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HISTORIA AMORIS

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Historia Amoris

A History of Love, Ancient and Modern

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Table of Contents

PART I
I
SUPER FLUMINA BABYLONIS
II
THE CURTAINS OF SOLOMON
THE SONGS OF SONGS.
III
APHRODITE URANIA
IV
SAPPHO
V
THE AGE OF ASPASIA
VI
THE BANQUET
VII
ROMA-AMOR
VIII
ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.
IX
THE IMPERIAL ORGY
X
FINIS AMORIS
HISTORIA AMORIS
PART II
I
THE CLOISTER AND THE HEART

II
THE PURSUIVANTS OF LOVE
III
THE PARLIAMENTS OF JOY
IV
THE DOCTORS OF THE GAY SCIENCE
V
THE APOTHEOSIS
VI
BLUEBEARD
VII
THE RENAISSANCE
VIII
LOVE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
IX
LOVE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
X
THE LAW OF ATTRACTION
INDEX

PART I

I

Table of Contents

SUPER FLUMINA BABYLONIS

Table of Contents

The first created thing was light. Then life came, then death. In between was fear. But not love. Love was absent. In Eden there was none. Adam and Eve emerged there adult. The phases of the delicate fever which others in paradise since have experienced, left them unaffected. Instead of the reluctances and attractions, the hesitancies and aspirations, the preliminary and common conflagrations which are the beginnings, as they are also the sacraments, of love, abruptly they were one. They were married before they were mated.

The union, entirely allegoric—a Persian conceit—differed, otherwise, only in the poetry of the accessories from that which elsewhere actually occurred.

Primitive man was necessarily speechless, probably simian, and certainly hideous. Women, if possible more hideous still, were joined by him momentarily and immediately forgot. Ultimately, into the desolate poverty of the rudimentary brain there crept a novelty. The novelty was an idea. Women were detained, kept in lairs, made to serve there. Further novelties ensuing, creatures that had learned from birds to talk passed from animality. Subsequent progress originated in a theory that they were very clearly

entitled to whatever was not taken away from them. From that theory all institutions proceed, primarily that of family.

In the beginning of things woman was common property. With individual ownership came the necessity of defence. Man defended woman against even herself. He beat her, stoned her, killed her. From the massacre of myriads, constancy resulted. With it came the home: a hut in a forest, a fort on a hill, in the desert a tent, yet, wherever situated, surrounded by foes. The foes were the elements. In the thunderclap was their anger. In the rustle of leaves their threats. They were placatable, however. They could be appeased, as human beings are, by giving them something. Usually the gift was the sacrifice of whatever the owner cared for most; in later days it was love, pleasure, sense, but in these simpler times, when humanity knew nothing of pleasure, less of love, and had no sense, when the dominant sensation was fright, when every object had its spectre, it was accomplished by the immolation of whatever the individual would have liked to have had given to him. As intelligence developed, distinctions necessarily arose between the animate and the inanimate, the imaginary and the real. Instead of attributing a malignant spirit to every element, the forces of nature were conglomerated, the earth became an object of worship, the sun another, that being insufficient they were united in nuptials from which the gods were born—demons from whom descended kings that were sons of heaven and sovereigns of the world.

In the process, man, who had begun by being a brute, succeeded in becoming a lunatic only to develop into a child. The latter evolution was, at the time, remote. Only

lunatics abounded. But lunatics may dream. These did. Their conceptions produced after-effects curiously profound, widely disseminated, which, first elaborated by Chaldæan seers, Nineveh emptied into Babylon.

Babylon, Queen of the Orient, beckoned by Semiramis out of myth, was made by her after her image. That image was passion. The city, equivocal and immense, brilliant as the sun, a lighthouse in the surrounding night, was a bazaar of beauty. From the upper reaches of the Euphrates, through great gates that were never closed, Armenia poured her wines where already Nineveh had emptied her rites. In the conjunction were festivals that magnetized the stranger from afar. At the very gates Babylon yielded to him her daughters. He might be a herder, a bedouin, a bondman; indifferently the voluptuous city embraced him, lulled him with the myrrh and cassia of her caresses, sheltering him and all others that came in the folds of her monstrous robe.

In emptying rites into this furnace Nineveh also projected her gods, the princes of the Chaldæan sky, the lords of the ghostland, that, in patient perversities, her seers had devised. Four thousand of them Babylon swallowed, digested, reproduced. Some were nebulous, some were saurian, many were horrible, all were impure. But, chiefly, there was Ishtar. Semiramis conquered the world. Ishtar set it on fire.

