

# Véra

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*For Madame la Comtesse d'Osmoyy*

The form of the body is more  
*essential* to it than its substance.  
*Modern Physiology*

Love is stronger than Death, said Solomon; and it is true that its mysterious power knows no limits.

It was dusk one autumn evening, some years ago, in Paris. A few carriages, with their lamps already lit, were rolling along towards the darkened Faubourg Saint-Germain, returning from the Bois de Boulogne later than the rest. One of them stopped in front of the entrance to a huge mansion surrounded by age-old gardens; the stone shield over the archway bore the arms of the ancient family of the Comtes d'Athol, namely a silver star on a blue ground, with the motto *Pallida Victrix*, under the ermine-lined coronet of a prince. The heavy doors swung open. A man of thirty-five, dressed in mourning, with a deathly pale face, got out of the carriage. On the staircase silent servants raised torches into the air. Without seeing them, he climbed the steps and went into the house. It was the Comte d'Athol.

Reeling slightly, he climbed the white stairs leading to the bedroom where, that very morning, in a velvet coffin, covered in violets and wrapped in folds of batiste, he had laid his pale wife, his lady of joy, Véra, his despair.

Upstairs, the door opened softly over the carpet; he drew the curtain aside.

Everything was where the countess had left it the previous evening. Death had struck swiftly. The night before, his beloved had fainted away in such profound ecstasies, had abandoned herself in such exquisite embraces, that her heart, bursting with delight, had failed her: her moist lips had suddenly turned a mortal purple. She had scarcely had time to give her husband a farewell kiss, smiling wordlessly; then her long lashes had fallen like mourning veils over the splendid darkness of her eyes.

The indescribable day had passed.

About noon, after the horrible ceremony in the family vault, the Comte d'Athol had dismissed his black-clad escort at the cemetery. Then, shutting himself up alone with the dead woman, between the four marble walls, he had pulled to the iron door of the mausoleum. Incense was burning on a tripod before the coffin: a bright crown of lamps shone around the young woman's head.

He had stood there all day, dreaming, conscious of nothing but a tenderness bereft of hope. At six o'clock, as dusk was falling, he had left the sacred spot. After closing the vault, he had pulled the silver key out of the lock, and, standing on tiptoe on the topmost step of the threshold, he had gently tossed it into the tomb. He had thrown it through the trefoil over the door, on to the flagstones inside. Why had he done this? Undoubtedly in response to some mysterious resolution never to return.

And now he stood once more in her death-chamber.

The window, draped with huge curtains of cashmere brocaded in gold, was open: the last ray of the evening sun lit up, in its frame of old wood, the large portrait of the dead woman. The count looked around him at the dress thrown on to an armchair the evening before; and at the jewels on the mantelpiece, the pearl necklace, the half-open fan, the heavy bottles of perfumes which she would never breathe again. On the unmade ebony bed with the twisted columns, beside the pillow on which the impression of her divine, beloved head was still visible in the midst of the lace, he caught sight of the bloodstained handkerchief in which her young soul had flown on one wing for a moment; the open piano, holding a piece of music which would never be finished now, the Indian flowers which she had picked in the conservatory and which were withering in old Dresden vases; and, at the foot of the bed, on the black floor, the little Oriental velvet slippers, on which there gleamed a whimsical motto of Véra's, embroidered in pearls: *Qui verra Véra l'aimera*.

His beloved's bare feet had played in them the morning before, kissed at every step by the swansdown lining. And over there, in the shadows, stood the clock, whose spring he had broken so that it should strike no more hours. So she had gone. . . . But where? . . . And why should he go on living? . . . It was impossible, absurd. And the count gave himself up to his thoughts. He looked back over the whole of his past life. Six months had elapsed since his marriage. Had it not been abroad, at an embassy ball, that he had seen her for the first time? . . . Yes. That moment was resuscitated very clearly before his eyes. She appeared before him, a radiant vision. That evening their eyes had met, and they had realized, deep in their hearts, that they were of similar natures and destined to love each other for ever.

The discouraging remarks, the watchful smiles, the insinuations—all the obstacles which the world raises to delay the inevitable happiness of those who belong to one another—had vanished in the face of the tranquil confidence in each other which they felt at that very moment. Véra, weary of the insipid formalities of her circle, had come to see him at the first difficulty which had arisen between them, thus simplifying in august fashion the commonplace exchanges in which the precious substance of time is wasted.

