

**OCTAVE MIRBEAU**

**THE LOVE OF A VENAL WOMAN**

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## ORIGINS OF THE PROSTITUTE<sup>1</sup>

What makes the prostitute is not her bed, not her nudity: it is the necessity of exchanging her body for money.

The little plebeian girl of the suburbs, skipping along with other urchins in the sordid and twisting lanes, nibbling the crust of bread in her hand, far from having reached the age of maturity, already knows how to answer, without fear or repugnance, the appeal of the lecherous old man who lures her with money or food. For this little girl is a precocious flirt and knows how to simulate rejection and extort money<sup>2</sup>.

The young girl, or the shop-girl, has no morals anymore<sup>3</sup>. Women from that social milieu, whether they work in workrooms or factories, or succumb to the weight of domestic chores, see prostitution as the only way to obtain certain conveniences, and they are morally prepared to enter that life. What could "honesty" mean to them? Nothing more than irremediable destitution: revolting food, a bed in a sordid place, a complexion turned leaden by confinement, slaps and blows from a drunken father or a furious husband, exhausting children, disability, the uncertainty of old age. These women constantly live in an atmosphere of debauchery and barter: rapacious procurers continually proposition them, they mix with unscrupulous employers, their friends proudly display their perversion and the riches they acquire through prostitution...

At the age of ten, these girls already know it all and have started to feel the irresistible temptation of sex, which makes women from the working class an inexhaustible source of prostitutes<sup>4</sup>. Then their walk changes: they skip, with their nose up, their breasts thrust forward, tight under a gaudy

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1 Whereas in the Bulgarian text, the prostitute is called *prostitutka*, in the pamphlet's title, she is a *prodajmata jena*, that is "venal woman". In Bulgarian and in French, the title has a double meaning, an objective and subjective one : love felt for and by the prostitute. (Alexandre Lévy)

2 The theme of the girls' precociousness has often been mentioned by Mirbeau, notably in *Sébastien Roch* (1890), through the character of Marguerite Lecautelet : "Her manners were not those of a little girl, even though her language had remained childish, and it contrasted with the skillful, almost perverted grace which emanated from her, the grace of a sexuality that had bloomed too soon, in a ardent and sickly flower." (Chapter I). Also see "Précocité", a tale published in *Le Journal* on November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1895 (*Contes cruels*, Séguier, 1990, volume II, pp. 123 sq.).

3 In one of his *Lettres de ma chaumière* (1885), "Justice de paix", Mirbeau shows that among the Norman peasants, social and economic determinism had crushed their moral conscience (*Contes cruels*, Séguier, 1990, volume II, pp. 435-440).

4 In *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), Célestine writes : "At ten years old, I wasn't chaste anymore. Initiated by the sad example of my mum to what love is, perverted by all the naughty things I gave myself over to with little boys, I had developed physically very early... Despite hardship and strikes, but always in the sea's open air, free and strong, I had grown so much that at the age of eleven I experimented the first jolts of puberty... Beneath my immature look, I was almost a woman" (*op. cit.*, Chapter V, Presses Pocket, p. 81 ; *Œuvre romanesque*, Buchet/Chastel, 2001, vol. II, p. 448).

muslin, their rump taugt, their legs straight, their eyes lascivious, their glance distraught and excited by the wind; and, with their red marks on the cheeks, they make old men go out of their minds<sup>5</sup>. The wonderful strength of their youth gives them energy, makes them natural: they are the only lively notes that sing and dance in the smoky suburbs... And yet, they are still only children...

Although we believe her still to be innocent, this little girl is already quite shameless<sup>6</sup>. For the little plebeian who indulges precociously in dubious games with other urchins, displaying her nudity is not only the consequence of the child's unconcern.

It is difficult to determine the precise moment when she becomes aware of what prostitution really is, when it occurs to her to display something that is not supposed to be shown, when she thinks about the benefits of doing so.<sup>7</sup> Given insights into the life of the people, we can make terrible and frightening observations about this little girl. Her perversion is horrible, as many examples prove: she is a master in the art of evasion, she knows how to parry the most resolute advances, how to avoid the most malignant questions. Well before being a woman, she has detected the repressed desire that obsesses the man who slyly stares at her, and the sensual delight she can bring him. This experience helps her to overcome her fear of losing her virginity and to see this loss as a mere formality, a sort of certificate of independence, and, as such, a source of pride<sup>8</sup>. Afterwards, each mating brings not only physical pleasure, but also a way of escaping misery, of overcoming it<sup>9</sup>. At no time does she wonder about "morality", for in the mind of the young girl, this notion is meaningless. If many men and women workers still consider "honesty" important, and try, by dint of blows and insults, to inculcate the word in their children's minds, they have a hard time explaining to them how such "honesty" is useful, for it is in their own eyes an abstract concept<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the advantages of "dishonesty" are revealed every day to the little wretches, who learn the great lesson of the street: the elegant shops, the beautiful courtesans strolling by in their sumptuous and dazzling clothes, the pimps watching out for them, offering them easy money. In sum, the whole of human existence offers them the example of corruption...

The number of these poor women who still believe in "honesty", such a theoretical and dry

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5 That is precisely what happens with Célestine. At twelve years old, she loses her virginity with "an old man, as hairy, as foul-smelling as a goat, and whose face was only a sordid scrub of beard and hair" (*Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, *loc. cit.*, p. 82 ; *Œuvre romanesque*, p. 448).

6 Célestine, remembering her twelve years, talks about "the ingenuousness of (her) vice" and "the naivety of her depravity" (*loc. cit.*).

7 If Célestine gives herself to the old Cléophas Biscouille, it is in exchange for an orange (*loc. cit.*).

8 Célestine even feels "grateful" to the disgusting Cléophas Biscouille (*ibid.*).

9 In the same way, in a unfinished novel full of personal memories, *Un gentilhomme*, the narrator – before he prostitutes his pen – is reduced by hunger to accepting the propositions of a female procurer and to putting himself in the service of respectable old gentlemen (*Œuvre romanesque*, vol. III, p. 891)...

10 The same idea is found in "Pour M. Lépine" (*Le Journal*, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1896). The narrator tells his story to a miserable prostitute who offers him a thirteen years old "vicious and skillful" girl : "I have nothing to tell her. And what would I tell her? Preach repentance to her, the beauty of virtue? Words, words, words!" (*Contes cruels*, volume II, p. 365).

notion, grows smaller all the time. The old disparagement of the young girl who has "sinned"<sup>11</sup> becomes less meaningful, given their growing interest in material well-being and comfort. The increasing number of women now having jobs that used to be done by men encourages some unmarried mothers to go without a husband who would beat them or a ruffian who would exploit them, and to raise their children alone. They may have lovers, but they remain in control of their own income and their own household.

This doesn't prevent the beautiful working class woman from knowing that her body is free only when it is put on sale. And the example of marriage is there to confirm that fact : if the young bride has food and lodging, it's only in exchange for her body<sup>12</sup>. For the girl of the suburbs, the social issue is summed up by this fact.

