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Opening Extract from...

The Paris Winter

Written by Imogen Robertson

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The Paris Winter



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PROLOGUE

At the Académie Lafond oil on board 29.3 × 23.6 cm

This charming, loosely painted study shows a life-class in progress. The model is just visible on the left, but it is the students – bored, intent or nervous – who are the subjects of the painting. One seems to be blowing on her hands to warm them. Lafond began offering training to young artists, male and female, in 1875 and opened his first all-female atelier in 1890, seven years before women were admitted to the Académie des Beaux Arts. He managed his various studios in Paris with great success until his death in 1919. His students received a thorough training in oils and were encouraged to be both experimental and imaginative in their use of colour and in their composition.

The tonal range in this painting is narrow and the colours cold, the model almost invisible and the students placed almost haphazardly in the frame. In this way, the artist gives an impression of a snatched, unstaged moment on a chilly morning. Note the middle-class appearance of the women in

the portrait. Lafond's fees for women were high, but his reputation was irreproachable.

Extract from the catalogue notes to the exhibition 'The Paris Winter: Anonymous Treasures from the de Civray Collection', Southwark Picture Gallery, London, 2010

Part One

Saturday, 20 November 1909, Paris

CHAPTER 1

THE NEWS OF THE SUICIDE OF ROSE CHAMPION reached her fellow students at the Académie Lafond on a pale wintry morning a little before ten o'clock. The heat from the black and clanking stove had not yet reached the far corners of the studio, and the women on the outer reaches of the group had to blow on their fingers to make them warm enough to work. Maud Heighton was always one of the first to arrive each day and set up her easel, which meant she could have taken her pick of places on each Monday when the model for the week was chosen, but the Englishwoman liked to sit on the far eastern side of the room. The challenge of the narrow angle she had on the model throne and whatever man, woman or child happened to occupy it seemed to please her – and she returned to the spot week after week when warmer ones, or those with an easier angle of view were available.

She was there that morning, silent and studious as ever, when the news of Rose's death came tumbling up the stairs, so she was among the first to hear it. It was unfortunate – shocking even – that the news reached the female students so raw and sudden, but even in the best-run establishments, such things do occur.

It was by chance the women painting in Passage des Panoramas heard so quickly and so brutally of the tragedy. One of Lafond's

male students, a young romantic Englishman called John Edwards, lived in the room beside Rose Champion's in a shabby tenement hunkered off the Boulevard Clichy. It was an unpleasant building without gas or electricity, and with only one tap which all the inhabitants had to share. He knew his neighbour was a student in one of the all-female ateliers, but she was not pretty enough to attract his attention, not while the streets were full of French girls who made it their business to charm the male gaze; what's more, he assumed that as a woman she would have little of interest to say about art. When he took up his residence, though, he noticed that Rose kept herself and her threadbare wardrobe clean and approved of that, then thought no more about her. In the month they had been neighbours they had had one short conversation on the stairs about the teaching at Académie Lafond. It ended when he asked to see her work and Rose told him he wouldn't understand it. He had wished only to be polite and was offended by her refusal. They did not speak again.

The walls that divided their rooms were thin and he happened to be awake and waiting that morning for the matt-grey light of the Paris dawn to filter into the sky. It was the hour and the season when the city looked unsure of itself. In the full darkness, the clubs and cabarets shone like the jewels. The city then was a woman in evening dress certain of her beauty and endlessly fascinating. The air smelled of roasting chestnuts, and music spilled out of every café, humble or luxurious, into the streets. In the full light of day Paris was chic and confident. The polished shops were filled with colour and temptation and on every corner was a scene worth painting. It was modern without being vulgar, tasteful without being rigid or dull. A parade of elegant originality. Only in this hour, just before dawn on a winter's morning, did the city seem a little haggard, a little stale. The shutters were up and the cafés all

closed or closing. The streets were almost empty – only the occasional man, purple in the face and stale with smoke and drink, hailing a cab in Place Pigalle, or the old women washing out the gutters with stiff-brushed brooms.

Sitting in the window with a blanket round his shoulders and his pipe clamped between his teeth, John Edwards was thinking about Matisse, his solid blocks of colour that at times seemed ugly, but with an ugliness more honest than beauty. He pictured himself making this argument to the poets and painters who gathered at *Le Lapin Agile* in Montmartre; he imagined them nodding seriously then telling their friends they had found an Englishman of talent and wisdom. They would introduce him to the most interesting art dealers in the city, the most advanced collectors and critics. He would write a manifesto . . .