At their first words the futile comments of other people on their score struck them as a flight of night birds disappearing into the darkness. What a smile they exchanged! What an indescribable embrace!

Yet the fact was that their natures were most extraordinary. They were two creatures endowed with wonderful senses, but of a wholly earthly character. Feelings were prolonged in them with an alarming intensity. They forgot themselves in the joy of sensation. On the other hand certain ideas, such as those of the soul, of Infinity, of God Himself, were so to speak hidden from their understanding. The faith of a great number of human beings in things supernatural was simply a source of vague astonishment to them, a closed book to which they paid no attention, not being qualified either to condemn or justify. Consequently, recognizing that the world was foreign to them, they had isolated themselves, as soon as they were married, in this dark old mansion, whose thickly planted gardens deadened the sounds from outside.

Here the two lovers plunged into the ocean of those languid and perverse pleasures in which the spirit mingles with the mysteries of the flesh. They exhausted the violence of desire, the thrill of tender passion. They became the beat of one another's heart. Their minds penetrated their bodies so perfectly that their forms assumed an intellectual character, and their kisses, the meshes of a burning chainmail, bound them together in an ideal fusion, a prolonged ecstasy. But all of a sudden the charm was broken; the terrible accident parted them; their arms untwined.

What shadow had taken his dead love from him? Dead? He could not believe that. Did the soul of a cello disappear in the cry of a broken string?

The hours passed.

Through the window he looked at the darkness spreading across the heavens; and Night took on a personality in his eyes. He saw her as a queen walking sadly in exile, and the diamond clip of her mourning tunic, Venus, shone all alone above the trees, lost in the depths of the sky.

'It is Véra', he thought.

At this name, spoken in an undertone, he started like a man awakening; then, standing up, he looked around him.

The objects in the room were now lit by a hitherto indistinct glow, that of a night-light which was tinting the darkness blue, and to which the night sky gave the appearance of another star, It was the incense-scented flame of an iconostasis, a family heirloom of Véra's. The triptych, made of precious old wood, was hanging by its Russian esparto between the mirror and the picture. A quivering gleam of light from the gold inside fell on the necklace, among the jewels on the mantelpiece. The halo of the Madonna, clad in sky-blue garments, shone brightly, tinged with pink by the Byzantine cross whose delicate red outlines, melting in the glow, streaked the gleaming pearls with blood. Ever since childhood Véra had gazed pityingly with her great eyes at the pure, motherly face of the hereditary Madonna, and since by her nature she could give her only a superstitious love, she offered her that sometimes, when she passed, innocent and thoughtful, in front of the night-light.

The count, moved to the depths of his soul at this sight by painful memories, stood up, hurriedly blew out the holy light, and, groping in the darkness for a bellrope, gave it a tug.

A servant appeared: an old man dressed in black. He was holding a lamp which he put down in front of the countess's portrait. When he turned round, it was with a shudder of superstitious terror that he saw his master standing smiling as if nothing had happened.

'Raymond,' the count said calmly, 'the countess and I are tired out this evening; you will serve supper about ten o'clock.... Incidentally, we have decided to isolate ourselves even more here, as from tomorrow. None of my servants, except yourself, is to pass the night in the house. You will give each of them three years' wages and tell them to leave. Then you will bar the door and light the candelabra downstairs, in the dining-room. You will be able to look after us by yourself. We shall do no entertaining in the future.'

The old man trembled and looked at him attentively.

The count lit a cigar and went down to the gardens.

The servant thought at first that his master's grief, too keen and overwhelming for him to bear, had unhinged his mind. He had known him since childhood, and realized at once that the shock of too sudden an awakening could be fatal to this sleepwalker. His first duty was to keep the secret entrusted to him.

He bowed his head. Was he to give his loyal support to this pious dream . . . to obey . . . to go on serving them without taking Death into account? What a strange ideal! Would it last a single night? . . . Tomorrow, tomorrow, alas! . . . Oh, who could tell? . . . Perhaps! After all, it was a sacred undertaking. And by what right was he reflecting on it?