Ishtar, whom St. Jerome generically and graphically described as the Dea Meretrix, was known in Babylon as Mylitta. Gesenius, Schrader, Münter, particularly Quinet, have told of the mysteries, Asiatically monstrous, naïvely displayed, through which she passed, firing the trade routes

with the flame of her face, adding Tyrian purple and Arabian perfumes to her incandescent robe, trailing it from shore to shore, enveloping kingdoms and satrapies in her fervid embrace, burning them with the fever of her kisses, burning them so thoroughly, to such ashes, that to-day barely the memory of their names endures; multiplying herself meanwhile, lingering there where she had seemed to pass, developing from a goddess into a pantheon, becoming Astarte in Syria, Tanit in Carthage, Ashtaroth in Canaan, Anaïtis in Armenia, yet remaining always love, or, more exactly, what was love in those days.

In Babylon, fronting her temple was a grove in which were dove-cotes, cisterns, conical stones—the emblems of her worship. Beyond were little tents before which girls sat, chapleted with cords, burning bran for perfume, awaiting the will of the first that put a coin in their lap and in the name of the goddess invited them to her rites. Acceptance was obligatory. It was obligatory on all women to stop in the grove at least once. Herodotus, from whom these details are taken, said that the sojourn of those that were fair was brief, but others less favored lingered vainly, insulted by the former as they left.[1]

Herodotus is father of history; perhaps too, father of lies. But later Strabo substantiated his story. There is anterior evidence in the Bible. There is antecedent testimony on a Nineveh brick. There is the further corroboration of Justinus, of St. Augustin, and of Eusebius regarding similar rites in Armenia, in Phœnicia, in Syria, wherever Ishtar passed.[2]

The forms of the ceremony and the duration of it varied, but the worship, always the same, was identical with that of

the Hindu bayaderes, the Kama-dasi, literally servants of love, more exactly servants of lust, who, for hire, yielded themselves to any comer, and whose dishonorarium the clergy took.

From Phœnicia the worship passed to Greece. Among local articles of commerce were girls with whom the Phœnicians furnished harems. One of their agencies was at Cythera. From the adjacent waters Venus was rumored to have emerged. The rumor had truth for basis. But the emergence occurred in the form of a stone brought there on a Phœnician galley. The fact, cited by Maximus Tyrius, numismatics confirm. On the old coins of Paphos it was as a stone that Venus appeared, a stone emblematic and phallic, similar to those that stood in the Babylon grove.

Venus was even otherwise Phœnician. In Semitic speech girls were called *benoth*, and at Carthage the tents in which the worship occurred were termed *succoth benoth*. In old texts B was frequently changed to V. From benoth came venoth and the final theta being pronounced, as was customary, like sigma, venos resulted and so appears on a Roman medal, that of Julia Augusta, wife of Septimius Severus, where Venus is written Venos.

Meanwhile on the banks of the Indus the stone reappeared. Posterior to the Vedic hymns, it is not mentioned in them. Instead is the revelation of a being purer than purity, excelling excellence, dwelling apart from life, apart from death, ineffably in the solitudes of space. He alone was. The gods were not yet. They, the earth, the sky, the forms of matter and of man, slept in the depths of the

ideal, from which at his will they arose. That will was love. The *Mahabhârata* is its history.

There, succeeding the clamor of primal life, come the songs of shepherds, the footfall of apsaras, the murmur of rhapsodies, of kisses and harps. The pages turn to them. Then follow eremites in their hermitages, rajahs in their palaces, chiefs in their chariots, armies of elephants and men, seas of blood, gorgeous pomps, gigantic flowers, marvels and enchantments. Above, on thrones of lotos and gold, are the serene and apathetic gods, limitless in power, complete in perfection, unalterable in felicity, needing nothing, having all. Evil may not approach them. Nonexistent in infinity, evil is circumscribed within the halls of time. The appanage of the gods was love, its revelation light.

That light must have been too pure. Subsequent theology decomposed it. In its stead was provided a glare intolerably crude that disclosed divinities approachable in deliriums of disorder, in unions from which reason had fled, to which love could not come, and on which, in a sort of radiant imbecility, idols semi-Chaldæan, polycephalous, hundred-armed, obese, monstrous, revolting, stared with unseeing eyes.

In the Vedas there is much that is absurd and more that is puerile. The *Mahabhârata* is a fairy-tale, interminable and very dull. But in none of these works is there any sanction of the pretensions of a priesthood to degrade. It was in the name of waters that slake, of fire that purifies, of air that regenerates, of gods dwelling not in images but in infinity, that love was invoked. It was in poetry, not in perversions,

that marriage occurred. In the Laws of Manu marriage is defined as the union of celestial musicians,—music then as now being regarded as the food of love.