And yet, it is to her that we owe the few bright notes alleviating the sad harshness of modern life, when it is spared the illusory benefits of technical progress<sup>13</sup>...

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11 Mirbeau had denounced this "old slander" several times. See in particular, in his *Combats pour l'enfant* (Ivan Davy, Vauchrétien, 1990), texts 10, 22 and 24. For instance, he writes that we should "love", "respect", "worship" and "glorify" "those sorrowful victims, whom we lead to all sorts of crimes, whom we consign to the rubbish heap" (p. 206).

12 Since the first novels he had "ghost-written", Mirbeau denounced marriage as an "underhanded dealing". See in particular *L'Écuyère*, 1882, and *La Belle Madame Le Vassart*, 1884 (*Œuvre romanesque*, vol. I et II). The same with his *Chroniques du Diable* of 1884-1885.

13 Mirbeau's opinion on "technical progress" is not consistent. At times he expresses strong suspicion of engineers who prepare a dehumanised society and risk destroying the world; he then appears as a forerunner of today's ecologists. And sometimes he praises the benefits of the car (cf. *La 628-E8*, 1907, *Œuvre romanesque*, t. III) and the wonders of electricity.

## THE PROSTITUTE'S BODY

The body of the prostitute is her thing of value, guaranteeing her right to exist, constituting her means of attack and defence. It is as meticulously maintained as the weapon that a soldier cleans and utilises. The most striking characteristic of the prostitute's body is that it doesn't belong to her. Like a house she offers for rent to people passing by, it is made attractive and presentable to prospective clients.

The prostitute's body is an unusual one, modified according to the purposes it has to fulfil. While the female body is naturally meant to conceive a child, the prostitute's body must exclude the possibility of conception, since its primary purpose is the arousal of man's desire. If the logical and natural outcome of a loving relationship between a man and a woman is sexual intercourse, much time is required before the stage is reached where modesty is set aside in favour of feelings and desires. But the man who accosts a prostitute would be embarrassed, perhaps rendered impotent, by the slightest human feeling. What he seeks is quick and direct animal satisfaction, accompanied by the momentary annihilation of his consciousness. If he's attracted to the woman he loves by the intimacy and the modesty of their relationship, in the prostitute, he is looking only for show and display.

The demands of her profession lead to a metamorphosis of the prostitute's body.

The body of an ordinary woman is not only designed to arouse desire and engage in intercourse. It is also made to walk, to work, to eat, to listen, to see, to feel, to adopt certain behaviours and fulfil various purposes not limited to amatory or sexual ones. A normal woman's body is an integral machine, one that gives her, even when naked, the appearance of natural healthiness and decency.

The natural decency issuing from these various duties and purposes is the first thing a prostitute must banish from her behaviour<sup>14</sup>. Her body must only ignite sexual desire and satisfy that desire, while ensuring the sterility of sexual intercourse diverted from its true purpose.

Sensual delight must emanate from every part of this body, not only from the organs that nature designed for these ends. The prostitute's body is fitted out accordingly. She quickly learns quickly how to use it, how to vary her stance and posture, how to call attention to her figure as she turns it into an object meant to be possessed, touched, fingered. Acting on the nerve centres of the man, she induces him to forget any idea of responsible maternity, while she concentrates on exciting him sexually<sup>15</sup>. That is what gives her body its uniqueness and its charm. Yet this body is also an

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14 Little Lisa from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is an exception : "Her face radiated ingenuousness, goodness and at the same time a strange gravity... That expression should have been harmful to her in the house" (Chapter V of the second part).

15 Maupassant developed this topic of the necessary sterility of women whose function is to excite men's desire.

infernal machine inflicting paralysis, tuberculosis, stroke, venereal disease, and madness on the man who pays for her services<sup>16</sup>... All that is part of the power exercised by this sweet, perfumed, and slim body, which is as different from the married woman's body as love is different from prostitution, and as tenderness is different from the war of the sexes. As modern painters have noticed, it's beautiful because of its qualities and purposes, and not because of its harmony<sup>17</sup>. A prostitute limited to her pure sexual function, uninterested in arousing desire, wouldn't have the slightest success. She would resemble those lower middle class women who marry and divorce several times. If the charm of that body remains, it is less because of the satisfaction that it brings than because of the desire it inflames. It is not enough for a woman to be naked : she must gradually arouse the desire to touch, to possess<sup>18</sup>. Nudity is natural and pure. If a woman is perfect by her face, her proportions, her complexion, she inhibits desire instead of arousing it<sup>19</sup>. Only a physically and psychologically healthy man feels his sexual desire grow, while he gazes at this noble nudity, as he experiences the enchantment inspired by the perfect beauty of the female body. Among those who nowadays are looking for women, such men are becoming scarce. Corrupted by vice and nervous disorders<sup>20</sup>, instinct is no longer directed to that sublime aim. In general, the pleasurable contemplation of nudity is the opposite of sexual desire. That is why the prostitute must arouse the most perverse thoughts by means of her sexual attributes...

There are very beautiful prostitutes, with ravishing figures and unusual delicacy. There are small ones, tall ones, slim or plump ones, but none of their attractions can be found in the woman who gives herself for love. Everything in them is vulgar, everything springs from the base desire to awaken the brute in man.

The prostitute's chest, contained by corsets, emerges, as does her huge and muscular rump. There is the double fruit of delicate breasts, the belly supported by the two strong columns of the thighs. Mysterious like the prostitute's sex, her armpits are dark and perverse. Each curve of this body is deliberate, as if shaped by a man's strong and firm hand. Looking like a heifer, like a panther, this body can be gracious and slender as well as muscular and frightening: ready to be embraced, to be kissed, to be twisted<sup>21</sup>...

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16 The Bulgarian text uses the word "spasms", literally translated from French, and not the word meaning "orgasm" (Alexandre Lévy).

17 Mirbeau is probably thinking of Félicien Rops, who painted prostitutes "with tortured muscles" and who expressed his sorrowful philosophy of "the nude, the true nude, who smells of skin and flesh", the functional nude, as opposed to the sanitized nude of Bouguereau and Cabanel (*La Plume*, November 15<sup>th</sup> 1896; an article collected in *Combats esthétiques*, 1993, volume 1). But his remark also applies to Degas' dancers, about which he writes, on November 15<sup>th</sup> 1884, that they are executed with such "cruelty" and "with such an intense expression that some of them really look like true torture victims" (*Notes sur l'art*, L'Échoppe, Caen, 1989, p. 37). On the contrary, Renoir "brings out the harmony of light and flesh" in the women he paints (*Ibid.*, p. 50).

18 The same idea is found in "Pour M. Lépine". The prostitute must evoke "the idea of sin", sin that "is joy, silk, perfume and [that is] made up lips, and eyes in delirium, and dyed hair, and flesh adorned like an altar, washed like a chalice, painted like an idol..." (*Contes cruels*, volume II, p. 361).

19 Probably a recollection of Stendhal's *De l'amour*.

20 Mirbeau became the analyst of the "nervous diseases" typical of modern times in *Paris deshabillé* (L'Échoppe, Caen, 1991) and *Chroniques du Diable*.

