From the Varens Obsession

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Abstract
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SHADY COSGROVE

FROM THE VARENS OBSESSION

This is an excerpt from the fourth chapter of Shady Cosgrove’s *The Varens Obsession*. Set in the 1830s, the novel responds to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in a Rhysian tradition by exploring the life of Edward Rochester’s mistress, Céline Varens. Céline was an opera dancer/courtesan and mother to Adele Varens (the child who inspired Jane’s arrival at Thornfield).

CÉLINE VARENS, LATE OCTOBER, 1833.

As a courtesan, there is always a tension between your suitors and your past. I am an actress; I have always acted. How could you believe I am not acting now? Could you set yourself up in front of a lion, believing it will not eat you, only because it says so?

My commitment to the English language should have been proof enough of my love for him; after the Egyptian exhibit, whenever we were alone, we spoke English. But perhaps I saw the equation in the wrong light. Any man in his position would have doubted me. Perhaps the fact that he sometimes believed me, even if it only lasted for moments, was what was truly extraordinary.

The next morning Rochester told me he was selling one of the paintings that hung in my hotel—the lovely Virgin and Child. He had never specified that the portrait was a gift, but I thought it was mine to enjoy with the living quarters.

He also took the opportunity to tell me the other painting in his collection that endeared me—the man and his boat—had been delayed in England. There had been difficulties with its shipping and he wanted to make sure nothing happened to it upon crossing the Channel.

“Perhaps when it arrives, we can hang it in the Madonna’s place,” he said over breakfast, reaching for his bread.
I didn’t say anything. I watched him break a piece off the loaf and butter it.

“She should bring in a tidy sum.” He set his knife upon his plate.

I was still quiet.

He patted his mouth with a serviette.

Finally, I spoke: “Who’s the buyer?”

“A young man to be married.” He looked up from the meal before him, his tone casual. “It’s a gift for his bride.”

After the painting of the boat, the Virgin portrait was my favourite picture Rochester owned. It was not an investment, it was a cause to believe in God. The light, the colours, the way red and yellow lurked within the blue shades of her robes. Her eyes were brown, but they were flecked with orange. They warmed her to me. I crawled into her arms looking at that picture. I looked up at her face.

“Please keep it, just for a little while,” I begged.

He laughed, “You don’t understand business.”

That morning I was moody with him. Quiet one minute, scowling the next, I alternated between placating our routine together and bursting out at him. He seemed unsurprised at whatever I did, but placated me as he would a child.

“Come now, Céline. Don’t be cross. There are other paintings in the world to enjoy. Certainly you will not perish with longing for this piece.”

I thought I might, so fierce was my desire for the canvas. But I understood I was being upbraided for frivolity. Perhaps it seems in character for a courtesan to covet art pieces, after all, we are renowned for wanton materialism. But my connection to the Madonna was not entirely aesthetic. Attending church was not always viable for me. Stares and whispers said plainly my profession was not in keeping with the church. As such, I found my God in little places—nooks and crannies. That picture hanging on my wall, I would pray to it.

“He will collect the painting tomorrow afternoon.” Rochester’s voice was matter-of-fact; the argument was over.

I decided to post my own letters when the removalist was scheduled to arrive. They dropped into the box at town, my writing clean and strong on the outside of the envelopes. I shuddered. I could feel an appraising gaze on the painting. Someone had taken hold of the frame, hoisting it down with one sudden movement. The hands were careful, but quick.

When I returned, it was gone. Rochester left the wall vacant; I hoped
this meant the image of the man and his boat would soon arrive. But even if it did, the empty space on the wall still belonged to the Virgin and Child; its absence seemed only to highlight its existence.

I began to visit galleries by myself again.

I thought of the lucky couple that would own the painting. Looking through the wedding announcements in the newspapers, I wondered which one it was. I scanned the lists, looking at the names.

By chance, I attended one such wedding. Walking home from a gallery, I watched the procession from the other side of the street. The young woman in white had rich dark hair pulled back from her round face. The man on her arm was handsome in a bland sort of way. He was older by about ten years, but there was care in the way he held her arm. She whispered something to him and they both laughed. I decided they didn’t own the painting.

