, influence Lord Nelvil's opinion, that she was suddenly overcome by a shyness that was quite new to her. She wanted to begin but emotion deprived her of speech. Oswald was upset that she did not display all her superiority to an Englishman. He lowered his eyes and his embarrassment was so obvious that Corinne, concerned only with the effect she was producing on him, continued to lose the presence of mind required for the talent of improvising. Finally, feeling that she was hesitating, that the words were coming to her from memory and not from feeling, and so she was depicting neither what she was thinking nor what she was really experiencing, she suddenly stopped and said to Mr Edgermond, 'Forgive me if shyness robs me of my talent today. My friends know it is the first time that I have not done myself justice in this way, but it may not be the last,' she added with a sigh.

Oswald was deeply moved by Corinne's touching weakness. Till then he had always seen imagination and genius triumph over her affections, and restore her spirits when she was most depressed. This time, her feelings had entirely prevailed over her mind, but Oswald had so identified himself with Corinne's glory that he suffered from her distress instead of enjoying it. As he was certain, however, that another day she would shine with her natural brilliance, he gave himself up with no regrets to the sweet emotions aroused by what he had just seen, and the image of his loved one reigned more than ever in his heart.