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AGAINST THE GRAIN

by

JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS

Translated by John Howard
CHAPTER 5

The afternoon was drawing to its close when a carriage halted in front of the Fontenay house. Since Des Esseintes received no visitors, and since the postman never even ventured into these uninhabited parts, having no occasion to deliver any papers, magazines or letters, the servants hesitated before opening the door. Then, as the bell was rung furiously again, they peered through the peep-hole cut into the wall, and perceived a man, concealed from neck to waist, behind an immense gold buckler.

They informed their master, who was breakfasting.

"Ask him in," he said, for he recalled having given his address to a lapidary for the delivery of a purchase.

The man bowed and deposited the buckler on the pinewood floor of the dining room. It oscillated and wavered, revealing the serpentine head of a tortoise which, suddenly terrified, retreated into its shell.
This tortoise was a fancy which had seized Des Esseintes some time before his departure from Paris. Examining an Oriental rug, one day, in reflected light, and following the silver gleams which fell on its web of plum violet and alladin yellow, it suddenly occurred to him how much it would be improved if he could place on it some object whose deep color might enhance the vividness of its tints.

Possessed by this idea, he had been strolling aimlessly along the streets, when suddenly he found himself gazing at the very object of his wishes. There, in a shop window on the Palais Royal, lay a huge tortoise in a large basin. He had purchased it. Then he had sat a long time, with eyes half-shut, studying the effect.

Decidedly, the Ethiopic black, the harsh Sienna tone of this shell dulled the rug's reflections without adding to it. The dominant silver gleams in it barely sparkled, crawling with lack-lustre tones of dead zinc against the edges of the hard, tarnished shell.

He bit his nails while he studied a method of removing these discords and reconciling the determined opposition of the tones. He finally discovered that his first inspiration, which was to animate the fire of the weave by setting it off against some dark object, was erroneous. In fact, this rug was too new, too petulant and gaudy. The colors were not sufficiently subdued. He must reverse the process, dull the tones, and extinguish them by the contrast of a striking object, which would eclipse all else and cast a golden light on the pale silver. Thus stated, the problem was easier to solve. He therefore decided to glaze the shell of the tortoise with gold.

The tortoise, just returned by the lapidary, shone brilliantly, softening the tones of the rug and casting on it a gorgeous reflection which resembled the irradiations from the scales of a barbaric Visigoth shield.

At first Des Esseintes was enchanted with this effect. Then he reflected that this gigantic jewel was only in outline, that it would not really be complete until it had been incrusted with rare stones.

From a Japanese collection he chose a design representing a cluster of flowers emanating spindle-like, from a slender stalk. Taking it to a jeweler, he
sketched a border to enclose this bouquet in an oval frame, and informed the amazed lapidary that every petal and every leaf was to be designed with jewels and mounted on the scales of the tortoise.

The choice of stones made him pause. The diamond has become notoriously common since every tradesman has taken to wearing it on his little finger. The oriental emeralds and rubies are less vulgarized and cast brilliant, rutilant flames, but they remind one of the green and red antennae of certain omnibuses which carry signal lights of these colors. As for topazes, whether sparkling or dim, they are cheap stones, precious only to women of the middle class who like to have jewel cases on their dressing-tables. And then, although the Church has preserved for the amethyst a sacerdotal character which is at once unctuous and solemn, this stone, too, is abused on the blood-red ears and veined hands of butchers' wives who love to adorn themselves inexpensively with real and heavy jewels. Only the sapphire, among all these stones, has kept its fires undefiled by any taint of commercialism. Its sparks, crackling in its limpid, cold depths have in some way protected its shy and proud nobility from pollution. Unfortunately, its fresh fire does not sparkle in artificial light: the blue retreats and seems to fall asleep, only awakening to shine at daybreak.

None of these satisfied Des Esseintes at all. They were too civilized and familiar. He let trickle through his fingers still more astonishing and bizarre stones, and finally selected a number of real and artificial ones which, used together, should produce a fascinating and disconcerting harmony.

This is how he composed his bouquet of flowers: the leaves were set with jewels of a pronounced, distinct green; the chrysoberyls of asparagus green; the chrysolites of leek green; the olivines of olive green. They hung from branches of almandine and ouwarovite of a violet red, darting spangles of a hard brilliancy like tartar micas gleaming through forest depths.

For the flowers, separated from the stalk and removed from the bottom of the sheaf, he used blue cinder. But he formally waived that oriental turquoise used for brooches and rings which, like
the banal pearl and the odious coral, serves to de-
light people of no importance. He chose occidental
turquoises exclusively, stones which, properly
speaking, are only a fossil ivory impregnated with
coppery substances whose sea blue is choked,
opaque, sulphurous, as though yellowed by bile.

This done, he could now set the petals of his
flowers with transparent stones which had morbid
and vitreous sparks, feverish and sharp lights.

He composed them entirely with Ceylon snap-
dragons, cymophanes and blue chalcedony.