21 About the ambivalence towards woman, see in particular *Le Calvaire* (1886), *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899)

Parts like the arms, feet, and neck have little strategic importance – for they are also found in the beloved, healthy, pure, and harmonious woman. Most important are the chest and the waist. With these bodies, the look can be satisfied only by touching; it is not the contours, nor the complexion of the body which attract him, but only the object that the senses can apprehend. And everything focuses on the exciting triangle, the dark intersection... It is from there that comes the heat of intoxication and temptation.

### III

## THE VISIT

Sexual intercourse with a prostitute is not an easy thing to analyse. The amorality of the act, the sin that it constitutes, the sensual delight and the easing of sexual desire, all these are the source of an inexorable and tragic attraction.

This act has one striking specificity. The mere exchange of a gold or silver coin can, as if by magic, bring closer for a moment two complete strangers, allowing them to reach a level of intimacy that persons who love and respect each other wait for months to achieve... It would be pointless to meet to talk or have lunch, but it seems only natural to perform an act, which, theoretically, establishes a link that lasts for life. There is a loss of consciousness and reason. Without regrets, without hesitation or repugnance, they act: only instinct matters. It often happens : passing a prostitute, a man decides to approach her, undresses her, possesses her, puts his clothes back on, and is back on the street in less than an hour... And this man, while getting dressed, also puts on again his moral and social identity. This adventure seems common to him. And yet, when thinking about it, he finds it extraordinary. The ease of such a meeting is possible only after a momentary loss of reason<sup>22</sup>. The prostitute represents this instant of unconsciousness ; by her mere presence, she distorts the man's value system. Thanks to her, he forgets his responsibilities, and this is how he can experience true pleasure. For sexual intercourse has no aim other than release.

This is what women in love will never understand. When they learn that their loved one has gone to a prostitute, they are cruelly disappointed and may even fall into despair. They imagine that the visit to the prostitute has been dictated by reason, that, in a way, it is a love story, brief and quick, with the first glance, the passion, seduction, love, disappointment, and separation. They won't admit that looking for and possessing a prostitute is an irrational act for a man, who, at that point, is no more than an animal driven by instinct, and who forgets this act as soon as he dresses and reassumes his identity.

Of course, love has the same physical outcome. But only if the two lovers achieve a spiritual reconciliation and try to prove the sincerity of their professions of love by giving themselves to each other. Love is the opposite of prostitution : it is a gift, whereas prostitution is only a transaction<sup>23</sup>.

Naturally, for the prostitute, this way of thinking is abstract. But she is nonetheless vaguely

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<sup>22</sup> The narrator of Dostoievsky's *Notes from Underground* writes, after his visit to Lisa : "And yet I pulled myself together ; I hadn't slept : I had been in a state of half-consciousness (...). I quickly got a grip on myself" (at the beginning of Chapter VI).

<sup>23</sup> We find the same opposition between "gift" and "transaction" in *Un gentilhomme*, in which the narrator is forced into prostituting his brain and his pen as the private secretary of rich and wealthy men – as Mirbeau had himself done over the course of long years. He writes : "When I understood that my intelligence, my fidelity, my efforts in working and my devotion weren't worth anything in the mind of those who benefited from them; when I knew that they were accepted, not as a voluntary gift, but as a thing owed , as a tithe, then I started giving them only what they paid for, and they scarcely paid..." (*Œuvre romanesque*, vol. III, p. 901).

aware of the magnetic attraction she exercises over men, and she knows how to use it. That is what gives her power over them. In her are incarnated the most vile desires promoted by society. It is to the prostitute that the man makes his confession. It is in the darkness of her room, on her soiled pillow that he confides the dreadful secrets which have been tormenting him for years<sup>24</sup>. This is why the prostitute occupies such an important place in society: she forgives sins, she grants peace to suffering and misunderstood souls. She has seen so much, heard so much, and forgotten so much... For if her body is impersonal, so are the bodies of her clients. She doesn't even look at them anymore. She has been in the arms of hundreds of men who all bear the same name: the next one...

With a well-turned phrase, like a shopkeeper who has just been paid and is already thinking about the next client, the prostitute escorts the man to the door. She is ready for the next one.

The prostitute knows that society cannot do without her. With a sort of Satanic pleasure<sup>25</sup>, she understands that this bestial, quick, and vulgar mating is the negation and the perversion of love between two human beings. That is why she insists... for she has no right to the love between humans.

And yet, neither love, nor an affair with an experienced lover, nor marriage to a woman of good social standing could replace those perverse moments when a man pictures himself approaching and possessing a prostitute, without remorse, and without damage to his social status.

The need for prostitution that ensures its survival is the voluptuous desire that haunts man at times, the desire to profane virtue<sup>26</sup>.

Indifferent, docile, servile, the prostitute fulfils a man's hidden fantasies which, once acted out, he could not bear anyone to know about. She alone can act with impunity and guarantee the secrecy that is indispensable when it is a matter of satisfying the most perverse needs of the flesh. Shyness and prudence would never allow a man to express his base desires in the presence of the woman he loves. He is afraid of disappointing her, of disgusting her, and thereby disrupting their married life<sup>27</sup>.

However openly a husband and wife express their shared love, with whatever tolerance and understanding they act out their fantasies, prostitution alone affords the man complete satisfaction, allowing him the freedom to be either delicate, tender, and attentive, or aggressive and brutal. Seized by passion, he descends from his pedestal and gets down into the mud, drawn there by the bestial feelings that he conceals in his heart of hearts. Nothing can match the strange and powerful joy of knowing that

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24 That is what the narrator of *Notes from Underground* does. But he feels even more hatred for Lisa: "Do you understand the degree of the hatred I feel for you now that you've seen and heard me here? A man confides only once in his life..." (Chapter IX).

25 Here is another point in common with Félicien Rops. In Mirbeau's opinion, Rops gives an image of "satanic love, which floors you, embraces you between iron knees, which crushes you [...] and tears you apart, which shrivels your heart, your brain, your marrow, and leaves you broken, crushed, soiled" (*loc. cit.*). It is worth mentioning that Rops illustrated Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Diaboliques*.

26 This is what happens to the narrator of *Notes from Underground*, who likes to appear to Lisa "pallid, ugly, mean, repellent" (Chapter V), who then thinks of corrupting her (Chapter VI), before he does anything to humiliate her (Chapter VII), as he confesses in Chapter IX: "What I needed? To prove I had power, to play, to provoke your tears, your humiliation".

27 On this "lowness of brute desires", see notably *Vieux Ménages*, a vitriolic short play collected in his *Théâtre complet* (Eurédit, 2003), and, naturally, *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*.

he can say anything, do anything, demand anything ; that he can profane love and soil it as much as he wants – all without incurring punishment, without feeling remorse, knowing that the next day, he will have protected his reputation...

If the temptation of money drives the prostitute to mimic feelings she doesn't experience, this counterfeit emotion demands an effort of will, which, no matter how frequent and habitual, is no less dreadful or cruel. It is the calm of a duellist who is full of hatred.