After that, I began to attend ceremonies with regularity whether I knew the families or not. I graced different churches, shifting my accent at will. It wasn’t the services themselves that compelled me, but rather the atmosphere, the guests, the women’s gowns. I systematically walked by the ceremonies with all the surprise of an accident. My afternoon dress clothes were always carefully ironed. If the services were held in cathedrals with guest lists at the door, I hung close outside, pretending to wait for a friend. Coming outside for fresh air, those invited spoke eagerly of the reception. Sometimes I followed them back into the church, careful to sit in the back row, anonymous in my observations.

“Did she enjoy the painting?” I asked Rochester one afternoon, while we drank tea.

“The Virgin and Child, in its new home?” he asked, before lifting his cup to his mouth.

“Yes.”

He drank slowly and then: “She was enchanted with it.”

“Where did they hang it?”

“I think they decided on their sitting room.”

I reached for my saucer, but didn’t pause in my questioning. “Their sitting room? What colour were the walls?”

“I don’t know. But he said something about the trim—it would contrast well with the blue of her robes. Highlight them, I suppose.”

“Did he?”
"Yes."

I brought the cup to my lips. The tea was warm. Imagining the painting in its new home, I decided that they would love it, that her taste was similar to mine. Rochester watched me and I lifted the corners of my mouth. It wasn’t a large smile, but I was trying to be reasonable. It was his painting after all. If he were to sell it, that was his prerogative.

Despite my efforts, our relationship continued to change. It shifted as subtly as the passing of time, but it shifted regardless. He was short with me. I was careful with him and no longer told him exactly what I saw in the canvases when we went to the museum. He discussed the paintings in English and he demanded that I too speak his native tongue, even outside the hotel. My English was not as practised as his French, so our conversations took more time. Sometimes I could not find the words and he would talk for both of us. He voiced arguments, deliberating over both sides as if he were two opinions. I walked beside him, counting our paces and watching the patterns shift in the cobblestones, amazed that he didn’t notice.

The stranger things seemed between us, the more passionate our evenings were. We moved throughout my boudoir, carving our bodies into the walls like secret initials. His hands were forceful and my own matched his strength. We were pushing and pulling, our bodies hard, unpliable. We were parts, body parts, separated from ourselves and each other. I remember those nights as images. My foot balanced on the corner of my writing desk. His finger tracing the tattooed cross on my thigh. My fists pulling his hair. His Adam’s apple bobbing overhead. We were brutal, and often would wake to find my water glass in pieces on the floor or my books fallen from their shelves.

In the morning, it seemed as if we had dreamed the night before and the wreckage in my room was strange and inexplicable. Often Rochester would be eating his breakfast when I stirred and I would roll over, careful not to upset the wooden tray balanced gently on his lap.

A few weeks later when most of the household was enjoying a day off, I went to the cellar for a particular bottle of champagne to show Cerise that evening. The door opened with a firm push. I climbed down the steep stairs, holding the railing with my right hand and a candle in my left. Boarded up and sitting on the ground, in front of the wine bottles, was a painting.
It's the man and his boat, I thought to myself excitedly. A surprise. Rochester's waiting to hang it for me. I was going to leave it alone, but curiosity prevailed; I pulled back one of the boards and the heavy protective cloth, making sure not to drop any wax onto the picture.

It wasn't the man alongside his boat at all. It was a woman holding a child. As I looked closer, the blues and flesh tones gave it away: it was the Virgin and Child portrait, the one Rochester had recently sold. I pulled back another board to make certain. Her face was quiet and serene. Even in the strange light, I could see the shifting colours that made up her skin—the reds and browns and pinks. I stared dumbly.

There was no generous bridegroom. It wasn't hanging grandly in a sitting room after all. No blue trim outlined the room, offsetting her robes. Rochester hadn't even bothered taking it away.

I swallowed hard and then lifted the painting into my arms. It was heavy and awkward; there was dust under my fingers. I thought to hide portrait at Cerise's, but after a moment, I set it down, thinking. I rarely went to the cellar, the cook or the servants usually ventured down those uneven stairs. But he must have known I would find it. Rearranging the cloth and boards, careful to leave the picture just as it was so no one would know it had been disturbed, I climbed out of the cellar backwards, one step at a time.