These three stones darted mysterious and per-
verse scintillations, painfully torn from the frozen
depths of their troubled waters.

The snap-dragon of a greenish grey, streaked with
concentric veins which seem to stir and change con-
stantly, according to the dispositions of light.

The cymophane, whose azure waves float over
the milky tint swimming in its depths.

The blue chalcedony which kindles with bluish
phosphorescent fires against a dead brown, choco-
late background.

The lapidary made a note of the places where the
stones were to be inlaid. "And the border of the
shell?" he asked Des Esseintes.

At first he had thought of some opals and hydro-
phanes; but these stones, interesting for their hesi-
tating colors, for the evasions of their flames, are
too refractory and faithless; the opal has a quite
rheumatic sensitiveness; the play of its rays alters
according to the humidity, the warmth or cold; as
for the hydrophane, it only burns in water and only
consents to kindle its embers when moistened.

He finally decided on minerals whose reflections
vary; for the Compostelle hyacinth, mahogany red;
the beryl, glaucous green; the balas ruby, vinegar
rose; the Sudermanian ruby, pale slate. Their feeble
sparklings sufficed to light the darkness of the shell
and preserved the values of the flowering stones
which they encircled with a slender garland of
vague fires.

Des Esseintes now watched the tortoise squat-
tting in a corner of the dining room, shining in the
shadow.

He was perfectly happy. His eyes gleamed with
pleasure at the resplendencies of the flaming corol-
læ against the gold background. Then, he grew hungry—a thing that rarely if ever happened to him—and dipped his toast, spread with a special butter, in a cup of tea, a flawless blend of Siafayoune, Moyoutann and Khansky—yellow teas which had come from China to Russia by special caravans.

This liquid perfume he drank in those Chinese porcelains called egg-shell, so light and diaphanous they are. And, as an accompaniment to these adorable cups, he used a service of solid silver, slightly gilded; the silver showed faintly under the fatigued layer of gold, which gave it an aged, quite exhausted and moribund tint.

After he had finished his tea, he returned to his study and had the servant carry in the tortoise which stubbornly refused to budge.

The snow was falling. By the lamp light, he saw the icy patterns on the bluish windows, and the hoar-frost, like melted sugar, scintillating in the stumps of bottles spotted with gold.

A deep silence enveloped the cottage drooping in shadow.

Des Esseintes fell into revery. The fireplace piled with logs gave forth a smell of burning wood. He opened the window slightly.

Like a high tapestry of black ermine, the sky rose before him, black flecked with white.

An icy wind swept past, accelerated the crazy flight of the snow, and reversed the color order.

The heraldic tapestry of heaven returned, became a true ermine, a white flecked with black, in its turn, by the specks of darkness dispersed among the flakes.

He closed the window. This abrupt transition from torrid warmth to cold winter affected him. He crouched near the fire and it occurred to him that he needed a cordial to revive his flagging spirits.

He went to the dining room where, built in one of the panels, was a closet containing a number of tiny casks, ranged side by side, and resting on small stands of sandal wood.

This collection of barrels he called his mouth organ.

A stem could connect all the spigots and control them by a single movement, so that once attached, he had only to press a button concealed in the
woodwork to turn on all the taps at the same time and fill the mugs placed underneath.

The organ was now open. The stops labelled flute, horn, celestial voice, were pulled out, ready to be placed. Des Esseintes sipped here and there, enjoying the inner symphonies, succeeded in procuring sensations in his throat analogous to those which music gives to the ear.

Moreover, each liquor corresponded, according to his thinking, to the sound of some instrument. Dry curacoa, for example, to the clarinet whose tone is sourish and velvety; kümmel to the oboe whose sonorous notes snuffle; mint and anisette to the flute, at once sugary and peppery, puling and sweet; while, to complete the orchestra, kirschwasser has the furious ring of the trumpet; gin and whiskey burn the palate with their strident crashings of trombones and cornets; brandy storms with the deafening hubbub of tubas; while the thunder-claps of the cymbals and the furiously beaten drum roll in the mouth by means of the rakis de Chio.

He also thought that the comparison could be continued, that quartets of string instruments could play under the palate, with the violin simulated by old brandy, fumous and fine, piercing and frail; the tenor violin by rum, louder and more sonorous; the cello by the lacerating and lingering ratafia, melancholy and caressing; with the double-bass, full-bodied, solid and dark as the old bitters. If one wished to form a quintet, one could even add a fifth instrument with the vibrant taste, the silvery detached and shrill note of dry cumin imitating the harp.

The comparison was further prolonged. Tone relationships existed in the music of liquors; to cite but one note, benedictine represents, so to speak, the minor key of that major key of alcohols which are designated in commercial scores, under the name of green Chartreuse.

These principles once admitted, he succeeded, after numerous experiments, in enjoying silent melodies on his tongue, mute funeral marches, in hearing, in his mouth, solos of mint, duos of ratafia and rum.

He was even able to transfer to his palate real pieces of music, following the composer step by
step, rendering his thought, his effects, his nuances, by combinations or contrasts of liquors, by approximative and skilled mixtures.

