

A DOOR (SHOULD BE OPEN OR SHUT)

by

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Adapted from

Il Faut Qu'Une Porte Soit Ouverte ou Fermée

by

Alfred de Musset

1 ONTHE COUNT, THE MARQUISE

(The scene is the bar and lounge area of a Soho private members' club. THE MARQUISE, seated at the bar, is smoking. Beside her is a drink and a newspaper. GEORGE is busying around with glasses, reading a newspaper etc)

(THE COUNT enters)

THE COUNT

(He stumbles) I really am a blunderer. Oh, you're alone?

THE MARQUISE

Alone? That's nice, isn't it George?

THE COUNT

Sorry, George ... the usual for me. I meant that it's quiet ... Where's the usual crowd? Everyone knows Sunday's your day at the club.

THE MARQUISE

I don't mind if it's just the two of us, it's a long time since we had a good chat. (He hovers at the door) What's the matter? Have you got something to tell me?

THE COUNT

Certainly not - the whole drunken rabble will be here once the pubs call time.

THE MARQUISE

This place has gone to pot, I don't know why I still come here. You think you're in a private club but really it's open house, isn't it George? Before the war it was exclusive - artists, writers, bright young things with money. Nowadays, all the bores of London show up. And not just London! Now we get all the suburban bores too! There was some bore from Crouch End here last week. Translated some old French play and wanted to read it to me. Dear God! All the real artists are washed up or dead. Youth has moved on. Present company excepted of course.

THE COUNT

Of course.

THE MARQUISE

But I still come every week so that the bores can see my face. The rest of the time they can fucking well leave me alone.

THE COUNT

Perhaps I should leave you alone too.

THE MARQUISE

No, stay, you're different, you amuse me. Stay, sit down. If you're in the mood, talk; if not, don't bother. I'm not expecting many people today. But what is the matter? You seem ...

THE COUNT

What?

THE MARQUISE

Do you want me to spell it out? What do you think he's after George? I think the girl's back in the flat upstairs.

THE COUNT

It's true before I came here, I was ...

THE MARQUISE

What?

THE COUNT

Well ...

THE MARQUISE

Spit it out.

THE COUNT

(He sits) I don't know ... I was a bit agitated. I don't know what's wrong, I've been restless and walking all day. I drank the length of Charlotte Street without finding anybody interesting, I haven't eaten, I've seen everything at the pictures and it's cold out. I don't know what to do, I'm as vacuous as a Modigliani.

THE MARQUISE

I'm so bored I could cry. It's the weather, nobody's around. Is it still foggy out George?

THE COUNT

This fog is foul. Curse London winters. The London winter is a sickness. Romantics like the fog, it's a conspirator in their illicit loves. But it makes me sick, I've no-one to hide with or from.

THE MARQUISE

My sickness comes less from the weather out there than the company in here. These shipwrecked wasters drag me under with them. I'm getting old. I'm nearly fifty, I've lost the taste for living.

THE COUNT

I never had that taste, and what's worse is that I'm getting old. In a few years time I'll be either senile or mad. I've a horrible fear that I'll die alone in an asylum full of books.

THE MARQUISE

Let's have another drink ... The way you talk chills me to the bone. (We hear the sound of a bell outside.)

THE COUNT

(Getting up) Not for me, someone's ringing, it's the arrival of your bores.

THE MARQUISE

Let's see who it is, you must stay.

THE COUNT

No, I'm going.

THE MARQUISE

Where are you going?

THE COUNT

I don't know. (He opens the door.) I'll see you Thursday evening.

THE MARQUISE

Why Thursday?

THE COUNT

(Standing up, holding the doorknob.) Won't you be at Francis' opening? I was hoping to see you there.

THE MARQUISE

I don't want to see you if you're like this, you're too wretched. Besides, I'm going with Widmerpool.

THE COUNT

Widmerpool?

THE MARQUISE

Yes, what's it to you?

THE COUNT

That pompous ass! He's so beastly he should be elected to an abattoir, not the House of Commons. Do you know what they say?

THE MARQUISE

No. But no-one's arrived, who rang the bell then?

THE COUNT

(Looking through the door.) There's no-one there, it must have been for Suzanne upstairs, they're always trying the wrong door.

THE MARQUISE

Well shut the bloody door then, there's a horrible draught. So tell me, what do they say?

THE COUNT

(Closing the door.) They say you're thinking of remarrying, that Widmerpool is a millionaire, and that he visits you every other day.

THE MARQUISE

Oh really! Is that it? You're repeating that schoolgirl tattle to my face?