The Buddhist Scriptures contain passages that were said to charm the birds and beasts. In the Vedas there are passages which, if a soudra overheard, the ignominy of his caste was abolished. The poetry that resided in them, a poetry often childish, but primal, preceding the Pentateuch, purer than it, chronologically anterior to Chaldæan aberrations, Brahmanism deformed into rites that sanctified vice and did so, on a theory common to many faiths, that the gods demand the surrender of whatever is most dear, if it be love that must be sacrificed, if it be decency that must be renounced. The latter refinement which Chaldæa invented, and India retained, Judæa reviled.

II

Table of Contents

THE CURTAINS OF SOLOMON

Table of Contents

In the deluge women must have been swept wholly away. If not, then they became beings to whom genealogy was indifferent. The long list of Noah’s descendants, which Genesis provides, contains no mention of them. When ultimately they reappear, their consistency is that of silhouettes. It is as though they belonged to an inferior order. Historically they did.

Woman was not honored in Judæa. The patriarch was chieftain and priest. His tent was visited by angels, occasionally by creatures less beatific. In spite of the terrible pomps that surrounded the advent of the decalogue, there subsisted for his eternal temptation the furnace of Moloch and Baal's orgiastic nights. These things—in themselves corruptions of Chaldæan ceremonies—woman personified. Woman incarnated sin. It was she who had invented it. To Ecclesiasticus, the evil of man excelled her virtue. To Moses, she was dangerously impure. In Leviticus, her very birth was a shame. To Solomon, she was more bitter than death. As a consequence, the attitude of woman generally was as elegiac as that of Jephthah's daughter. When she appeared it was but to vanish. In betrothals there was but a bridegroom that asked and a father that gave. The bride was absent or silent. As a consequence, also, the heroine was rare. Of the great nations of antiquity, Israel produced fewer notable women than any other. Yet, that, it may be, was by way of precaution, in order to reserve the strength of a people for the presentation of one who, transcending all, was to reign in heaven to the genuflections of the earth.

Meanwhile, conjointly with Baal and Moloch, Ishtar—known locally as Ashtaroth—circumadjacently ruled. At a period when these abstractions were omnipresent, when their temples were thronged, when their empires seemed built for all time, the Hebrew prophets, who continuously reviled them, foretold that they would pass and with them the gods, dogmas, states that they sustained. So promptly were the prophecies fulfilled that they must have sounded like the heraldings of the judgment of God. But it may be

that foreknowledge of the future rested on a consciousness of the past.

There, in the desert, had stood a bedouin preparing the tenets of a creed; in the remoter past a shadow in which there was lightning, then the splendor of the first dawn where the future opened like a book, and, in that grammar of the eternal, the promise of an age of gold. Through the echo of succeeding generations came the rumor of the impulse that drew the world in its flight. The bedouin had put the desert behind him and stared at another, the sea. As he passed, the land leaped into life. There were tents and passions, clans not men, an aggregate of forces in which the unit disappeared. For chieftain there was Might and, above, were the subjects of impersonal verbs, the Elohim, from whom the thunder came, the rain, darkness and light, death and birth, dream too, nightmare as well. The clans migrated. Goshen called. In its heart Chaldæa spoke. The Elohim vanished and there was El, the one great god and Isra-el, the great god's elect. From heights that lost themselves in immensity, the ineffable name, incommunicable, and never to be pronounced, was seared by forked flames on a tablet of stone. A nation learned that El was Jehovah, that they were in his charge, that he was omnipotent, that the world was theirs. They had a law, a covenant, a deity and, as they passed into the lands of the well beloved, the moon became their servant, to aid them the sun stood still. The terror of Sinai gleamed from their breast-plates. Men could not see their faces and live. They encroached and conquered. They had a home, then a capital, where David founded a line of kings and Solomon, the city of God.

Solomon, typically satrapic, living in what then was splendor; surrounded by peacocks and peris; married to the daughter of a Pharaoh, married to many another as well; the husband of seven hundred queens, the pasha of three hundred favorites, doing, as perhaps a poet may, only what pleased him, capricious as potentates are, voluptuous as sovereigns were, on his blazing throne and particularly in his aromatic harem, presented a spectacle strange in Israel, wholly Babylonian, thoroughly sultanesque. To local austerity his splendor was an affront, his seraglio a sin, the memory of both became odious, and in the Song of Songs, which, canonically, was attributed to him, but which the higher criticism has shown to be an anonymous work, that contempt was expressed.