He left the bedroom and carried out his orders to the letter; that very evening, the strange existence began.

It was a question of creating an awe-inspiring mirage. The awkwardness of the first few days quickly disappeared. Raymond, first of all in a daze, then out of a sort of tender deference, made such an effort to be natural that before three weeks had passed he occasionally felt almost taken

in himself by his good will. His mental reservations disappeared. Now and then, feeling a kind of giddiness, he had to remind himself that the countess was definitely dead. He was caught up in this funereal game and kept forgetting the reality. Soon he needed more than a moment's thought to convince himself and take hold of himself. He saw that he would end up by abandoning himself entirely to the terrifying magnetism with which the count was gradually imbuing the atmosphere around them; and he was filled with fear, a vague, sweet fear.

D'Athol was in fact living in complete oblivion of his beloved's death. He could not help but feel that she was perpetually present, the young woman's body was so closely linked to his. Sometimes, on sunny days, on a bench in the garden, he would read aloud the poems she loved; sometimes, in the evening, by the fireside, with the two cups of tea on a little table, he would chat with the smiling Illusion whom he could see sitting in the other armchair.

The days, the nights, the weeks flew by. Neither of the two men realized what they were doing. And strange phenomena now started occurring in which it became difficult to distinguish the point at which real and imaginary coincided. A presence was floating in the air; a form was trying to break through, to weave itself on what had become an indefinable space.

D'Athol was living two lives, like a visionary. A pale, gentle face, glimpsed like a flash of lightning between two flickers of an eyelid; a faint chord suddenly struck on the piano; a kiss which closed his lips just as he was about to speak; feminine affinities of thought which awoke him in response to what he said; a division of himself so profound that he could smell, as in a fluid mist, the sweet, heady scent of his beloved beside him; and, at night, between wakefulness and sleep, the sound of whispered words; all these were signs of a negation of Death, raised to a power never known before.

Once D'Athol felt her and saw her so clearly beside him that he took her in his arms: but this movement dispelled her.

'Child!' he murmured with a smile.

And he went back to sleep like a lover playfully rebuffed by his sleepy mistress.

On her birthday, by way of a joke, he placed an immortelle in the bouquet which he tossed on to Véra's pillow.

'Seeing that she thinks she is dead,' he said.

Thanks to the profound and omnipotent determination of Monsieur d'Athol, who, by the sheer power of his love, created the life and presence of his wife in the house, this existence ended up by taking on a sombre, persuasive charm. Raymond himself no longer felt any fear, having gradually become accustomed to these impressions.

A black velvet dress glimpsed round the bend of a path; a laughing voice calling to him from the drawing-room; a ring on the bell when he awoke, as in the old days; all this had become familiar to him. It was as if the dead woman were playing at being invisible, like a child. She felt so deeply loved that it was perfectly natural.

A year had passed.

On the evening of the anniversary the count, sitting by the fire in Vera's room, had just finished reading her a Florentine fable: *Callimaco*. He closed the book, and then, pouring himself some tea, he said:

'*Douschka*, do you remember Rose Valley, the banks of the Lahn, the castle of the Four Towers? . . . That story reminded you of them, didn't it?'

He stood up, and saw in the bluish mirror that he was looking paler than usual. He took a pearl bracelet out of a bowl and examined it closely. Had not Véra removed it from her arm just now, before undressing? The pearls were still warm and their orient softened, as if by the warmth of

her flesh. And what of the opal in that Siberian necklace, which, like the pearls, loved Véra's beautiful breasts so much that it turned sickly pale in its gold trellis-work when the young woman forgot it for a little while? In the old days the countess used to love the faithful stone because of that . . . This evening the opal was shining as if it had just been taken off, and as if it were still imbued with the dead woman's exquisite magnetism. Putting down the necklace and the precious stone, the count accidentally touched the batiste handkerchief on which the drops of blood were as wet and red as carnations on snow . . . There, on the piano, who had turned the last page of the music she had been playing? And the holy light must have rekindled in the reliquary, for its golden flame was casting a mystic glow over the Madonna's face and closed eyes! And those newly-picked Oriental flowers, blossoming in the old Dresden Vases—what hand had just placed them there? The room seemed gay and full of life, in a more intense, significant way than usual. But nothing could surprise the count. It seemed so normal to him that he did not even pay any attention when the hour struck on the clock which had been stopped for a year.