THE COUNT

You asked.

THE MARQUISE

Shall I tell you what they say about you?

THE COUNT

About me? What could anyone possibly say?

THE MARQUISE

What they say about you is just as bad, no worse, because sadly it seems to be true.

THE COUNT

What then? You're worrying me.

THE MARQUISE

No, it's no business of mine, I'm no gossip.

THE COUNT

(Sitting down again.) I'm asking you nicely. You know I value your opinion above all others.

THE MARQUISE

Rubbish.

THE COUNT

No, I mean it, you are the person that, of whom the esteem, the feeling, the ...

THE MARQUISE

Oh, Christ! You're going to make a statement.

THE COUNT

If you can't see anything, it's because you don't want to see anything.

THE MARQUISE

See what?

THE COUNT

It's easy to understand.

THE MARQUISE

I don't like guesswork, it's a child's game.

THE COUNT

You ridicule everything but, honestly, would it be possible that for a year, seeing you nearly every day, made as you are, with your talent, your poise and your beauty ...

THE MARQUISE

Oh hell! It's worse than a statement, it's a proposal! Tell me: Is it a proposal, or do you just want to wish me happy new year?

THE COUNT

Happy New Year ... But if it was a proposal?

THE MARQUISE

That's the last thing I want. I told you I'm going out later, I'm in danger of being proposed to there as well. I can't put up with two proposals in a day.

THE COUNT

Really, if that's how you feel I hope you'll be just as miserable as I am.

THE MARQUISE

I'd be happy to feel some real emotion. Sometimes I think I'd pay good money to have some genuine feeling in my life. I was having my hair done this morning and that girl was going on about... What? Who knows what? Some boyfriend nonsense. Who cares? I was in despair at the sheer fucking banality of her life. And mine too. The absurdity of it. I was sighing enough to split my soul at the prospect of having these men queue up to bore me this afternoon.

THE COUNT

Is it that bad?

THE MARQUISE

No. It's worse.

THE COUNT

Don't you want another relationship?

THE MARQUISE

A relationship? What on earth is that? No, it's too stupid. Tell me, since you're so clever, what does that mean, a relationship?

THE COUNT

It means that you love someone, and that you're happy to say so.

THE MARQUISE

Right. But think about this someone, what good does it do her to please you? Say you find me attractive and it makes you happy to tell me. Well, what then? What does that prove? Is it a reason for me to love you? If someone loves me I want it to be about more than just finding me attractive. All this flattery? Isn't it delightful the way you know you're loved is when someone - let's say Widmerpool but it could be any one of a dozen of them - plants himself in front of you and looks at you as if with a magnifying glass from your feet to your head, like a doll in a shop window, and then trots out a few trite compliments, while all the time his piggy little

(MORE)

THE MARQUISE (CONT'D)

eyes are flickering around the younger company - that's what happens to a woman of my age.

THE COUNT

You shouldn't be angry about it.

THE MARQUISE

Angry? I'm fucking livid! If I were a man and I met an attractive woman, I'd say to myself, 'There's a creature who must really have had enough compliments. I'll spare her, instead I'll have the good sense to talk about something serious. Art. Life. Ambition.' But no, it's always, 'You're so beautiful,' and then, 'You're charming, darling, simply charming.' My God! Aren't I charming! So fucking charming. Men are full of shit.

THE COUNT

I find you charming, take it how you like. (We hear the bell again.) Someone's ringing again. I'll go, I'll spare myself this vitriol. (He rises, and walks towards the door.)

THE MARQUISE

But wait (She touches him on the arm) I had something to ask you ... I can't remember what it is ... Yes! Will you be passing by Mappin and Webb in the morning?

THE COUNT

I can make the trip for you. What is it?

THE MARQUISE

Good God, another compliment! It's a necklace, well the locket, it's broken. I could just send it.

THE COUNT

Honestly, I don't mind.

THE MARQUISE

Let me show you ... (She takes the locket from her bag.) Here, do you see? There's a little point just there? It opens on the side, there, I knocked it this morning and the spring's broken.

THE COUNT

Was there a lock of hair in it?

THE MARQUISE

Maybe. What are you laughing about?

THE COUNT

Widmerpool's?

THE MARQUISE

It was my husband's hair. What is going on with those people? Who rang this time?

THE COUNT

(Looking through the door.) Another client for Suzanne.
(Double take) But I think she's still busy. No, she's let him in.

THE MARQUISE

Shut the door, you're freezing me.

THE COUNT

I'm going. But you promised to tell me what they say about me, didn't you?