He was enjoying the opening night of his first sensational solo show when he heard the sound of a chair overturning and the creak of a rope. There was no doubt where it came from. He dropped the blanket from his shoulders, ran into the corridor and started hammering at the door, calling her name, then rattling the handle. It was locked. By the time he put his shoulder to the door, the other residents of the house had emerged from their rooms and were watching, peering over the banister rails, their eyes dull with the new day. Finally the lock splintered and he tumbled into the room. She had hung a rope from one of the central beams. Her body still swung a little from side to side like a pendulum just before it stops completely. John had to scream in the face of the waiter who lived in the other room on this floor before he would help him get her down. It was too late. She was most likely dead even before he had begun shouting her name.

They laid her on the bed and one of the women went to phone the police from *Le Rat Mort* on Place Pigalle. He waited with the

body until they arrived. The misery in the room pressed on him, as if Rose Champion had left a desperate ghost behind her to whisper in his ear about the hopeless vanity of his ambitions.

By the time the police arrived, John Edwards was not young or romantic any more. Once the gendarmes had been and the morgue van had taken away the body, he packed his trunk and left the building for good. He called at Académie Lafond to inform his professor what had happened and of his decision to leave Paris, but his master was not there and the rather off-hand way Mrs Lafond spoke to him irritated his already over-strung nerves. Rather than leave a note he simply told her what had happened, perhaps rather more graphically than necessary and without regard to the fact there was a servant in the room. The latter's shocked face haunted him as he prepared to return to his mother's comfortable house in Clapham and resume his career as a clerk at Howarth's Insurance Company in the City. There can be too much truth.

The servant in the room was the maid who tended to the ladies in the Passage des Panoramas atelier. She left the offices in Rue Vivienne before Mme Lafond could tell her to keep the news to herself and so it escaped, awkward and disturbing and stinking of misery.

Even though the women who studied at Académie Lafond paid twice the fees the men did, their studio accommodation was no more than adequate. The only light came from the glassed ceiling and the room was narrow and high, so that it seemed sometimes as if their models were posing at the bottom of a well. The stove was unpredictable and bad-tempered. Nevertheless it was worth paying

the money to be able to study art. The rough manners of the male students meant that no middle-class woman could work in a mixed class – and sharing life models with male students caused ugliness. At the women-only studios a female could prepare for a career as an artist without sacrificing her dignity or reputation, and even if the professional artists who visited them did not spend as much time guiding their female students, at least they did come, so the modest women could make modest progress and their families could trust that although they were artists, their daughters were still reasonably sheltered. The suicide of a student put a dangerous question-mark over this respectability, and news of it would probably have been suppressed if it had been given privately. As it was, it spilled out of Lafond's office and made its way up the stairs and into the room where Maud Heighton and her fellow students were at work.

Maud, perched on a high stool with her palette hooked on her thumb, heard their teaching assistant exclaim and turned her head. Mademoiselle Claudette was making the sign of the cross over her thin chest. That done, she squeezed her almond-shaped eyes closed for a second, then helped the maid set down the kettle on the top of the stove. When it was safe, she placed a hand on the servant's shoulder.

Maud frowned, her attention snagged by that initial gasp. There was some memory attached to the sound. Then it came to her. It was just the noise her sister-in-law, Ida, had made on the morning of the fire. Her brother, James, had driven the car right up to Maud where she stood at the front of the fascinated crowd, her hair down and her face marked with soot. Ida had got out of the car without waiting for James to open the door for her, looked at the smoking ruins of the auctioneer's place of business and the house Maud and James had grown up in, and given just that same gasp.

Maud turned towards Mademoiselle Claudette the moment the older woman rested her hand on the maid's shoulder. The assistant was normally a woman of sharp, nervous movements, but this gesture was softly intimate. Maud wanted to click her fingers to stop the world, like a shutter in a camera, and fix what she saw: the neatly coiffed heads of the other young women turned away from their easels, the model ignored, all those eyes leading towards the two women standing close together by the stove. The finished painting formed in Maud's mind – a conversation piece entitled *News Arrives*. The shaft of light reaching them from above fell across Mademoiselle Claudette's back, while the maid's anxious face was in shadow. Was it possible to capture shock in paint, Maud wondered – that moment of realisation that today was not going to be as other days?

Mademoiselle Claudette ushered the maid out into the hallway then closed the door to the studio behind them. The semi-sacred atmosphere of concentration still hung over the women, keeping them silent, but no one put brush to canvas again. They paused like mermaids just below the water, waiting for one of their number to be the first to break the surface, into the uncertain air.