Something else was expressed. The Song of Songs is the gospel of love. Humanity at the time was sullen when not base. Nowhere was there love. The anterior stories of Jacob and Rachel, of Rebekah and Isaac, of Boaz and Ruth, are little novels, subsequently evolved, concerning people that had lived long before and probably never lived at all. To scholars they are wholly fabulous. Even otherwise, these legends do not, when analyzed, disclose love. Ruth herself with her magnificent phrase—“Where thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God,”—does not display it. Historically its advent is in the Song of Songs.

The poem, perhaps originally a pastoral in dialogue form, but more probably a play, has, for central situation, the love of a peasant for a shepherd, a love tender and true, stronger than death, stronger at least than a monarch’s will.

The scene, laid three thousand years ago in Solomon's seraglio, represents the triumph of constancy over corruption, the constancy of a girl, unique in her day, who resisted a king, preferring a hovel to his harem. In an epoch more frankly unmoral than any of which history has cognizance, this girl, a native of Shulam, very simple, very ignorant, necessarily unrefined, possessed, through some miracle, that instinctive exclusiveness which, subsequently disseminated and ingrained, refurbished the world. She was the usher of love. The Song of Songs, interpreted mystically by the Church and profanely by scholars, is therefore sacred. It is the first evangel of the heart.

From the existing text, the original plan, and with it the original meaning, have disappeared. Many exegetes, notably Ewald, have demonstrated that the disappearance is due to manipulations and omissions, and many others, Renan in particular, have attempted reconstructions. The version here given is based on his.[3] From it a few expressions, no longer in conformity with modern taste, and several passages, otherwise redundant, have been omited. By way of proem it may be noted that the Shulamite, previously abducted from her native village—a hamlet to the north of Jerusalem—is supposed to be forcibly brought into the presence of the king where, however, she has thought only of her lover.

THE SONGS OF SONGS.

Table of Contents

Act I.

Solomon, in all His Glory, Surrounded by His Seraglio and His Guards.

An Odalisque

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.

Chorus of Odalisques

Thy love is better than delicious wine. Thy name is ointment poured forth. Therefore do we love thee.

The Shulamite
(*forcibly introduced, speaking to her absent lover.*)

The King hath brought me into his chamber. Draw me away, we will go together.

The Odalisques
(*to* Solomon.)

The upright love thee. We will be glad and rejoice in thee. We will remember thy love more than wine.

The Shulamite
(*to the* Odalisques.)

I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, comely as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Do not disdain me because I am a little black. It is the sun that has burned me. My mother's children were angry at me. They made me keeper of the vineyards. Alas! mine own vineyard I have not kept.

(*Thinking of her absent lover.*)

Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou takest thy flocks to rest at noon that I may not wander among the flocks of thy comrades.

AN ODALISQUE

If thou knowest not, O thou fairest among women, follow the flock and feed thy kids by the shepherds' tents.

SOLOMON
(*to the* SHULAMITE.)

To my horse, when harnessed to the chariot that Pharaoh sent me, I compare thee, O my love. Thy cheeks are comely with rows of pearls, thy neck with charms of coral. We will make for thee necklaces of gold, studded with silver.

THE SHULAMITE
(*aside.*)

While the King sitteth at his divan, my spikenard perfumes me and to me my beloved is a bouquet of myrrh, unto me he is as a cluster of cypress in the vines of Engedi.

SOLOMON

Yes, thou art fair, my beloved. Yes, thou art fair. Thine eyes are the eyes of a dove.

THE SHULAMITE
(*thinking of the absent one.*)

Yes, thou art fair, my beloved. Yes, thou art charming, and our tryst is a litter of green.

SOLOMON
(*to whom constancy has no meaning.*)

The beams of our house are cedar and our rafters of fir.

THE SHULAMITE
(*singing.*)

I am the rose of Sharon The lily of the valley am I.

(ENTER *suddenly the* SHEPHERD.)

THE SHEPHERD

As a lily among thorns, so is my love among daughters.

THE SHULAMITE
(*running to him.*)

As is the apple among fruit, so is my beloved among men. In delight I have sat in his shadow and his savor was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banquet hall and put o'er me the banner of love.

(*Turning to the* ODALISQUES.)

Stay me with wine, strengthen me with fruit, for I am swooning with love.

(*Half-fainting she falls in the* SHEPHERD'S *arms.*)

His left hand is under my head and his right hand doth embrace me.

THE SHEPHERD
(*to the* ODALISQUES.)

I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes and the hinds of the field, that ye stir not, nor awake my beloved till she will.

THE SHULAMITE

(*dreaming in the* SHEPHERD'S *arms.*)

My own love's voice. Arise, my fair one, he tells me, arise and let us go....

THE SHEPHERD

I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not, nor awake my beloved till she will.