THE MARQUISE

Come to the party this evening, we'll have a chat there.

THE COUNT

Oh yes, a nice quiet chat at a party! That's a good place to have a chat, to the sound of rotten jazz and the swilling of cheap wine. One man treads on your foot, the other elbows you, while a drunk student pours brown sherry down your jacket. I want you to tell me now ...

THE MARQUISE

Are you staying or going? You'll give me the 'flu.

THE COUNT

(Shutting the door and coming to sit down again.) I'm in such a bad mood. I really must stop coming to see you.

THE MARQUISE

Plain talk at last; and why would you stop seeing me?

THE COUNT

I don't know, but I know I bore you, you said so yourself just now, and I know it, I bore everyone. It's my bad luck that I live across the road from you. I can't go out without seeing your studio, and I call in mechanically, without thinking about what I'm going there to do.

THE MARQUISE

If I said that you bored me just now it's because it's not usually the case. Seriously, I enjoy seeing you.

THE COUNT

You? Not at all. Do you know what I'm going to do? Return to the country.

THE MARQUISE

Ah! What did that girl say ...?

THE COUNT

What 'girl'?

THE MARQUISE

I don't know who, your protégée. Do I know the names of your students? She came here looking for you.

THE COUNT
So that's the story?

THE MARQUISE
Exactly. Do you deny it?

THE COUNT
It's too stupid to waste time on.

THE MARQUISE
I know that you've made an impression. You've been among the
the students, everyone knows it.

THE COUNT
Like your marriage to Widmerpool?

THE MARQUISE
Back on that? And why not? Now he's an M.P. it's about time
he got married. I'm a 'distinguished widow', he's a man in
need of a wife. What could be more convenient?

THE COUNT
I'm sure you'll be very happy together. In your domestic
hell.

THE MARQUISE
It's just rumours.

THE COUNT
Some rumours have the ring of truth.

THE MARQUISE
Why don't you ask your bluestocking about the delights of
domesticity? Harriet or Felicity or whatever she's called.

THE COUNT
(Rising) I'll say goodbye. You'll make me say something I'd
regret.

THE MARQUISE
How cool you are! Don't you have any blood in your veins?

THE COUNT
You're too cruel. Isn't it enough to forbid me to love you,
without accusing me of loving someone else.

THE MARQUISE
Have I forbidden you from loving?

THE COUNT
Certainly - or to speak to you about it, at least.

THE MARQUISE
Well! I permit you now, come on, I'm ready.

THE COUNT

If you're talking seriously ...

THE MARQUISE

Why shouldn't I be?

THE COUNT

You ridicule everything, you believe in nothing. You chew men up for fun, I've seen you do it.

THE MARQUISE

Not for fun.

THE COUNT

Yes, for fun.

THE MARQUISE

Are you afraid of me? I talk about love and you say you're going to leave. I'm waiting for you to throw yourself at my feet, that's what Widmerpool did.

THE COUNT

You see, you're mocking me.

THE MARQUISE

I want you to talk straight for a change.

THE COUNT

Of course I can talk straight.

THE MARQUISE

Really? Well then, what's on your mind?

THE COUNT

(The bell rings again) Another ringing! This time I am going, I'll let you have the last word. (He opens the door.)

THE MARQUISE

I'll see you this evening won't I? But what's that racket? Is it thunder?

THE COUNT

No, it's only a hurricane, it'll pass.

THE MARQUISE

It's hideous. But shut the door, you can't go out in that weather.

THE COUNT

No-one's going to come out in this weather, you'll have some peace for a change.

THE MARQUISE

Not at all. Stay, please, but sit down, you're getting on my wick hovering like that. I like our little chats.

THE COUNT

A compliment! I thought you hated compliments.

THE MARQUISE

But it's true, I enjoy talking to you. Give me a light.

THE COUNT

(THE COUNT closes the door) Let me talk to you properly.

THE MARQUISE

I want you to.

THE COUNT

I shall.

THE MARQUISE

Frankly?

THE COUNT

Yes ... I want you to know that despite my timid heart I have the good sense to respect you. But it seems to me that one has the right, without offending the person one respects ...

THE MARQUISE

For God's sake! You say you're going to talk straight and then you prattle on like a tongue-tied professor. You're a berk. You know what a berk is don't you? You got here, you said so yourself, without knowing why. You said you were bored, you didn't know what to do. If you'd found three other people here, you would have talked all day to them about, oh I don't know, the latest novels or Palestine - if they were men - and then you would have rolled home for dinner. So it's because you found me alone that you feel you have to talk to me. And since I'm alone with you here I have to hear you torture on about how you love me. Do you know what men remind me of? Writers who have their works thrashed by the critics but always have an unpublished play in their pocket at parties. Some unexpected and unplayable tragedy, with which they'll bore you to death as soon as you're left a quarter of an hour alone with them.