The man who comes with his money, feverishly looking to satisfy his lust, nonetheless retains his calm, for his rational thinking, which he momentarily suppresses, will soon return. This is why his actions are hurried.

The embrace begins to look like a duel<sup>28</sup>...

But if this embrace seems like a merciless fight, in which muscles strain, breath explodes, mouths bite, and nails claw, there is still tenderness in the act. There is the kiss – as proof of love and affection, which marks the end of mating.

But one never kisses a prostitute. She has no right to a kiss. For her, the duel is without pity, like a murder committed in the dark<sup>29</sup>. But it is a murder in which the attacker himself falls defeated. At a point his nerves betray him ; he faints, falling exhausted and dazed. But when his reason returns, the man stands up. Staggering, disgusted, mute, he goes away like a burglar caught in the act<sup>30</sup>, retreating from the mocking gaze of the woman who had played the victim, and who now stands back up, carefree, intact – ready to give herself to the next man...

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28 In a general way, Mirbeau, like Schopenhauer, considers that the two sexes are involved in a perpetual war one against the other. See Chapter III in *Contes cruels*. Léopold Lacour also talks about “sexual duel”.

29 This assimilation of sexual embraces to murder is frequent in Mirbeau's work, notably in *Le Calvaire*, *Sébastien Roch* and *Le Jardin des supplices*. Also see “Piédanat” in *Contes cruels* (volume II, pp. 31-37).

30 This is what happens to the narrator of *Notes from Underground*, who, in the presence of Lisa, feels “ashamed, almost guilty” (Chapter VI), then “dazed” and “confused” (Chapter IX).

## IV

### THE PROSTITUTE'S HATRED AND COURAGE

Drowned in the dark surges of a constant sorrow, the prostitute, strictly speaking, has no moral existence. Yet she does have feelings, the most prominent of which is her hatred of man. She will never forgive him for having dispelled her dream of an idyllic love – a chimera that has haunted her since childhood<sup>31</sup>.

Her intelligence, fixed in its childish state, is cloaked in unawareness: she has the child's impulsive goodness, mixed with tendencies toward cruelty<sup>32</sup>. Without knowing it, she is among the most radical of anarchists, able to see man only in his primitive bestiality. She encounters a man at the only time that the urgency of his instinct and perverted drives overwhelms his education, his social image, his professional persona. An impartial judge, she sees all men as equal, for they show her only their desire. She discovers the discrepancy between their claim of civic responsibility and their true nature. From her perspective, man's "civilisation" seems to be "mere posturing"<sup>33</sup>...

The hatred that combines with this spontaneous anarchism is motivated by several things. First, she has lost the first man she embraced. Second, there is the overvaluation of money, which the man sees as the source of his superiority, money which structures every aspect of that humiliating transaction by which she uses her body to earn her daily bread. Third, there is the profound contempt with which society views her, an exclusion that she suffers from and cannot understand. The man chooses her as an accomplice. He needs her ; he counts on her silence. But no sooner is his desire sated than he recovers his pride and closes to her the door of the society that he belongs to. This injustice fills the prostitute's heart with indignation. Rich or destitute, the woman who sells her body never gives up her proletarian hatred for those who have money, power, and social respectability. That hatred, initially focused on an individual, expands to encompass the whole of society, becoming a true class hatred. Exacerbated by alcohol, the prostitute's hatred makes her a scourge on society and accounts for her tragic fate.

The prostitute knows that the disease she communicates is one that society has no intention of

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31 The little prostitute Lisa, in *Notes from Underground*, dreams of an idyllic love with a student who has written her a letter, which she sees as her most precious possession : "Lisa would have kept it her entire life like a treasure" (Chapter VII).

32 Dostoievsky's vision of human nature, which Mirbeau used as early as his second novel written under his name, *L'Abbé Jules* (1888).

33 Célestine already writes, in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* : "I am not old, and yet I've seen some things so close up... I have seen so many naked people... And I have sniffed the smell of their laundry, of their skin, of their soul... Despite the perfumes, it doesn't smell good... How much can a respectable interior, all that an honest family hides: filth, shameful vices, vile crimes, under the appearance of virtue... ah! I know all that!... Even if they're rich (...), even though they wash themselves (...), it's not clean... And their heart is more disgusting than my mother's bed used to be." (*loc. cit.*, p. 451).

recovering from. She knows this for two reasons, and also because she is indispensable. On the one hand, deviant desire is an eternal element of man's mind.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, marriage and cohabitation do not provide adequate satisfactions to make recourse to prostitution unnecessary<sup>35</sup>. The prostitute has no mores scruples. Armed with "false sincerity", she can confront men's imposture. She knows the conqueror, the winner – the one who deceives her, rejects her, while purporting to "protect" her, who hates her yet seeks her out, who throws her into the mud only to join her there<sup>36</sup>. That is why hatred and aggression become increasingly important. After displaying the passivity of a dog, she exhibits the aggressiveness of a wildcat. Passing through the prostitute's neighbourhood, one has the sense of being in the presence of an untameable and dangerous being. For many men, reducing her to the most abject servility is what whips up their sexual desire...

In the company of a prostitute, men can express their tyrannical impulses, something they would never dare to do as freely with a mistress<sup>37</sup>. There is no innocent, young, middle-class man who wouldn't heap on the prostitute all the contempt he feels for the people, and who, proud of his few coins, wouldn't assume the air of a king... He never suspects that, in the body he has purchased, there is a broken soul, and that, if that soul could take shape, it would frighten him more than a murderer.

So, the courtesan exacts her revenge as best she can : selling herself for a little money, displaying indifference, laughing at everyone including herself, doing all she can to avoid thinking of love in the exercise of her profession.

Along with the duel of the bodies, there is the moral duel. When the man visits a prostitute, he stays on his guard. Afraid of being swindled, he knows he is hated, and so is haughty and full of pride, hiding his fear beneath an appearance of brutality and arrogance. If he ever shows pity or courtesy, the prostitute regards him as naive and tries to exploit him. That a man could express compassion comes as a shock to the prostitute. Even when alone and unoccupied, the man who accosts a prostitute has the sense of doing something forbidden and suspect, something which should remain secret and which traumatises him – even when he does not consider the horrifying prospect of venereal disease...

Under these conditions, the two who meet and simulate intimacy are not really strangers, but enemies. As soon as intercourse is over, they separate, without talking, without kissing, without shaking hands. When we are in love, we can never bring ourselves to say goodbye. In that last kiss, we want to leave everything of ourselves and take everything of the other. On the other hand, the encounter with a

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34 To Mirbeau, this tendency toward perversity is mostly explained by the oppressive nature of a social organisation that represses man's healthy aspirations. See in particular *L'Abbé Jules* : "I am a wicked, an evil person, the abject slave of filthy passions (...). Because, as soon as I was able to produce a sound, my brain was stuffed with absurd ideas, my heart of superhuman feelings. I had organs, and I was taught, in Greek, in Latin, in French, that it was shameful to use them... The function of my intelligence, like the function of my body, was distorted..." (*Œuvre romanesque*, vol. I, 2000, p. 471) Also see *Combats pour l'enfant* (*loc. cit.*).