(SOLOMON *motions; the* SHEPHERD *is removed.*)

ACT II.

A STREET IN JERUSALEM.

In the distance is Solomon and his retinue.

CHORUS OF MEN

Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness, exhaling the odor of myrrh and of frankincense and all the powders of the perfumer?

(SOLOMON *and his retinue advance.*)

FIRST JERUSALEMITE

Behold the palanquin of Solomon. Three score valiant men are about it. They all hold swords....

SECOND JERUSALEMITE

King Solomon has had made for him a litter of Lebanon wood. The supports are of silver, the bottom of gold, the covering of purple. In the centre is a loved one, chosen from among the daughters of Jerusalem.

THE CHORUS
(*calling to women in the houses.*)

Come forth, daughters of Zion, and behold the King....

ACT III.

THE SERAGLIO.

SOLOMON
(*to the* SHULAMITE.)

Yes, thou art fair, my love, yes, thou art fair. Thou hast dove's eyes.... Thou art all fair, my love. There is no spot on thee.

THE SHEPHERD
(*without, in the garden, calling to the* SHULAMITE *and referring in veiled terms to the seraglio and its dangers.*)

Come to me, my betrothed, come to me from Lebanon. Look at me from the top of Amana, from the summit of Shenir and Hermon, from the lion’s den and the mountain of leopards.

(*The* Shulamite *goes to a window and looks out.*)

The Shepherd

You have strengthened my heart, my sister betrothed, you have strengthened my heart with one of thine eyes, with one of the curls that float on thy neck. How dear is thy love, my sister betrothed! Thy caresses are better than wine, and the fragrance of thy garments is sweeter than spice.

The Shulamite

Let my beloved come into his garden and eat its pleasant fruits.

The Shepherd

I am come into my garden, my sister betrothed, I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey. I have drunk my wine with my milk.

(*To the chorus.*)

Eat, comrades, drink abundantly, friends.

(*The* Shepherd *and the chorus withdraw.*)

Act IV.

The Seraglio.

The Shulamite
(*musing.*)

I sleep but my heart waketh. I heard the voice of my beloved. He knocked. Open to me! he said. My sister, my love, my immaculate dove, open to me, for my head is covered with dew, the locks of my hair are wet ... I rose to open to my beloved ... but he was gone. My soul faileth me when he spoke not. I sought him, but I could not find him. I called him but he did not reply.

(*A pause.* She *relates the story of her abduction.*)

The watchman that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me, and the keepers of the walls took away my veil.

(*To the* Odalisques.)

I pray you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him that I die of love.

CHORUS OF ODALISQUES

In what is the superiority of thy lover, O pearl among women, that thou beseechest us so?

THE SHULAMITE

My beloved’s skin is white and ruddy. He is one in a thousand.... His eyes are as doves.... His cheeks are a bed of flowers.... He is charming. Such is my beloved, such is my dear one, O daughters of Jerusalem.

CHORUS OF ODALISQUES

Whither is thy beloved gone, O pearl among women? Which way did he turn, that we may seek him with thee?

THE SHULAMITE

My beloved is gone from the garden.... But I am his and he is mine. He feedeth his flocks among lilies.

(*Enter* SOLOMON.)

(*The* SHULAMITE *looks scornfully at him.*)

SOLOMON

Thou art beautiful as Tirzah, my love, and comely as Jerusalem, but terrible as an army in battle. Turn thine eyes away. They trouble me....

THE SHEPHERD
(*from without.*)

There are sixty queens, eighty favorites, and numberless young girls. But among them all my immaculate dove is unique, she is the darling of her mother. The young girls have seen her and called her blessed. The queens and the favorites have praised her.

THE CHORUS
(*astonished at the* SHULAMITE'S *scorn of the King.*)

Who is it that is beautiful as Tirzah but terrible as an army in battle?

THE SHULAMITE
(*impatiently turning her back, and relating again her abduction.*)

I went down into the garden of nuts, to see the green plants in the valley, to see whether the vine budded, and the pomegranates were in flower. But before I was aware of it, I was among the chariots of my princely people.

THE CHORUS

Turn about, turn again, O Shulamite, that we may see thee.

A DANCER

What will you see in the Shulamite whom the King has compared to an army?

SOLOMON
(*to the* SHULAMITE.)

How beautiful are thy feet, prince’s daughter,... How fair and how pleasant art thou....

THE SHULAMITE
(*impatiently as before.*)

I am my beloved’s and he is sighing for me.

(*Exit* SOLOMON. *Enter the* SHEPHERD.)

THE SHULAMITE
(*hastening to her lover.*)