'Rose Champion is dead!' Francesca blurted out. It was done. A flurry of exclamations ran around the room. The high walls echoed with taps and clicks as palettes were put aside, brushes set down and the women looked at the plump Prussian girl who had spoken. Her eyes were damp and her full bottom lip shook. The high collar on her blouse made her look like a champagne bottle about to burst. 'The maid said she killed herself. She was found hanged in her room this morning. Oh Lord, have mercy on us! Poor Rose!' She looked about her. 'When did we see her last?'

'Not since summer, I think,' a blonde, narrow-hipped girl answered, one of the Americans whose French accent remained

unapologetically Yankee. 'She didn't come back this year, did she?' There was general agreement. 'Did anyone see her about since then?'

'I saw her,' Maud said at last, remembering even as she spoke. She felt the eyes of the women swing towards her, she who spoke so rarely. 'She was in the Tuileries Gardens sketching Monsieur Pol with his sparrows.' The other women nodded. Pol was one of the sights of Paris, ready to be admired just outside the Louvre in his straw boater, whistling to the birds, and calling to them by name. 'It was a month ago perhaps. She was thinner, but . . . just as she always was.'

One of the students had begun to make the tea and the boiling water splashed a little. The girl cursed in her own language, then with a sigh put down the kettle and produced a coin from her pocket to pay her fine. Claudette used the money to buy the little cakes and pastries the women ate during their morning breaks. When funds were low they fined each other for inelegant phrasing. In the Paris art world, Lafond's girls were said to paint like Academicians and speak like duchesses.

'Poor Rose,' Francesca said more softly. The women sighed and shook their heads.

The room was filling with cigarette smoke and murmured conversation. '*La pauvre, la pauvre . . .*' echoed round the studio like a communal prayer.

Maud looked to see if any painting of Miss Champion's remained on the walls. Perhaps once a month during his twice-weekly visits to his students, M. Lafond would nod at one of the women's paintings and say, 'Pop it up, dear.' It was a great honour. Francesca had cried when Lafond had selected one of her pictures. He had not yet selected any work of Maud's. She had submitted successfully to the official Paris Salon early this year – the head and

shoulders oil portrait of a fellow student – but even if the Academicians approved of her worked, careful style and thought it worthy of exhibition in the Grand Palais, Lafond did not think she had produced anything fresh enough for his draughty attic classroom.

Maud had written to her brother and sister-in-law about having the painting in the exhibition. Even in the north-east of England they had heard of the Paris Salon, but the reaction had not been what she had hoped for. If James had sounded proud or impressed, she might have asked him for a loan and used the money to spend the summer in Fontainebleau and recover her health out of the heat and dust of the capital. All the other women she worked with seemed to have funds to do so. Instead he had asked if a sale were likely, reminding her that she still owed him ten pounds. Her little half-brother Albert though had sent her a cartoon of a great crowd of men in hats grouped round a painting and shouting *Hurrah!* There had been no sale. Her portrait hung high on the walls, and surrounded by so many similar works, it went unnoticed.

There *was* a canvas from Rose Champion. It showed the Place Pigalle in early-morning light. The human figures were sketchy and indistinct, blurred by movement. One of the new double-decker motor-buses, identifiable only by its colours and bulk, rattled along the Boulevard Clichy. By the fountain a few rough female figures lounged – the models, mostly Italian, some French, who gathered there every morning waiting for work from the artists of Montmartre and Pigalle. They were scattered like leaves under the bare, late-autumn trees. Rose had lavished her attention on the light; the way it warmed the great pale stone buildings of Paris into honey tones; the regular power and mass of the hotels and apartment blocks, the purple and green shadows, the glint on the pitch-black metalwork around the balconies. The American was

right, Rose had not returned to the studio after the summer, but the picture remained. M. Lafond must have bought it for himself. Maud felt as if someone were pressing her heart between their palms. The girl was dead and she was still jealous.

'She was ill,' the American said to Francesca. 'I called on her before I left for Brittany this summer. She said everything she had done was a failure and that there was . . .' she rubbed her fingertips together '. . . no money. I've never seen a woman so proud and so poor. Most girls are one or the other, don't you agree?'

'I saw her a week ago,' said an older woman, sitting near the model. Her shoulders were slumped forward. 'She was outside Kahnweiler's gallery. She seemed upset, but she wouldn't talk to me.'

Maud wondered if Rose had seen something in the wild angular pictures sold by Kahnweiler which she herself was trying to achieve but could not – whether that would have been enough to make her hang herself. Or was it hunger? More likely. Hunger squeezed the hope out of you. Maud held her hand out in front of her. It shook. I hate being poor, she thought. I hate being hungry. But I will survive. Another year and I shall be able to paint as I like and people will buy my work and I shall eat what I want and be warm. If I can just manage another winter.

