

HETEROSOCIAL

Colette, *La Naissance du jour* (extract)

*Born in rural Burgundy in 1873, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, known simply as Colette, was a literary rebel who moved in avant-garde artistic circles in early twentieth-century France. Her life was the subject of a 2018 biopic starring Keira Knightley. She was married three times and embarked on a series of relationships with men and women, making her the object of scandal. The feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir called Colette ‘the only great women writer in France’, and her work is consistently concerned with the question of women’s independence in a male-dominated society. Written from her garden in Provence as she was approaching middle age, *La Naissance du jour* (1928) is, in a sense, a goodbye to her youthful hedonism. In this extract, the narrator reflects on the friends who were there to pick up the pieces as she moved from love affair to love affair.*

[trans. Enid McLeod]

Il m’en reste bien peu, deux, trois amis, de ceux qui pensèrent autrefois me voir périr à mon premier naufrage ; car de bonne foi je le croyais aussi, et je le leur annonçais. Ceux-là, un à un, la mort pourvoit à leur repos. J’ai des amis plus jeunes, surtout plus jeunes que moi. D’instinct, j’aime acquérir et engranger ce qui promet de durer au-delà de mon terme. À ceux-ci, je n’ai pas causé de si grands tourments, tout au plus des ennuis : « Allons, bon, Il va encore nous l’abîmer... Jusqu’à quand va-t-il tenir tant de place ? » Ils conjecturèrent le dénouement, ses drames, ses courbes de fièvre : « Typhoïde grave, ou bénigne éruption ? Le ciel confonde notre amie, elle s’arrange toujours pour attraper des affections si sérieuses » Mes amis véritables m’ont toujours donné cette preuve suprême d’attachement : une aversion spontanée pour l’homme que j’aimais. « Et s’il disparaît encore, celui-là, que de soins pour nous, quel travail pour l’aider, elle, à reprendre son aplomb... »

Au fond, ils ne se sont jamais tellement plaints – bien au contraire – ceux qui m’ont vue leur revenir tout échauffée de lutte, léchant mes plaies, comptant mes fautes de tactique, partielle que c’en est un plaisir, chargeant de crimes l’ennemi qui me défit, puis le blanchissant sans mesure, puis serrant en secret ses lettres et ses portraits : « Il était charmant... J’aurais dû... Je n’aurais pas dû... » Puis la raison venait, et l’apaisement que je n’aime pas, et mon silence, trop tard courtois, trop tard réservé, qui est, je crois bien, le pire moment... Ainsi va la routine de souffrir, comme va l’habitude de la maladresse amoureuse, comme va le devoir d’empoisonner, innocemment, toute vie à deux...

Very few, only two or three, remain of those friends who in former days thought they saw me going under in my first shipwreck: for I honestly thought so myself and said as much to them. To these, one by one, death is bringing rest. I have friends who are younger, and in particular younger than I. I instinctively like to acquire and store up what looks like outlasting me. I have not caused such great torments to these, at most a few cares: “There now, He’s going to spoil her for us again... How long is He going to remain so important?” They would speculate on the outcome of the disease, its crises and its temperature chart: “A dangerous typhoid or a mild rash? Confound the woman, why does she always manage to catch such serious complaints!” My true friends have always given me that supreme proof of devotion, a spontaneous aversion for the man I loved. “And what if this one disappears too, what a lot of trouble it will give us, what a job to help her recover her balance!”

But in the end they never grumbled greatly – very much the other way – when they saw me coming back to them overheated by the struggle, licking my wounds, counting my tactical errors, revelling in being biased, heaping crimes on the enemy who defies me, then whitewashing him out of all measure, then secretly hugging his letters and pictures: “He was charming... I ought to have... I ought not to have...” Then reason would return, bringing with it the calm that I do not like and my belatedly courteous, belatedly reserved silence which is, I really believe, the worst moment of all. Such is the routine of suffering, like the habitual clumsiness of those in love, and the compulsion which makes every couple innocently position their home life.