35 Mirbeau often denounced the unnatural, and consequently perverting, quality of marital monogamy.

36 This is precisely what happens in Chapters V to IX of the second part in *Notes from Underground*.

37 The narrator from *Notes from Underground* confesses it bluntly : "To me, loving meant tyrannising, morally dominating. (...) I imagined this feeling only as a struggle: it always began with hatred and ended in moral subservience" (Chapter X).

prostitute always ends in flight, as it began with aggression. If a man ever experiences intense sexual satisfaction and wishes to show his gratitude with a kiss, he will never forget the coldness of those scarlet lips that meet his own. He will always remember the crushing indifference of that impassive contact...

The woman who sells herself has one incontestable quality : her courage. She is not afraid of anything, and she will stop at nothing. Since childhood, her exclusion from a contemptuous society has hardened her. Her life is uncertain and dangerous; she needs constant protection, protection first from nature. She eats little and badly<sup>38</sup>, she has to endure heat as well as cold, rain and snow. She frequents unhygienic areas. She doesn't sleep well or enough. She experiences a crushing fatigue. She has neither holidays, nor time for hope. The horrors of her profession, the insalubrious places where she performs her ablutions, make her ill, forcing her to mimic pleasure while dissimulating the torture to which her frail body is subjected. She takes it all stoically, without anyone's pity. She works herself to a state of exhaustion. Only the hospital remains to take her in, yet she knows that as soon as she gets out, the same life awaits her. But the hospital is not her only "protection"...

The prostitute lives in a society where a woman has no value. She is dependent on pimps, gangsters, alcoholics. She frequents unsafe places, surrounded by strangers who can strangle her, kill her, or drug her while she sleeps. She closes her eyes at night, never knowing whether she will be alive to open them in the morning<sup>39</sup>...

Prostitutes are often murdered in red-light districts and in working class neighbourhoods. Errant circus artists, pick-pockets, high-class procurers, card-sharks, attentive to their dress and appearance, don't hesitate to use a dagger. And then the beautiful prostitute is found naked, her throat cut, lying on the lace blankets of her bed, her chest of drawers emptied of the jewellery it contained. No trace is found of the mysterious, elegant visitor. Everything is quickly settled, so the noble client can enter and leave while remaining incognito<sup>40</sup>...

For kings and prostitutes, murder is a risk that goes with the profession. Robbery is not always the motive. There are sadists for whom a love-embrace ends with the strangulation of their partner<sup>41</sup> ; drunks who awaken in the morning, dazed, before a corpse, unable to remember the murder they have committed the night before. Some return to consciousness, anxious to disguise their crime, and indulge in slaughters which make society tremble<sup>42</sup>. Others are more methodical in their murder of prostitutes,

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38 In the first Chapter of *Un gentilhomme*, an unfinished novel, Mirbeau talks about a seventeen year- old prostitute who doesn't even have a crust of bread to eat (*Œuvre romanesque*, vol. III, pp. 892-898).

39 Mirbeau has dealt with that topic in 1885 in his *Chroniques du Diable* and in "L'Assassin de la rue Montaigne" (*Contes cruels*, volume I, pp. 323-327)...

40 Possibly a recollection of Jack the Ripper, the murderer of prostitutes in White Chapel, London, in 1888-1889.

41 Mirbeau imagined many of those in his *Contes cruels* : see in particular, in volume I, "L'Assassin de la Rue Montaigne", "La P'tite", "Le Petit Pavillon" and "La Livrée de Nessus". In *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, the taciturn Joseph, whom Célestine marries in the end, has raped and strangled a little girl (at least according to her conviction).

42 A new allusion to Jack the Ripper.

and act on an irrepressible desire to take revenge on women. Sometimes, in an intimate moment, the prostitute detects a homicidal gleam in the eyes of her client<sup>43</sup>. She nonetheless behaves docilely, hums while she undresses, surrendering to her tragic destiny, as if every night might be the last one...

Poor prostitutes live in close proximity to their murderers. At the slightest provocation, a knife is drawn. In fortification ditches, under metal bridges, in the vast underground, on steep, deserted river banks, in squalid huts and disreputable inns, murders are committed coldly. The prostitute is there and sees blood gush. She must endure the pimp's cynicism and derisive laughter. But she, too, can use a knife, and, sometimes seizes it to kill others.

The prostitute is robbed by hotel owners just as the "demi-mondaine" is robbed by servants and bellboys<sup>44</sup>. Ruffians insult and beat her; policemen harass her<sup>45</sup>. And yet she is never afraid. Instead, her soul hardens, and her will stiffens. She adopts a philosophy of despair, proud of the curse hanging over her. Contemptuous of public morality, she braves danger, even enjoying it and seeking it out.

She drinks with criminals, unafraid of night and of blood. At the beginning of all revolutions, one sees her. Unkempt, courageous, she exposes herself to bullets and sabre-blades, displaying a mixture of heroism and cynicism. She is both repellent and majestic, despairing yet proud. She swears with all her working-class rage. Drunk, stinking of wine and face powder, she embraces the rabble of sans-culottes as she prepares herself for death<sup>46</sup>... Exasperated by her profession, she turns times of upheaval into cruel and insane orgies.

But daily life is enough to give her strength of character and endurance. Like philosophers, she adjusts well to universal decadence.<sup>47</sup> Her desire to survive is so strong that she endures the squalor in which she lives, and, in the end, it is we who are frightened when we happen to pass by her...

Kings have loved prostitutes, worshipping them like goddesses, because they saw in them superior creatures who were fearless, unconstrained by duty, indifferent to taboo. Priestesses, they served the atavistic instincts that make all men equal, that make a mockery of social vanity. Prostitutes have attracted kings who saw in them the only creatures who could make them forget the hypocrisy of class systems.

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43 In the same Chapter of *Un gentilhomme*, the young prostitute thinks she notices this "homicidal gleam" in the eyes of her visitor, who has not eaten anything for several days: "Because the gestures of the hungry look like the gestures of the criminal, the same sinister gleam shines in the eyes of [both]... There is a time when both of them follow the same inexorable fate... For a few seconds, she anticipated with dreadful anguish being stabbed by a visitor" (*loc. cit.*, p. 895).

44 The Bulgarian text uses the French words "larbins" and "grooms", together with an explanation given in brackets: "little servant" and "little lackey" (Alexandre Lévy).

45 "Pour M. Lépine"’s prostitute explains about the cops: "It's been a month since the agents came.. They took me in... It's been only three days since they let me out. (...) If only I had had twenty francs to give them, they would have left me in peace... Ah! The swines! No, really! Some ask for 'happiness', others for money. Me, they always ask me for money. That sort of things shouldn't exist" (*Contes cruels*, volume II, p. 364).