At other times, he himself composed melodies, executed pastorals with mild black-currant which evoked, in his throat, the trillings of nightingales; with the tender chouva cocoa which sang saccharine songs like "The romance of Estelle" and the "Ah! Shall I tell you, mama," of past days.

But on this evening Des Esseintes was not inclined to listen to this music. He confined himself to sounding one note on the keyboard of his organ, by swallowing a little glass of genuine Irish whiskey.

He sank into his easy chair and slowly inhaled this fermented juice of oats and barley: a pronounced taste of creosote was in his mouth.

Gradually, as he drank, his thought followed the now revived sensitiveness of his palate, fitted its progress to the flavor of the whiskey, re-awakened, by a fatal exactitude of odors, memories effaced for years.

This carbolic tartness forcibly recalled to him the same taste he had had on his tongue in the days when dentists worked on his gums.

Once abandoned on this track, his revery, at first dispersed among all the dentists he had known, concentrated and converged on one of them who was more firmly engraved in his memory.

It had happened three years ago. Seized, in the middle of the night, with an abominable toothache, he put his hand to his cheek, stumbled against the furniture, pacing up and down the room like a demented person.

It was a molar which had already been filled; no remedy was possible. Only a dentist could alleviate the pain. He feverishly waited for the day, resolved to bear the most atrocious operation provided it would only ease his sufferings.

Holding a hand to his jaw, he asked himself what should be done. The dentists who treated him were rich merchants whom one could not see at any time; one had to make an appointment. He told himself that this would never do, that he could not endure it. He decided to patronize the first one he could find, to hasten to a popular tooth-extractor,
one of those iron-fisted men who, if they are ignorant of the useless art of dressing decaying teeth and of filling holes, know how to pull the stubbornest stump with an unequalled rapidity. There, the office is opened early in the morning and one is not required to wait. Seven o'clock struck at last. He hurried out, and recollecting the name of a mechanic who called himself a dentist and dwelt in the corner of a quay, he rushed through the streets, holding his cheek with his hands repressing the tears.

Arrived in front of the house, recognizable by an immense wooden signboard where the name of "Gatonax" sprawled in enormous pumpkin-colored letters, and by two little glass cases where false teeth were carefully set in rose-colored wax, he gasped for breath. He perspired profusely. A horrible fear shook him, a trembling crept under his skin; suddenly a calm ensued, the suffering ceased, the tooth stopped paining.

He remained, stupefied, on the sidewalk; finally, he stiffened against the anguish, mounted the dim stairway, running up four steps at a time to the fourth story. He found himself in front of a door where an enamel plate repeated, inscribed in skyblue lettering, the name on the signboard. He rang the bell and then, terrified by the great red spittles which he noticed on the steps, he faced about, resolved to endure his toothache all his life. At that moment an excruciating cry pierced the partitions, filled the cage of the doorway and glued him to the spot with horror, at the same time that a door was opened and an old woman invited him to enter.

His feeling of shame quickly changed to fear. He was ushered into a dining room. Another door creaked and in entered a terrible grenadier dressed in a frock-coat and black trousers. Des Esseintes followed him to another room.

From this instant, his sensations were confused. He vaguely remembered having sunk into a chair opposite a window, having murmured, as he put a finger to his tooth: "It has already been filled and I am afraid nothing more can be done with it."

The man immediately suppressed these explanations by introducing an enormous index finger into his mouth. Muttering beneath his waxed fang-like
moustaches, he took an instrument from the table.

Then the play began. Clinging to the arms of his seat, Des Esseintes felt a cold sensation in his cheek, and began to suffer unheard agonies. Then he beheld stars. He stamped his feet frantically and bleated like a sheep about to be slaughtered.

A snapping sound was heard, the molar had broken while being extracted. It seemed that his head was being shattered, that his skull was being smashed; he lost his senses, howled as loudly as he could, furiously defending himself from the man who rushed at him anew as if he wished to implant his whole arm in the depths of his bowels, brusquely recoiled a step and, lifting the tooth attached to the jaw, brutally let him fall back into the chair. Breathing heavily, his form filling the window, he brandished at one end of his forceps, a blue tooth with blood at one end.

Faint and prostrate, Des Esseintes spat blood into a basin, refused with a gesture, the tooth which the old woman was about to wrap in a piece of paper and fled, after paying two francs. Expectorating blood, in his turn, down the steps, he at length found himself in the street, joyous, feeling ten years younger, interested in every little occurrence.

"Phew!" he exclaimed, saddened by the assault of these memories. He rose to dissipate the horrible spell of this vision and, returning to reality, began to be concerned with the tortoise.

It did not budge at all and he tapped it. The animal was dead. Doubtless accustomed to a sedentary existence, to a humble life spent underneath its poor shell, it had been unable to support the dazzling luxury imposed on it, the rutilant cope with which it had been covered, the jewels with which its back had been paved, like a pyx.