

FRANCE



⑥ COLETTE

Sidonie Gabrielle Colette (1873–1954), known simply as “Colette,” was a prolific French novelist, short story writer, dramatist, librettist, and essayist who became the first woman to receive a French state burial. A master craftsperson in all her writing, the dramatic irony in her work is carefully elaborated by the use of symbolic detail and metaphor. Never associated with a particular artistic movement, Colette is regarded as the first truly feminist writer. Drawing inspiration from her own life in the French demimonde, which included three marriages and several lesbian relationships, Colette’s literary province is female nature, most notably in its experience of love and sexuality. In her novels such as Chéri (1920) and My Mother’s House (1922) as in her short stories—available in English as The Collected Stories of Colette (1983)—women are the sexual subjects and it is their point of view that Colette depicts. This portrayal is informed by Colette’s pessimistic view of an irreconcilable tension between men and women. The shifting sexual desires that she renders in her fiction are to Colette the clearest proofs of a basic disunity of spirit between male and female.

The Other Wife

“‘T able for two? This way, Monsieur, Madame, there is still a table next 1
to the window, if Madame and Monsieur would like a view of the
bay.”

Alice followed the maître d’. 2

“Oh, yes. Come on, Marc, it’ll be like having lunch on a boat on the 3
water . . .”

Her husband caught her by passing his arm under hers. “We’ll be more 4
comfortable over there.”

"There? In the middle of all those people? I'd much rather . . ."

"Alice, please."

He tightened his grip in such a meaningful way that she turned around.

"What's the matter?"

"Shh . . ." he said softly, looking at her intently, and led her toward the table in the middle.

"What is it, Marc?"

"I'll tell you, darling. Let me order lunch first. Would you like the shrimp? Or the eggs in aspic?"

"Whatever you like, you know that."

They smiled at one another, wasting the precious time of an overworked maître d', stricken with a kind of nervous dance, who was standing next to them, perspiring.

"The shrimp," said Marc. "Then the eggs and bacon. And the cold chicken with a romaine salad. *Fromage blanc*? The house specialty? We'll go with the specialty. Two strong coffees. My chauffeur will be having lunch also, we'll be leaving again at two o'clock. Some cider? No, I don't trust it . . . Dry champagne."

He sighed as if he had just moved an armoire, gazed at the colorless midday sea, at the pearly white sky, then at his wife, whom he found lovely in her little Mercury hat with its large, hanging veil.

"You're looking well, darling. And all this blue water makes your eyes look green, imagine that! And you've put on weight since you've been traveling . . . It's nice up to a point, but only up to a point!"

Her firm, round breasts rose proudly as she leaned over the table.

"Why did you keep me from taking that place next to the window?"

Marc Seguy never considered lying. "Because you were about to sit next to someone I know."

"Someone I don't know?"

"My ex-wife."

She couldn't think of anything to say and opened her blue eyes wider.

"So what, darling? It'll happen again. It's not important."

The words came back to Alice and she asked, in order, the inevitable questions. "Did she see you? Could she see that you saw her? Will you point her out to me?"

"Don't look now, please, she must be watching us . . . The lady with brown hair, no hat, she must be staying in this hotel. By herself, behind those children in red . . ."

"Yes. I see."

Hidden behind some broad-brimmed beach hats, Alice was able to look at the woman who, fifteen months ago, had still been her husband's wife.

"Incompatibility," Marc said. "Oh, I mean . . . total incompatibility! We divorced like well-bred people, almost like friends, quietly, quickly. And then I fell in love with you, and you really wanted to be happy with me."

How lucky we are that our happiness doesn't involve any guilty parties or victims!"

The woman in white, whose smooth, lustrous hair reflected the light from the sea in azure patches, was smoking a cigarette with her eyes half closed. Alice turned back toward her husband, took some shrimp and butter, and ate calmly. After a moment's silence she asked: "Why didn't you ever tell me that she had blue eyes, too?"

"Well, I never thought about it!"

He kissed the hand she was extending toward the bread basket and she blushed with pleasure. Dusky and ample, she might have seemed somewhat coarse, but the changeable blue of her eyes and her wavy, golden hair made her look like a frail and sentimental blonde. She vowed overwhelming gratitude to her husband. Immodest without knowing it, everything about her bore the overly conspicuous marks of extreme happiness.

They ate and drank heartily, and each thought the other had forgotten the woman in white. Now and then, however, Alice laughed too loudly, and Marc was careful about his posture, holding his shoulders back, his head up. They waited quite a long time for their coffee, in silence. An incandescent river, the straggled reflection of the invisible sun overhead, shifted slowly across the sea and shone with a blinding brilliance.

"She's still there, you know," Alice whispered.

"Is she making you uncomfortable? Would you like to have coffee somewhere else?"

"No, not at all! She's the one who must be uncomfortable! Besides, she doesn't exactly seem to be having a wild time, if you could see her . . ."

"I don't have to. I know that look of hers."

"Oh, was she like that?"

He exhaled his cigarette smoke through his nostrils and knitted his eyebrows. "Like that? No. To tell you honestly, she wasn't happy with me."

"Oh, really now!"

"The way you indulge me is so charming, darling . . . It's crazy . . . You're an angel . . . You love me . . . I'm so proud when I see those eyes of yours. Yes, those eyes . . . She . . . I just didn't know how to make her happy, that's all. I didn't know how."

"She's just difficult!"

Alice fanned herself irritably, and cast brief glances at the woman in white, who was smoking, her head resting against the back of the cane chair, her eyes closed with an air of satisfied lassitude.

Marc shrugged his shoulders modestly.

"That's the right word," he admitted. "What can you do? You have to feel sorry for people who are never satisfied. But we're satisfied . . . Aren't we, darling?"

She did not answer. She was looking furtively, and closely, at her husband's face, ruddy and regular; at his thick hair, threaded here and there

with white silk; at his short, well-cared-for hands; and doubtful for the first time, she asked herself, "What more did she want from him?"

And as they were leaving, while Marc was paying the bill and asking for the chauffeur and about the route, she kept looking, with envy and curiosity, at the woman in white, this dissatisfied, this difficult, this superior . . . 45

Translated from the French by Matthew Ward

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Colette use the reflection of light to create a mood of ambiguity in "The Other Wife"? Find the different instances of light imagery.
2. What is the significance of Marc's ordering the food? Why does the author devote so much of a very short story to food and eating?
3. How does Alice's mood change when Marc says, "I don't have to. I know that look of hers." How had Alice regarded the first wife before this statement? How does she regard her now?
4. What are Alice's feelings for Marc at the beginning of the story? What are they at the end?
5. For what are eyes metaphors?



ANDRÉ BRETON

André Breton (1896–1966) was a French poet and essayist who was the founder and chief theoretician of Surrealism. Breton began medical studies with the aim of becoming a psychiatrist, but the experience of World War I turned him permanently to literary work with the aim of using his art to create a new vision. In his theoretical essays, the Manifestos (1924, 1930, 1942), Breton postulated that knowledge was incomplete because it previously had relied on rationalism. Art in its power to reveal the subconscious, the realm of desires, dreams, and intuitions, had an important role in expanding human understanding. The project of the surrealist artist was the discovery of the self, both collective and individual. To this end, Breton developed techniques, particularly of automatic writing and free association, by which to capture the spontaneity, the exigency, the very spirit of emotion. "Free Union" was one of Breton's most striking free association poems in which through a succession of unordered images he evoked the urgency of desire. A