46 It is difficult not to think of the famous painting by Delacroix, *La Liberté guidant le peuple*.

47 It had been Mirbeau's leitmotif since the early 1880's, most notably in his crepuscular editorials in the *Grimaces*.

## THE PROSTITUTE'S LOVE

The procurer – a kind of human hyena – is the only love object the prostitute has. Thanks to him, she feels proud to give herself to a lover she has chosen on her own. The money she hands over to him every day is proof she has taken her revenge on the rich man who is her enemy. The “whore” entrusts to her pimp what is most precious to her : her love, her sexual spontaneity. With him she shares her modest life. But her profession forces her to betray this union several times a day. Authorising her to couple with her clients, the pimp affords her a better understanding of prostitution and its incompatibility with love, and for that she is grateful to him. A law exists between them, more inflexible than the laws that govern the middle-class. With her procurer, the street-walker achieves something seemingly impossible: prostituting herself without committing any moral transgression. If she gives herself willingly to another, she risks death. Men kill for her, yet a passer-by need only give her a wink and a coin to possess her without anyone caring...

It is in the society of whores and pimps that one can best fathom the mystery of a woman's heart, the subject of so much literature, the focus of so many dramas<sup>48</sup>. What is important to them is sincerity of emotion, not the pretence of a purely physical act. The prostitute reveals to her clients the most intimate secrets of her body without her procurer objecting. But what he is ready to defend with his knife is the hidden passion she has for him. True betrayal involves the heart and the imagination, and that is an act of treason the pimp would not forgive. Herein lies a strange paradox. Without knowing it, the pimp distinguishes between the physical and moral claims he makes upon the prostitute. If, on her days off, she sees her boyfriend and gives him money or presents – if she dares to smile or proposition another man – she turns into a woman for whom blood will be shed. All it takes is one gesture, done with a woman's pureness and sincerity, to make a man happy or unhappy. The procurer may indeed exploit and physically abuse the prostitute. But she cares for him since he is the only one with whom she can have a true relationship, a relationship different from the one imposed by middle-class society. With her pimp, the prostitute she can afford the luxury of actually having a man, to whom she gives for free the tenderness she is forced to sell to others. With her pimp, she is happy knowing that she can also act on her demands, even if it means living under his yoke the rest of the time.

If, together, the pimp and prostitute do not find love, at least they experience what is most essential in human relationships : sincerity, tenderness, and trust. Unexpectedly, this peculiar couple

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48 Another of Mirbeau's leitmotif. In his opinion, the woman is almost always the stake or the instigator of the greatest crimes: “The most atrocious crimes, the ones that had made us shiver the most, are almost always the woman's work. She is the one who imagines them, who thinks them up, prepares them, runs them”, he writes on November 6<sup>th</sup> 1898. See the frontispiece of *Le Jardin des supplices* and Chapter III in *Contes cruels*.

becomes increasingly sympathetic. They confirm the suspicion that instincts are inevitably frustrated and perverted by flaws in the organisation of society<sup>49</sup>. They suggest that there is no one not susceptible of being victimised by a society incorrectly seen as “moral” and “virtuous”. The highest authorities set bad examples<sup>50</sup>. In rich, bourgeois environments, love is mocked, and no one cares about the consequences or expresses remorse. This is what must not be forgotten by those who profess to be indignant and disgusted by the sight of the ladies of the night walking through sordid streets in search of clients. All who enjoy the fruits of “civilisation” and yet criticise the prostitute are nonetheless responsible for what she represents.

Before us lies the defiled corpse of the Ideal Woman, imprisoned and humiliated by men in the name of love or terror for over thirty centuries. If the social system tolerates the aberration of paying for an act that nature has determined to be free, can we blame these women for the position they are in without their really having chosen it? Why such hypocrisy? Why this false philanthropy? Why the protests against this “dreadful slavery” that society itself has instituted?...

When one goes lower into the prostitute’s world, one finds that lesbianism is often the only consolation available to these girls<sup>51</sup>, affording tenderness and physical satisfaction not found in relationships with men.

The prostitute knows this tenderness well before she reaches the age of maturity. Once she’s a woman, it is something she shares it with her other co-workers.

In the company of another woman, the prostitute experiences a specific pleasure, along with proof of the trust that a man will never give her. Lesbian embraces are free and spontaneous, and therefore less perverted than those they share with male clients. There no longer seems to be any vice in kisses exchanged between innocent children. The fearsomeness of male jealousy does not extend to these relationships. Men even encourage them, judging them to be harmless games that keep sexual temptation at bay... Only a woman can truly appreciate another woman and reveal herself to her totally. Even the most sensitive and intelligent man cannot understand a woman’s spiritual life. His conception of the world and of himself is dictated by reason. The woman, however, thinks with her sex<sup>52</sup>, and the images and ideas that come from her body are only intellectualised later. Consequently, a

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49 Cf. *supra*, note 35.

50 Mirbeau develops this idea in *Le Journal d’une femme de chambre* (1990), really an inventory of middle-class vices, and also in two of his *Farces et moralités*, *Vieux Ménages* (1894) and *Scrupules* (1902), collected in our edition of his *Théâtre complet*.

51 Paul Adam has notably dealt with this topic in *Chair molle* (1885). According to the gossip related by Edmond de Goncourt, Mirbeau’s wife, Alice Regnault, a woman of loose morals, was involved in lesbian practises. Mirbeau evokes lesbian relationships in *Le Jardin des supplices* (between Clara and Annie) and incidentally in *Le Journal d’une femme de chambre*.

52 In an article of an astonishing “gynecophobia”, published on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1892, Mirbeau, under a pseudonym that his wife was unaware of, wrote with even more brutality: “the woman is not a brain, she is only her sex, and nothing more. She has only one role in the universe, of making love, that is, continuing the race.”

conversation between two women will always remain unfathomable to a man<sup>53</sup>. Two women who have just met often know more about each other than their husbands do after many years of marriage... Instinctively driven towards intimacy, they share confidences and compare bodies. Those who are most sincere are curious about their friend's body, valuing it dispassionately, appraising it objectively – as hunters vaunt and compare their weapons and the method of their functioning... Even if their friendship does not evolve into a lesbian relationship, they feel a shared attraction and establish a special intimacy.

The ease of these mutual confidences makes intercourse all the more meaningful. Having neither social support, nor public respect, nor family, nor a thoughtful lover – nothing that could satisfy her desire to be protected, comforted, assisted –, the prostitute is engaged in a continuous struggle for life. She is an actress required to smile and please, even when she feels soiled and indignant. Enduring exhaustion, dizziness, she entertains thoughts of suicide. Apart from alcohol, what refuge does she have in this world? Seeing the doors of society closed to her, she has only the embrace of a friend to make her forget the solitude of the bed from which her client has left. Sinful acts thus become acts of compassion. Familiar with each other's degrading routine, these women are the sole source of comfort in a merciless world. It is her lesbian friend who visits the dying prostitute in the hospital and who brings to the graveyard a flower in memory of her friend<sup>54</sup>...

Nothing stops her. Nothing disgusts her. Only in that supposedly shameful liaison does the prostitute find goodness, generosity of spirit, and sincerity.

