

## CHAPTER XV

## The Lesbian

WE commonly think of the lesbian as a woman wearing a plain felt hat, short hair, and a necktie; her mannish appearance would seem to indicate some abnormality of the hormones. Nothing could be more erroneous than this confounding of the invert with the "viriloid" woman. There are many homosexuals among harem inmates, prostitutes, among most intentionally "feminine" women; and conversely a great many "masculine" women are heterosexual. Sexologists and psychiatrists confirm the common observation that the majority of female "homos" are in constitution quite like other women. Their sexuality is in no way determined by any anatomical "fate."

There is no doubt, however, that physiological characteristics may create peculiar situations. There is no rigorous biological distinction between the two sexes; an identical soma is acted upon by certain hormones the direction of which—toward maleness or femaleness—is genotypically determined<sup>1</sup> but can be diverted more or less during the development of the fetus, with the resulting appearance of individuals in some respects intermediate between male and female. Certain men take on a feminine aspect because the development of their masculine organs is delayed: thus we occasionally see supposed girls—especially some devoted to sports—become changed into boys. Helene Deutsch<sup>2</sup> gives the case history of a young girl who paid ardent court to a married woman, wishing to abduct her and live with her. It turned out that she was in fact a hermaphrodite, and she was able to marry her divorced innamorata and have children, after a surgical operation had made her condition normally masculine. But it is by no means to be supposed that every woman invert is biologically a man sailing under false colors. The hermaphrodite, who has elements of the genital systems of both sexes, may display a feminine sexuality: I myself knew one such, exiled from Vienna by the Nazis,

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 10–11.

<sup>2</sup> *Psychology of Women*, Vol. I, p. 328.

who regretted her inability to appeal either to heterosexual men or to homosexuals, she herself being attracted by males only.

Under the influence of male hormones, women called "viriloid" show masculine secondary sex characteristics such as a growth of hair on the face; in women of infantile type the female hormones may be deficient and development therefore not completed. Such peculiarities may more or less directly give rise to lesbian leanings. A female of vigorous, aggressive, exuberant vitality prefers to exert herself actively and commonly spurns passivity; ill-favored, malformed, a woman may try to compensate for her inferiority by assuming virile qualities; if her erotic sensitivity is undeveloped, she does not desire masculine caresses.

But anatomy and the hormones only establish a situation and do not set the object toward which the situation is to be transcended. Helene Deutsch<sup>3</sup> cites also the case of a young Polish legionnaire in the First World War who, when wounded, came under her care and who was in fact a girl with pronouncedly masculine secondary sex characteristics. She had joined the army as a nurse, and then had succeeded in concealing her sex and becoming a soldier. She fell in love with a comrade, however, and later she made a favorable adjustment. Her behavior caused her comrades to regard her as a male homosexual, but in reality it was her femininity reasserting itself despite her masculine pretensions. A male does not necessarily desire woman; the fact that the homosexual male may have a perfectly masculine physique implies that a woman with viriloid characteristics is not necessarily doomed to homosexuality.

Even in women of quite normal physiology it has sometimes been asserted that "clitorid" and "vaginal" types can be distinguished, the first being fated for sapphic love. But we have seen that all childhood eroticism is clitorid; whether it remains fixed at this level or becomes transformed is not a matter of anatomy; nor is it true, as often maintained, that childish masturbation explains the later primacy of the clitoris: sexology today regards the masturbation of the child as a quite normal and prevalent phenomenon. The development of feminine eroticism, as we have seen, is a psychological process which is influenced by physiological factors but which depends upon the subject's total attitude toward existence. Marañon held that sexuality is a unitary quality and that in man it attained full development, whereas

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

in woman it remained at a kind of halfway stage; only the lesbian could have as rich a libido as that of the male, and she would therefore represent a "superior" feminine type. But the truth is that feminine sexuality has a structure of its own, and it is therefore absurd to speak of superiority or inferiority in connection with the male and female libidos; the choice of sexual object in no way depends on the amount of energy at the disposal of the woman.