THE COUNT

So, you tell me that you like my company, I reply that I love you, and then you tell me I'm a failure and a liar?

THE MARQUISE

You love me no more than you love Rita Hayworth.

THE COUNT

Oh! Really, that's too much. Listen to me, if you think I'm insincere ...

THE MARQUISE

No, no, and no! You listen to me. Do you think I don't know what you want to say? I know you're an Oxford man, but just because you're educated do you think that I've read nothing? Listen, I met a chap in the war, I don't remember where, you

(MORE)

THE MARQUISE (CONT'D)

met all sorts then. He had a collection of fifty letters, quite well written, love letters, you see. These fifty letters were composed in a way that made a sort of novel, where all situations were anticipated. There were letters for proposals, for anger, for moments of hypocrisy, for quarrels, for hope, for moments of jealousy, for bad feeling, even for days when it's raining, like today. I read them all. The author said he'd used them himself and never found a woman who could resist them later than number thirty-three. Well! I've resisted the whole lot. Do you think you could teach me something new?

THE COUNT

You really are tired of life, aren't you?

THE MARQUISE

Insults? I prefer that.

THE COUNT

Yes, you really are tired of life.

THE MARQUISE

You think so?

THE COUNT

You're as tired as an old housewife with litters of rotten children.

THE MARQUISE

Rubbish, I'm like a filly on Derby day. You think that life is some deep science that you study to learn the ways of the world? But you don't need to study it to learn; you need to do it. Listen, it'll do you good. Men who are brave enough to listen to women are extremely rare. Men have one song, a flannel song that they all perform, with the same lines, the same repetition of the same words, the same clichéd gestures, the same hackneyed tender looks. The miserable times when men lie to try and please with that fake humility ... they're only saved from tragedy by making us want to laugh, or by just boring us into silence. If I had a daughter ... If I had a daughter I'd give her this advice, 'Don't listen to one man, listen to all of them. Don't close the book and don't mark the page; leave it open, let these men tell you all their little jokes. If, by bad luck, there's one that you like, drop him; another one will come along who will disgust you with both of them by talking the same old rot. It begins at fifteen, that's when they start on you and it'll be like that until you're fifty. It'll be like that forever. That's what I know about men. Do you call that being tired of life?

THE COUNT

Horribly. And I don't believe a word of it.

THE MARQUISE

You don't believe me.

THE COUNT

How can you despise love? The words of someone who loves you have the same effect as a bad novel? His looks, his gestures, his feelings seem like a shabby play? You can get angry and tell the truth but you see nothing but lies in others. Who taught you to think like that?

THE MARQUISE

I've lived, I didn't need teaching.

THE COUNT

You think you know everything; you know nothing. Ask yourself, what experience have you had? That of a man who, dropping into the pub in a new town, sees two redheads and says to himself, 'The women are all redheads in this place.'

THE MARQUISE

I need a light.

THE COUNT

Fine, turn away, cover up your ears, hate love, that works; but to deny it exists, what a joke! You scorn me, yes me, saying, 'I know what you're going to say to me.' But don't I have the right to reply, 'Yes, perhaps you do; and I do too, I know what to say when I'm in love, but I forget when I talk to you!' There's nothing new under the sun but what does that prove?

THE MARQUISE

Oh, bravo, bravo! You speak very well, no wonder your students are in love you; when you speak it's like listening to a book.

THE COUNT

If I believed what you said, I would pity you.

THE MARQUISE

Pity me. That's nice! I don't like being pitied.

THE COUNT

What? You have the right to attack me, don't I have the right to defend myself? When you tell me I'm like a bad writer? Every man has his limits.

THE MARQUISE

This wretched thing, give me a light again.

THE COUNT

(Lighting her cigarette) If love is a tired play, then this play, as old as humanity, is the least worst show on offer. The roles are clichéd I agree but not everyone is tired of it as you are. But I'm fooling myself when I say it's old. I'm wrong ... after all is it old to be immortal?

THE MARQUISE

How poetic. (She yawns)

THE COUNT

Fine, I'm boring you, but these compliments, these proposals, all of this twaddle, are timeless, yes, tiring, ridiculous sometimes, but they accompany something else which is always young.

THE MARQUISE

What does that mean? What's old that's always young?

THE COUNT

Love.