In the love these girls share with one another, they may experience true spiritual elevation. United in their hatred of men, they work together to capitalise on male lechery, and whether they are greedy, sly, mendacious, or aggressive – they are like unhappy children who must make common cause.

Young, naked, they have leaned over the abyss, glimpsing an open hand in which money gleams. That hand may have saved them from death, but its fingers have also closed on them inexorably<sup>55</sup>...

Whether it is the vice officer's fist or the sweaty palm of a man, that hand weighs heavily on the prostitute's shoulder. Prostitution is a form of slavery from which a woman needs relief, even in the sincerity and compassion of a lesbian's kiss.

The most noble and sincere love known to a prostitute comes when she falls in love with a man

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Idea inherited from Schopenhauer.

53 On the strangeness of sexes to one another, see the short play *Les Amants*, collected in Mirbeau's *Théâtre complet*, and "Vers le bonheur" and "Mémoire pour un avocat", in *Contes cruels*, volume II. Also see Pierre Michel's study "Un chef d'œuvre méconnu : *Amants*", in the special *L'Orne Littéraire* on *Octave Mirbeau*, Alençon, June 1992, pp. 61-67.

54 The narrator of *Notes from Underground* tells Lisa, the young prostitute: "When you're at death's door, they'll all turn away from you (...). On your grave, there will be no sighs, no tears, no memories. Your name will disappear from the face of the earth as if you had never existed" (Chapter VII).

55 The metaphor used in the Bulgarian text is quite awkward, and I am not sure of having managed to make it coherent enough (Alexandre Lévy).

who doesn't belong to her environment.

Those considered "honest" women change radically when they cross the boundary between platonic love and sensual love. When in love, however, the prostitute often does things the other way around. The obligation to sell her body without the slightest desire changes her conception of sexual intercourse, making it an unreflecting, mechanical act. This enables her to better apprehend pure love, unlike the "honest" woman, who, once initiated into the secrets of sexuality, cannot differentiate between spiritual love and its physical expression. Whereas her respectable counterpart becomes the slave of her dominant partner, the prostitute is not afraid of a man or his sexual power. If she meets a man who loves her sincerely, their love becomes a beautiful thing, because there is nothing carnal to it. It is given freely. In giving herself to her friend, she expresses her gratitude, her fidelity, and her tenderness. Looking for an idyllic love with the desperation of one whose body alone has been desired, she discovers, that, once found, this love opens up a new world. A young lady just initiated into the mysteries of physical love may only engage in sexual fantasies, yet a prostitute who falls in love turns away from carnal and perverted things<sup>56</sup>. Her perception of the world may become more elevated than that of a young bride, who, in discovering the novelty of sexual pleasure and the recurrence of her desire, begins to exhibit signs of coquetry, capriciousness, and cunning, pleased with the power that comes from granting or refusing the gift of her body. Disenchanted as a result of her professional experience, the prostitute already knows all that, and she does not intend to mix sex with love.

For a man, sexual satiation is accompanied by a sort of melancholic bliss. Reason, momentarily repressed by the urgency of his desire, returns, while a sleepy consciousness hovers over his tired body. It is a moment many sybarites prefer to the orgasm itself.<sup>57</sup> But in the end, it is always mixed with a bitter feeling, signalling the re-emergence of dissatisfaction and regret that come with the painful return to life. All who are looking for the infinite seek the prolongation of that moment. This is the prostitute's secret skill: restoring that instant, reawakening man to the attraction of sexual pleasure. For the one she loves, she wants to do all she can do to make him happy. For her, it is a liberating gesture that leads to love. Other women may regard romantic conversation, the tenderness of a fleeting kiss, the poetic expression of love as ways to bring an affair to completion. For them, physical love is a goal to reach, while for the prostitute, it has one that has already been attained, enabling spiritual love to be revealed to her in its entirety<sup>58</sup>. A sensitive man who is loved by a prostitute, having possessed her in all ways, will accord her the happiness of kissing her hand. And how grateful she will be if he shows that

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<sup>56</sup> It is in such a way that the prostitute from *Un gentilhomme* "gently" turns the narrator's hand away, after having just saved him by her sacrifice (*op. cit.*, pp. 898-899).

<sup>57</sup> For instance, Jean Mintié writes, in *Le Calvaire*: "Eagerly I contemplate her (Juliette)... She sleeps beside me, calmly and deeply like a child. And for the first time, possession leaves me with no regret, no disgust; for the first time, I am able, my heart moved and grateful, my flesh still quivering with desire, to look at a woman who has just given herself to me. What I feel is something indefinable, something very soft, very grave too, and something very religious, a sort of Eucharistic ecstasy..." (*Œuvre romanesque*, vol. I, 2000, p. 211).

<sup>58</sup> In the first Chapter of *Un gentilhomme*, the face of the prostitute who had just sacrificed herself so that the narrator could eat "radiates with an angelically pure joy" (p. 897).

respect! While other women think their lover has a duty towards them, the prostitute is thankful to the considerate man, joyfully giving him what she has always sold before.

## VI

### HER FUTURE

The more one studies the prostitute's material and physical conditions, the more one is inclined to excuse her. Considered apart, as an isolated element of society, she is disgusting and frightening. It is easy to blame her for her cynicism, for her shameful condition, and her rapaciousness. But one ends by wondering why, all things considered, "honest people" don't treat her with more sincerity and compassion.

The study of the relationship between the prostitute and the social organisation does no credit to society.

Today's society condemns and reviles a creature that it has created and exploited itself. In an unforgivable display of hypocrisy, society supervises the "production" of sex-workers, yet also continues to demand their destruction<sup>59</sup>

This is why, while I was writing these lines and thinking about the prostitute's wretched condition, I was overwhelmed by pity, a pity that soon gave way to indignation at society. Prostitutes are indisputably victims of the debility and egoism of the upper classes. They are even the most unhappy of these victims, for, added to the risks of death and misery, are shame and humiliation.

In her own way, the prostitute is a worker<sup>60</sup>. While others may produce bread, clothes, or entertainments for the mind, the prostitute satisfies needs that are no less urgent, no less vital than our need for daily bread. She provides the sexual pleasure that is indispensable to everyone<sup>61</sup>. She contributes to the balance of a man's sex life, whether he lives with someone, is married, or has chosen to stay single. The prostitute works with her body. Few workers have a sense of personal morality, but those who do, strive to cultivate and protect it. However, self-contempt is expected of the prostitute. Even latrine cleaners and ragmen derive some sort of self-esteem from the exercise of their job. But the creature who satisfies men's sexual desires enjoys neither dignity nor the gratitude society shows even to street-sweepers and nightmen. While they are workers, she is only a "whore"... For a woman, this appellation is one of the most degrading insults. And despite all that, she is the person with whom man accomplishes one of the most essential acts of life. Wouldn't it be more reasonable to assign part of the responsibility to him, the man who finds this miserable creature and with whom he accomplishes an act that he could have just as easily have carried out with the woman he lives with?