She looked up, possessed by that strange feeling that someone was eavesdropping on her thoughts. Yvette, the model for the life-class that week, was watching her, her dressing-gown drawn carelessly up over her shoulders as she sat on the dais, tapping her cigarette ash out on the floor. She was a favourite in the studio, cheerfully complying when asked for a difficult pose, still and controlled while they worked but lively and happy to talk to them about other studios and artists in her breaks. Yvette was a little older than some of the girls, and occasionally Maud wondered

what she thought of them all as she looked out from the dais with those wide blue eyes, what she observed while they tried to mimic the play of light across her naked shoulders, her high cheekbones. Now the model nodded slightly to Maud, then looked away. Her face, the angle of it, suggested deep and private thought.

Mademoiselle Claudette returned and soon realised that the news she had to give was already known. The facts she had to offer were simply a repeat of what Francesca had already overheard.

'Is there anyone here who knows anything of Miss Champion's people in England?'

'I believe she had an aunt in Sussex she lived with as a child,' Maud said into the silence that followed. 'But I have no idea of her address. Were there no letters?'

'We shall discover something, I hope. Very well.' The woman looked at her watch. 'It is ten to the hour. Let us return to work at ten minutes past. Monsieur Lafond asks me to tell you that in light of this unhappy event he will reserve the pleasure of seeing you until tomorrow.' There was a collective groan around the room. Mademoiselle Claudette ignored it, but frowned as she clicked the cover back onto her watch and turned to the tea-table.

'Does he fear a plague of suicides if he tells us we are miserable oafs today?' Francesca said, a little too loudly. The students began to stand, stretch, make their way to the pile of teacups and little plates of cakes.

'My darlings, good day! How are you all on this dismal morning? Why is everyone looking so *terribly* grim?' Tatiana Sergeyevna Koltsova made her entrance in a cloud of furs and fragrance. Maud smiled. It was a pleasure to look at her. For all that she was Russian,

it seemed to Maud that Tanya was the real spirit of Paris, the place Maud had failed to become part of: bright, beautiful, modern, light. She would chat to Yvette or tease Lafond himself and they all seemed to think her charming. Not all the other women students liked her, no one with looks, talent and money will be short of enemies, but Tanya seemed blissfully ignorant of any animosity directed towards her.

Francesca straightened up from the tea-table where she had been leaning. 'Be gentle with us today, my sweet. There's been a death in the family.'

The Russian's kid glove flew up to cover her pretty little mouth. At the same moment she let her furs drop from her shoulders and her square old maid bundled forward to gather them in her arms before they could pool onto the paint-stained floor. Maud watched as Francesca lowered her voice and explained. The Russian was blinking away tears. That was the thing about Tanya. She could be genuinely moved by the sufferings of others even as she threw off her cape for her maid to catch. She arrived late every day and one could still smell on her the comfort of silk sheets, chocolate on her breath. Then she would paint, utterly absorbed, for two hours until the clock struck and the women began to pack away. She would shake herself and look about her smiling, her canvas glowing and alive with pure colour.

Yvette tied her dressing-gown round her then clambered down from the model throne on the dais and passed the table, dropping the stub of her cigarette on the floor and grabbing up a spiced cake in the same moment. As she chewed she put her hand on the Russian's elbow and led her away into a far corner of the room. The movement seemed to wake Maud. She stood and went over to the food and helped herself, trying not to move too urgently nor take too much. She ate as slowly as she could.

The Russian materialised at her side like a spirit while she was still licking her lips. 'Miss Heighton?' Maud was startled, but managed a 'Good morning'. She had never had any conversation with Tanya, only watched her from a distance as if she were on the other side of a glass panel. 'I know it is not the most pleasant day for walking, but will you take a little stroll with me after we pack away today? I have something particular to ask you.'

Maud said she would be pleased to do so. Tanya smiled at her, showing her sharp white teeth, then turned to find her place amidst the tight-packed forest of easels. Maud steered her own way back to her place on the other side of the room and stared at the canvas in front of her, wondering what the Russian could want with her. The model was once again taking her place on the raised platform. She glanced at Maud and winked. Maud smiled a little uncertainly and picked up her brush.

An atmosphere of quiet concentration began to fill the room once more – Rose Champion already, to some degree, forgotten. The food seemed to have woken Maud's hunger rather than suppressed it. She closed her eyes for a moment, waiting for the sting of it to pass, then set to work.