

THE WOMAN OF FASHION

Bettini is on stage, and an andante has begun, an andante from *Martha* where each note is a melancholy sigh, or a sad lament. However, the people are not listening to Bettini and, as usual, are motionless, silent, and serious. In the seats, in the boxes, in the stalls, in the entire circle of light that fills the golden world of the court, a soft murmur is heard, like the noise that is made by leaves when the wind is rustling through a grove of trees. Driven by curiosity, some women lean over the velvet railing while others, feigning interest in the music, fix their eyes on the stage and then pretend to look distractedly at the upper galleries. All the heads have turned in one direction, and all the opera glasses are fixed on one spot. The velvet curtain in her box fluctuates for a moment and, beneath the red folds, the delicate white bottom of her elegant tulle skirt is visible. She is finally going to appear. The current idol of fashionable society is about to appear; the heroine of aristocratic festivals, the enchantment of her admirers, and the desperation of her rivals... the woman of fashion.

How many other women have stifled a sigh of envy, or a snort of derision, when they noticed that movement, or when they heard the murmur of impatience or admiration with which the courtiers greet their sovereign! How many would gladly exchange their own happy, but obscure, life for that brilliant life filled with satisfied desires, intoxicated by adulation, and scornful of facile triumphs! But the greatness of the woman of fashion, like all feelings of grandeur, hides a silent feeling of bitterness that is equal to all these moments of happiness.

Like those luminous comets that shine in the sky for one night, and then are lost in the darkness, the people see the woman of fashion pass by, without knowing from where she comes, nor where she has gone after she disappears.

And how did she get here? Usually, along a path lined with thistles, obstacles, and anxieties. The woman of fashion is like those great ambitions that arise and struggle silently in the shadows with an incredible tenacity, and are not seen until they reach the top. Then, people say of her, like they say of some renowned champion: "Look at that miracle of good fortune!" And that is because they don't realize that, what seems to have been granted by chance to an ordinary person, has actually been the dream of her life, her constant desire, something she has struggled to achieve as the goal of her aspirations. The woman of fashion is a true queen. She has her court and her vassals, but before she can assume the crown, she must earn it. Like the first elected monarchs, the aristocratic host almost always gives her this honor, lifting her over their banner on the field of battle, once she has achieved her victory.

There was a time when people were not so refined, and the exquisite taste of the lovely women who occupied this throne was not recognized. Of these women, it was usually assumed that they were queens by divine right or, which is the same, by the grace and mercy of the Supreme Creator, who had already awarded them the crown when He gave them their incomparable beauty. But today things are quite different.

A change has occurred in all places, and the path to power has now been opened to all women. The importance given to elegance in the feminine world has now become equal to aptitude, or talent, in modern society.

This is an advancement like none other.

Nevertheless, once this broad path was opened to all legitimate aspirations, the access to this desired throne has become all the more difficult to attain. Previously, this woman was always anointed by the Lord, and her beauty was sufficient for her to be revered. It was enough for her to be seen to be admired by all those who meet her. But no longer. Now, there are a multitude of things that need to be considered; beauty is appreciated, but elegance is discussed.

To ascertain the tastes of different people; to discover the secret of fascination; to make herself resemble the beautiful women in the world of art and fashion and make her beauty seem special and indefinable; to create an atmosphere of enchantment, wrap herself in it, and then be pursued by the frivolous multitude. In short, by means of her foresight, her talent, and her originality, to gain the preference of others. To cultivate some, to control others, to break the barrier of envy, to overcome the obstacle of rivals, to continue fighting and never give an inch, always with the necessity to be beautiful, to be agreeable, to be visible, quick to smile, and quick to inspire a weak desire, or a rebellious heart. All this is part of the difficult task undertaken by the woman who aspires to become queen of the moment. These are the things, compared to which the twelve labors of Hercules are just a snap of the fingers, that must be successfully accomplished by the woman who wants to take her seat on the throne of elegance.

As we have suggested, to embark on this austere and difficult path with some hope of success, a woman must have many different traits, which are not just the ordinary ones. Physical traits, social traits, and those of the soul.