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59 We have the same idea in "Pour M. Lépine" : "She is not the guilty one. She is exactly as society has wanted her to be, society whose insatiable appetite needs its daily portion of human souls" (*Contes cruels*, volume II, p. 365).

60 This thesis defines the difference between anarchists and socialists. See Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de noce*, Flammarion, 1982, p. 357.

61 The right to pleasure is also a typically anarchist thesis. Cf. Alain Corbin, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

The accusation of laziness that is often levelled at the street-walker is similarly unfair. She endures the most painful fatigue and the most brutal violence with a smile on her face. Unentitled to hygiene, denied respite, she soon withers. Exhausted, she succumbs to alcoholism or is exposed to other diseases. The fragile prostitute has none of the advantages enjoyed by other workers: neither the support of a union nor the expectation of a pension<sup>62</sup>. She leaves her bed only for the comforts of the grave. No one cries for her ; no one grants her a final pardon. Death alone restores the equality that was denied to her in life...

But a new era is beginning. Women's living conditions, their way of thinking are undergoing a radical revolution. Everywhere women are invoking the right to be neither idealised nor enslaved. Everywhere, they are demanding to be men's equals, afforded the same rights. They are refusing to be decoratively useless, entertained in marriage as "kept women" fed in exchange for their sexual favours. Today, women want a legitimate social status ; they want to learn jobs which will protect them from hunger. They want control of their own bodies and their own possessions. They demand the freedom to study, to improve their minds, to think freely, to decide themselves and for themselves; to replace the war of the sexes with a more dignified form of contract<sup>63</sup>.

Soon the day will come when prostitutes join this movement. Having managed to develop their intelligence despite the abuse of their body, they will give themselves dispassionately, regarding their beauty as capital assuring them an income for life<sup>64</sup>. No longer will their job prevent them from gaining instruction. Retaining their reason and lucidity, they will free themselves from their pimps and will break their addiction to alcohol. Their job will no longer exclude them from the social order. It will no longer prevent them from cultivating their own tastes, from having their own friends, expressing their own opinions, and choosing their own clients. Enlightened and with clear consciences, they will become women of the middle-class.

When they reach this state, society's perception of prostitutes will also change. Women who sell

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62 In his article from November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1896, "Pour M. Lépine", Mirbeau evoked a "miserable street-wanderer" : "Old more from misery than from age, withered by hunger, [...] deformed by the horrible work of her tragic profession, forced under the threat of a knife, to walk, to walk in the night, [cultivating] the desire that loiters about and that searches, turned away by the procurer who despoils her and the policeman who fleeces her, forced to move from furnished accommodations to prison, she is a sorrowful scene to look at" (*Contes cruels*, volume II, p. 361).

63 Mirbeau had already developed this thesis in *Chroniques du Diable*, in *L'Événement*, in 1884-1885.

64 Mirbeau already analysed this new type of prostitute, thrifty rather than extravagant, in a 1881 article: "She thinks less of getting her legs over, of doing the rounds of parties and pleasures, of drinking champagne and singing obscene refrains than of filling her silk stocking with good gold coins and good banknotes, of investing her savings so that they will provide good interest, and of being given in money the amounts previously spent on orgies." And he added : "Being a courtesan is not a vice anymore; it is a business" (*L'Illustration*, January 8<sup>th</sup> 1881). Let us mention that Alice Regnault belonged to that type of courtesan : she wisely invested in property the money she had earned by selling her charms. Moreover, she already had acquired the profile of the future prostitutes as imagined by Octave: she had the bearing of a lady, she wrote novels (*Mademoiselle Pomme*, 1886, *La Famille Carmettes*, 1888), she painted (one of her paintings – a portrait of Mirbeau – was even exhibited at the 1886 Salon), she received the greatest artists and writers of that time (Rodin, Monet, Pissarro, Mallarmé, Goncourt, Zola, etc.). In short, she brought about her own conversion. About Alice, see Pierre Michel's monograph, *Alice Regnault, épouse Mirbeau, À l'Écart*, Reims, 1993.

themselves will finally hold up their heads, uniting to protect themselves from humiliation, theft, disease, submission, slavery, and exploitation by brothel managers, hotel-keepers, usurers, and criminals.

Supported by men of letters and moralists, they will overturn inhuman laws and escape the humiliation of compulsory medical examinations. They will be “state-approved”, and not only in the derisive and hypocritical police sense of the term. New laws will be promulgated, proclaiming that marriage and cohabitation are not adequate sexual outlets. They will acknowledge that prostitution satisfies a natural need. Delivered from society’s contempt, the prostitute will benefit from the same protections accorded to other professionals.

When this time comes, there will be no longer be any prostitution as we now know it. There will only be women who give pleasure and whom clients thank with a smile<sup>65</sup>. For there is no prostitute so stupid and ill-mannered, that she would not try to obtain payment without counterfeiting some passion, vice, or perverted desire<sup>66</sup>... Only a hungry, low-class “whore” begins, like a beggar, by holding out her hand, demanding a guarantee of payment before she lets a client into her sordid bedroom. The prostitute’s cynical greed will only vanish when her safety is assured.

From time immemorial, the prostitute has always had a lover. And she will always have one, because it is only natural that she wish to accomplish an act that is not motivated by money but is instead inspired by love. If the prostitute has recourse to a procurer, it is only because she is refused protection and held in disregard. Recruited into that part of society that unites the damned and the guilty, she joins an “army of crime,” prompting “right-thinking citizens” to associate prostitution with murder and robbery. If she had been accepted and protected, she would never have endured the tyranny of pimps and thugs. But if she tries to escape them, she doesn’t find any support. What she wants is a lover, not a pimp. An open acceptance of prostitution – as a necessary social function, free from any stigma – would eliminate these vices and the people who indulge them. But will lives and civilisations sooner perish than these prejudices? Such is the question that society must answer<sup>67</sup>...

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65 Paul Robin, libertarian pedagogue and neo-Malthusian propagandist, like Mirbeau, displayed the same optimism. See Alain Corbin, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-361. As a matter of fact, Mirbeau has vigorously stood up for Paul Robin, when he was arbitrarily dismissed from his job as director of the Cempuis orphanage (cf. *Combats pour l'enfant, loc. cit.*, pp. 139 sq.).

66 This a point noticed by the narrator of “Pour M. Lépine” : “She has become self-confident again. She understands that she shouldn’t humiliate herself anymore, that she might not be so ugly anymore, since I am here, since she holds me, since she has conquered, brought back a man, a man whom she has to keep, with words and caresses, a man she has to encourage to be generous with promises of love. Love!” (*Contes cruels*, volume II, p. 362).

67 This pessimism, which expresses Mirbeau’s lucid understanding of unrefined human nature, strongly contrasts with the official optimism of anarchist theoreticians. It was already the case in *Les Mauvais Bergers* in 1897. On that contradiction, see Chapter III of Pierre Michel’s study, *Les Combats d’Octave Mirbeau, and Lucidité, désespoir et écriture* (Société Octave Mirbeau, 2001).