THE MARQUISE

Oh, poetry AND eloquence.

THE COUNT

I mean it. Love is immortally young. But the way we express it is eternally old. Tired words, repetitions, these scraps of old films and novels that we borrow without knowing, all of this ragbag of words, this paraphernalia, it's a procession of old generals, of old diplomats, old ministers, it's the contents of the ante-chamber of the king; all of that passes, but the king doesn't die. Love is dead, long live love.

THE MARQUISE

Love?

THE COUNT

Love.

THE MARQUISE

Get me another drink.

THE COUNT

Another?

THE MARQUISE

Yes, I need to clear my mind. I need whiskey.

THE COUNT

Isn't love a sacred thing?

THE MARQUISE

But I tell you it's always the same tired old thing. It's absurd.

THE COUNT

It's always new but you can't invent it from scratch.

THE MARQUISE

Here's the chorus of the flannel song. Beautiful.

THE COUNT

Love's a story that's retold for every age, even in our miserable times, from Romeo and Juliet to Scarlett O'Hara.

THE MARQUISE

That's all fiction. For suckers.

THE COUNT

Your cynicism reduces everything to nothing. It's an illness that runs through society. That's absurd. Why bother even getting up in the morning? What's the point of breathing then? You might as well be dead. (THE COUNT kneels) I will make a proposal, you've pushed me too far.

THE MARQUISE

Would you mind getting up.

THE COUNT

No, first you must listen to me.

THE MARQUISE

You won't get up?

THE COUNT

No! At least not until you agree to listen.

THE MARQUISE

I've got to go.

THE COUNT

(Still kneeling.) For God's sake! You're too cruel. You make me mad, you put me into despair.

THE MARQUISE

Oh, cut the hysterics, if I wanted a man like that I'd move to Paris.

THE COUNT

(Still on his knees.) No, in all seriousness. It's true that I came here at random. I didn't count on seeing you except in passing. After all I've tried to leave three times since I got here. I didn't mean to propose to you. But our conversation, your insults, your coldness have led me further than I ever dared before to show you how I feel. The first time that I met you, I loved you, I adored you ... I'm not exaggerating ... yes, for a year, I've loved you, I don't dream ...

THE MARQUISE

Goodbye. (THE MARQUISE leaves and leaves the door open.)

THE COUNT

(Left alone, stays on his knees a moment, then stands up) It's true, the draught from that door is freezing. (He makes to leave, and sees THE MARQUISE.) You're making fun of me.

THE MARQUISE

(Leaning in the half open door frame.) Have you recovered?

THE COUNT

Yes, and I'm leaving. I'll never see you again.

THE MARQUISE

Come to the party this evening, I won't say a word.

THE COUNT

Never, I'll never see you again!

THE MARQUISE

Never?

THE COUNT

I'm lost. I love you. And I'm lost.

THE MARQUISE

Goodbye. (She makes to leave.)

THE COUNT

I'm the one who's leaving. You stay, please, I've got to go. Someone else will come along to light your cigars.

THE MARQUISE

(In a serious tone.) But seriously, what do you want from me?

THE COUNT

I want ... I would like ... I would throw my entire life at your feet; my name, my money, my entire future. I would give it all to you. Do you think that I could be interested in any other woman in the world? How could you even think that? Have I done anything to make you doubt me? You said you enjoyed my company and I thought you loved me. Or could come to love me. Am I wrong? I must be blind or insane.

THE MARQUISE

You're obviously not blind. So, you love me and want to marry me?

THE COUNT

I have thought of nothing else for a year.

THE MARQUISE

You're much younger ... You're much richer than me.

THE COUNT

Money! Is that it? What does that matter against love? One word, my life is in your hands.

THE MARQUISE

I'll tell you two French proverbs. The first is that there is nothing as important as coming to an understanding. So we should talk some more.

THE COUNT

And the second?

THE MARQUISE

Here is the second proverb. It's that a door must be either open or shut. But thanks to you this one has been neither one nor the other for three-quarters of an hour, and poor George here is frozen. So close the door and sit down with me for the evening. (She sits) Tomorrow we'll go to Mappin and Webb together.

THE COUNT

Together ... But what for?

THE MARQUISE

The ring.

THE COUNT

But the pendant?

THE MARQUISE

That can wait, life's too short to cling on to the past. I was thinking of an engagement ring.

THE COUNT

You make me mad with joy! ... How can I tell you ...

THE MARQUISE

But will you shut the bloody door! George! More drinks. And music, put a record on. A love song George. I feel as though I'm in love again.

(Music plays)

(LIGHTS DOWN)