A woman of fashion, as this phrase indicates, cannot be a girl, but only a woman, one who is somewhere around thirty years old, that mysterious age which is never considered a stage of life, and which stretches from youth to maturity without any obstacle other than a zero which jumps up and down... always a little higher, or a little lower, and never in a single spot.

She doesn't have to be beautiful; having beauty would certainly not be a drawback, but it would also help to be pleasant and nice. Noble or illustrious... Most people feel that elegance is evident in many different things but it is also true that, while it is a special gift for the child, it is similar to those flowers that blossom naturally in a field, and then are transplanted in a garden where they are given special care until they have twice as many petals, are larger, more beautiful, and exude a more exquisite aroma.

Poets praise the simplicity of the things of nature, the wildflowers in the fields and the uncultivated fruits; but the truth is that intemperate weather burns the most beautiful skin, the blossoms on a rosebush have fewer petals, and the wild apples are sour. It is a fact that the woman of fashion, the truly elegant woman, must be rich: rich enough, so that her whims of *toilette* are never impeded by a mundane barrier of insufficiency which might close her path, or clip her wings, and thus keep her from entering the extravagant world of costly fantasies.

She must also be unrestricted like the woman, married or single, who does not have to subject herself to ordinary occupations, and who lives in the grand world where tradition has used the knife of ridicule to cut through certain bonds that other women are not able to penetrate.

And let's be clear, the complex feminine talent, spurred by vanity that is both frivolous and sweet, easily noticed and quick to be displayed, that is brilliant and elusive, feels but does not reason, and embraces without explaining, is a talent that is so indispensable one

could argue that all the other skills she uses in her impassioned struggle for success are derived from it.

Once she is fortified by the strong conviction of her excellence, the woman who hopes to achieve this enviable position casts her eyes on the other woman who occupies it and, after measuring her from head to foot, challenges her to single combat. This starts one of those duels of elegance, a duel to the death without compassion or mercy, a battle that is witnessed by a broad circle of admirers *comm'il faut*, a battle waged with smiles, flowers, laces, and pearls from which they emerge, one with her soul in tatters and with tears of dismay in her eyes and despair in her heart, while the other strides through the elegant circle of her rival's admirers who are now attached like spoils to her chariot of victory.

Victory! Just imagine all the nervous tension, all the anxieties, all the attempts to use good taste, all the physical suffering, all the worries and the sleepless nights, which this triumph must have cost her! And it is still not finished. The queen of a fickle populace, a queen who rules by fascination, must watch her people carefully so she can keep track of their fantasies and anticipate their desires.

A misstep or an error, a delay of just one day, or of even a moment, could undo the work of an entire year. A dress that is out of style, an ornament that shows bad taste, a flower that is awkwardly placed, an unattractive hairdo, an action, a movement, a gesture, or an unfortunate word, could place her in ridicule and ruin her forever. How many times the woman of fashion has trembled as she enters a room, fearing that there may be someone lovelier than she is, and thinking that she must do everything in her power to be the most attractive. Then she also envies those who can pass unnoticed and sit down on the edge of the room, far from the eyes that are searching for a defect, or a mistake that they could mock or ridicule. She envies the woman who puts a flower in her hair so that her lover will think she is beautiful; then, she wonders how she will appear to her rivals, her enemies, those who envy her, and all the people who will grow tired of admiring her and search for someone else to adore.

And why does she do it? Why all the anxiety?... To hear once more the meaningless words of admiration that finally reach her ears, to bask in the praises from her flatterers, to look with scorn at all those who envy her; to say, "I do not live in the head, but only in the heart of those who know me," and then to fall from the pedestal where a new idol has come to preside, or be forced to descend the steps, one by one, as the years pass, and finally abdicate a kingdom where she can no longer reign.

No; do not sigh, choking with desires; do not envy her good fortune, and do not aspire to become a woman of fashion. Like all powers, this is a power that comes with a price; it is a brief happiness that repays you with tears, a pride that is scorned by others, a vanity that is earned through humiliation.