Yet this evening anybody would have sworn that the countess was trying in an adorable way to come back into this room which was scented with her presence. She had left so much of herself in it! Everything which had formed her life drew her here. Her charm hung in the air; the prolonged assaults made by her husband's passionate will must have loosened the vague bonds of the invisible around her. . . .

She was forced to come back. Everything she loved was here.

No doubt she wanted to smile once more at her reflection in this mysterious mirror in which she had so often admired her lily-like face. The sweet creature must have shuddered, over there, among her violets, under the extinguished lamps; the divine creature must have shivered, all alone in the vault, looking at the silver key which had been tossed on to the flagstones. She wanted to come to him, too. And her will dwelt on the idea of incense and isolation. Death is a final circumstance only for those who hope for something from Heaven; but, for her, Death and Heaven and Life were all contained in their embrace. The solitary kiss of her husband attracted her lips in the darkness. And the bygone sound of melodies, the intoxicated words of former times, the materials which covered her body and preserved its perfume, those magic jewels which summoned her to them in their obscure sympathy, and above all the overwhelming, absolute impression of her presence—an impression which objects themselves had come to share in the end—everything was calling her there, and had been drawing her there for so long and so imperceptibly that, finally cured of the sleeping Death, She alone was missing.

Ideas are living creatures; and since the count had hollowed out in the air the shape of his love, that space had to be filled by the only creature which was homogeneous with him, or else the Universe would have collapsed. The impression was created at that moment, final, simple and absolute, that She must be there in the room. He was as calmly certain of this as of his own existence, and all the objects around him were saturated with this conviction. It could be seen in them. And since Véra alone, tangible and visible, was missing, it was essential that she should be there and that the great Dream of Life and Death should open its infinite doors for a moment. Faith extended the road of the resurrection to her tomb. A gay, musical laugh lit up the marriage bed with its joy; the count turned round. And there before his eyes, created out of will and memory, languidly lying with one elbow on the lace pillow, her hand supporting her heavy black tresses, her lips deliciously parted in a smile of paradisiacal delight, beautiful beyond compare, the countess was looking at him with eyes which were still a little drowsy.

'Roger!' she said in a far-away voice.

He came over to her. Their lips met in a divine, oblivious, immortal joy.

And they realized then that they were in fact one and the same being.

The hours brushed with impassive wings this ecstasy in which, for the first time, earth and heaven were united.

Suddenly the Comte d'Athol gave a start, as if struck by a fatal reminiscence.

'But now I remember!' he said. 'What is the matter with me? You are dead!'

The moment he uttered this last word, the mystic flame of the iconostasis went out. The pale light of morning—a greyish, rainy, commonplace morning—filtered into the room through the gaps between the curtains. The candles turned pale and guttered out, their red wicks giving off an acrid smoke; the fire disappeared under a layer of warm ash; the flowers faded and withered in a few moments, the pendulum of the clock gradually regained its previous immobility. The conviction of all the objects vanished abruptly. The opal had died and lost its gleam; the bloodstains had faded too on the batiste next to it; and effacing herself between the desperate arms which were trying in vain to hold her tight, the passionate white vision withdrew into the air and was lost from sight. A farewell sigh, faint but distinct, penetrated to Roger's very soul. The count stood up; he had just realized that he was alone. His dream had dissolved all of a sudden; he had broken the magnetic thread of its radiant texture with a single word. The atmosphere was now that of a death-chamber.

Like those glass tears which are illogically shaped and yet so solid that a blow with a mallet on their thick end would not break them, but which shatter immediately into an impalpable dust if the needle-thin tip is broken off, everything had vanished.

'Oh!' he murmured. 'So it's all over! . . . I have lost you! . . . You are all alone! . . . What road must I take now to reach you? Show me the path which leads me to you!'

Suddenly, like a reply, a shining object fell with a metallic sound from the marriage bed on to the black fur. A ray of the sinister earthly dawn lit it up. . . . The lonely man bent down and picked it up; and a sublime smile illumined his face as he recognized this object. It was the key to the tomb.