All for Love

Dan Jacobson

From their quasi-honeymoon on the Adriatic, Louise and Mattachich returned to the still-wintry streets of Vienna, where leaves and buds lagged far behind their Mediterranean counterparts and a Siberian wind pinched every ear and finger exposed to it. For the lovers it was as if they had gone back in time to a city that was as they had left it, climatically and in every other way, while they themselves had passed through an irreversible change in relation to one another and the world at large. Before Abbazia they could not have guessed what they would do when they at last managed to meet and speak to one another, face to face; now they knew - and much else besides. That mystery had been resolved; other unguessable possibilities were still to reveal themselves, one by one.

So: back to Vienna. 1896. The end of the century approaching. The high-point of a period that would lead historians of a later generation to make exaggerated reference to the city as 'the birth-place of the modern world'. Which presents a temptation here that has to be resisted. There is no need for you to imagine that this slight, bearded, firm-gazed, intensely respectable Jew, who looks on with interest as Louise and her retinue pull up in front of the Coburg palace in Seilerstrasse, is Dr Sigmund Freud (author so far only of Studies in Hysteria). Or that the abstracted, faintly smiling 22-year-old on the far side of the park is Arnold Schönberg, listening inwardly to fragments of sound that will eventually become his tone-poem Verklärte Nacht. Or that several city blocks from him Gustav Klimt is striking a price with a consumptive prostitute whom he is eager to paint in the overblown, romantic manner he will soon abandon for something stiffer, stranger, more hieratic. Or that the little boy with a wide forehead, a sharp nose and intense eyes, walking with his plainly intimidated governess towards the Franziskaner Kirche, is Ludwig Wittgenstein, who himself has no idea that within a few decades he will transform the direction of philosophical inquiry in the English-speaking world. Equally there is no point in imagining that any of these people - or any other Viennese poet, thinker and artist who will eventually achieve a stature comparable to theirs - is going to be casually snubbed by Louise or Philipp or Stephanie (at a formal reception, say, or a theatrical performance), who will never know just how important that unknown person will appear to be when they themselves have been all but completely forgotten.

No doubt Louise and Philipp attended a Schnitzler premiere or two; and Stephanie might (later) see Gustav Mahler mount the rostrum in the Stadtsoper, after he had painstakingly converted from Judaism to Christianity in order to make himself eligible for the conductor's job. But none of this mattered to them. They were preoccupied with what they had always considered truly significant: their health, their relations with one another, the exact degree of precedence given them on royal occasions, their clothes, public appearances, shopping, affairs, gossip, hunting, gambling, occasional political crises, the scanning of the newspapers for mention of their names. In one of the memorable phrases that Louise produces from time to time in her autobiography, she summarizes life in and around Franz Joseph's Hofburg as

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a 'combination of Spanish etiquette and German discipline': a society in which it was unthinkable that families of royal and ducal blood should marry out of their kind; in which male members of the imperial court and the high aristocracy (the 'First Society'), let alone underlings like cabinet ministers and senior civil servants, usually wore military uniform in public; and in which status and styles of address were as carefully calibrated as the stars, ribbons, sashes and epaulettes that embellished the men's jackets and tunics. Among the women-folk the signals of relative standing were even more elaborate and changed more from season to season, but they were always plain to the eye that had been trained to recognize them.

Yet it was into this world that Louise attempted to insert her lover, the murky stepson of a Croatian baron whom no one in Vienna had ever heard of. (Of his real father, if he had ever had such a thing, even less was known.) If she had discreetly taken a lover from an 'acceptable' family whose presence in her life Philipp could have tacitly acknowledged and ignored, people would have talked of it and let her get on with it. So many years had passed since Philipp and Louise had had anything but formal relations with one another that he felt no jealousy, no prurience even, in thinking about her with another man, or men; merely a patronizing, faintly incredulous wonder as to what they might find in her and why anyone in his right mind would choose to have anything to do with her.

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