

THE POMPADOUR

by BRANCH CABELL

IN the days of your power you, Madame Jeanne Antoinette Poisson Le Normant d'Étioles, Marquise de Pompadour, were called, for pert brevity's sake, "the Pompadour": and it appears odd that I also should remember the reign of the pompadour, not over clearly, but very fondly, and even with some hint of nostalgia. For, in that faraway time, it seems to me, the pompadour was the badge—or, as one might more justly say, the bright and most splendid crown—of a semi-divine race who did not strikingly resemble the young women in current use nowadays.

It was an idyllic period, which might be termed pastoral but for the infrequency of its black sheep. Victoria still reigned in England, and the polite life of America likewise was governed by Victorianism. All skeletons stayed sedately in their own proper closets; sepulchres were quite liberally whitened; and the extreme limit of printed impropriety was, I imagine, the not scarlet, the merely pink, iniquities of that always dog-eared *Police Gazette* which one met with in barber shops—whither none of the fair sex (as they were still called, here and there) ever penetrated.

Nor indeed was it then mentally possible to think about any really nice woman in connection with the unrestraint and *déshabillé* of a barber shop. Gentlewomen in those days were regarded as beings who yet kept about them something of the fading and final radiance of men's chivalrous respect, its thin and faint but beguiling afterglow. In brief, except only in barber shops, in saloons, and in clubs, there were ladies all over the place—which is almost like saying that in my own day I have noted the Great Auk or the pterodactyl as a familiar feature of the American landscape.

And it appears droll that, at a time when the professed standards of that now extinct creature, the lady, were at their supreme highest, the crowning ornament of the lady should have been the pompadour. For you, Madame, were not—upon the whole—in complete accord with Victorianism; and to imitate you was, at the very least, to acknowledge the existence of that sort of person whose existence ladies simply did not acknowledge. I do not know how they circumvented this point in logic. I know only that in practice they did imitate you through the aid of much mystic paraphernalia, which included wholly unrodent-like "rats."

They imitated, in fine, that rolled-back and that puffed-out arrangement of your thinning hair, as even to-day you are visible, in the portrait called "La Belle Jardinière," which Carlo Van Loo painted of the King's *maitresse en titre* when Louis Quinze ruled nominally in France, and you ruled in reality. And this style of hair dressing the ladies termed, in your honor, "the pompadour." Such, then, is your ultimate glory, Madame: your fair ghost appeared, like a benevolent fairy, at the cradle side of the new-born twentieth century, to bestow upon it the pompadour; and the last living lady (whosoever she may have been) was your faithful mimic.

But you rebuke these reflections. Pallid, and frail, and extremely lovely, you arise before me (as in your portrait by Latour) clothed in white satin embroidered with rosebuds, with large lace sleeves, with a beribboned corsage of ineffably vague violet tints. Your slippers are pink; in your rolled-back and puffed-out, chestnut-colored hair there is just a dash of powder; beneath it, your fair and delicate face appears coolly scornful. You do not relish this nonsense which remembers you merely as a coiffure. It does not merit perhaps a *lettre de cachet*, not immediately. None the less, do you wish to remind me—without any least irritation, in view of my complete insignificance—that beneath this coiffure, as to which I prattle, moved a superb and unscrupulous brain.

I grant that very willingly, Madame. You were cold; you were grasping to an extent which was thought remarkable even in the daughter of an absconded tax-collector; your cunning was serpent-

like: you had no least virtue, except only, it may be, your love of art and of art's more delicate products. For you did love beauty, or, at any rate, prettiness; and its presence awakened in you always—in you, the frigid, the unwilling, the unutterably tired harlot—something of warmth and of active kindness, as did nothing else in this world perhaps, and as, very certainly, did no human creature in this world at any time.

You appear to have loved no flesh-and-blood being, not even temperately. . . . You were a bit irritated, it is true, by the death of your only child, because you had but lately arranged to marry Alexandrine to the Duc de Chaulnes, who would have brought into your family circle his three million francs. Your daughter's death thus became to you a real loss, which you felt arithmetically. . . . For the rest, you despised, naturally enough, the nobility and the gentry who thronged about you, the enthroned tax-collector's daughter, as your suppliants. You at bottom despised also your Louis Quinze, just as he at bottom came by-and-by to dislike fretfully, and to fear most profoundly, you.

Yet you, who were born a nobody, and so lacked the *entrée* at court, you pursued the king of *roués*, whensoever he quitted the protection of his palace to hunt in the woods of Sénart. You indomitably hunted the hunter, incomparable in your rose-pink gown, and most elegantly mounted in your fine phaeton lined with blue silk, until, after several months of pursuit, he capitulated. You thus conquered your Louis Quinze, through the sheer weight of your persistence; and for nineteen years you held the unwilling, the restive lecher, even down to the day of your death, with your not-ever-failing adroitness. . . . He was delighted to be rid of you, remarking affably as your funeral cortège drove off in the rain, "Madame has a bad day for her journey." But he had never the pluck to resist you, living.

So, for nineteen years, did the Pompadour govern all France absolutely, and rob the exchequer every day with both hands: it is a record, I grant, unequalled by any other woman. Yes, very truly, Madame, you were a deal more than a coiffure, you were unspeakably more significant than a season's mode in hair dressing: for you, who died childless, became by-and-by the mother of I know not how many revolutions.

You were a most dreadful, a most petty, and yet, in your own special, patched and berouged way, a remarkably great personage. Like *Méline*, in a romance which seems once to have been more familiar to me than it is nowadays, you were a terrible and delicious woman.

Ah, but, Jeanne Antoinette Poisson Le Normant d'Étioles, that was a long while ago. It does not really matter any more. And in this world we, being that which we are, can feel deeply about only this or the other transitory occurrence which we have perceived with our own senses. For this reason I am led now and then to think, a bit fondly, about the reign of your futile namesake, the pompadour, rather than about your own longer and more splendid and far more abominable reign. The proceeding is not logical: but then, as I have just pointed out to you, Madame, the pompadour had not ever anything to do with logic.