The psychoanalysts have had the great merit of seeing in inversion a psychic and not an organic phenomenon; to them, however, it still seems to be determined by outside circumstances. But then, they have devoted little study to it. According to Freud, the maturing of feminine eroticism requires change from the clitorid stage to the vaginal stage, a change symmetrical with that which transfers to the father the love the little girl has felt for her mother. Various causes may check this developmental process; the woman may not become resigned to her "castrated" state, hiding from herself the absence of the penis and remaining fixed on her mother, for whom she is ever seeking substitutes.

In Adler's view, this arrest of development is not an accident, passively suffered: it is desired by the subject who, through the will to power, deliberately rejects her mutilation and seeks to identify herself with the male while refusing his domination. Whether a matter of infantile fixation or of masculine protest, homosexuality is thus regarded as an arrest of development. But as a matter of fact the lesbian is no more an "undeveloped" woman than a "superior" one. The history of an individual is not a fatalistically determined progression: at each moment the past is re-appraised, so to speak, through a new choice, and the "normality" of the choice gives it no preferred value—it must be evaluated according to its authenticity. Homosexuality can be for woman a mode of flight from her situation or a way of accepting it. The great mistake of the psychoanalysts is, through moralistic conformity, to regard it as never other than an inauthentic attitude.

Woman is an existent who is called upon to make herself object; as subject she has an aggressive element in her sensuality which is not satisfied on the male body: hence the conflicts that her eroticism must somehow overcome. The system is considered normal or "natural" which, abandoning her as prey to some male, restores her sovereignty by putting a child in her arms: but this supposed "normality" is enjoined by a more or less clearly comprehended social interest. Even

heterosexuality permits of other solutions. Woman's homosexuality is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh. And if nature is to be invoked, one can say that all women are naturally homosexual. The lesbian, in fact, is distinguished by her refusal of the male and her liking for feminine flesh; but every adolescent female fears penetration and masculine domination, and she feels a certain repulsion for the male body; on the other hand, the female body is for her, as for the male, an object of desire.

As I have already pointed out, when men set themselves up as subjects, they also set themselves apart; when they regard the other as a thing to be taken, they make a deadly attack upon the virile ideal in the other and likewise in themselves. And when woman regards herself as object, she sees her kind and herself as prey. The male homosexual, the pederast, arouses hostility in heterosexual males and females, for both these require man to be a dominating subject; \* both sexes, on the contrary, spontaneously view lesbians with indulgence. "I avow," said Count de Tilly, "that it is a rivalry which in no way disturbs me; on the contrary, it amuses me and I am immoral enough to laugh at it."<sup>5</sup> Colette attributes the same amused indifference to Renaud faced with the couple formed by the girls Claudine and Rézi.<sup>6</sup>

A man is more annoyed by an active and independent heterosexual woman than by an unaggressive lesbian; only the first assaults the masculine prerogatives; sapphic love affairs by no means run counter to the traditional distinction of the sexes; they involve in most cases an acceptance of femininity, not its denial. We have seen that they often appear among adolescent girls as a substitute for the heterosexual relations that such girls as yet have neither the opportunity nor the hardihood to enter upon. The homosexual affair represents a stage, an apprenticeship, and a girl who engages in it most ardently may well become tomorrow the most ardent of wives, mistresses, or mothers. What must be explained in the female invert is not, then,

\* A heterosexual woman may easily be on terms of friendship with certain pederasts, because she finds security and amusement in such nonsexual relationships. But in general she feels hostile toward these men who in themselves or in others degrade the sovereign male to the status of a passive thing.

<sup>5</sup> In his *Memoirs* Casanova often confesses to a similar amusement at female homosexuality, calling it "a trifling matter," very different from male homosexuality.—Tr.

<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that English law punishes male homosexuality, while regarding the same behavior in women as no crime.

the positive aspect of her choice, it is the negative: she is distinguished not by her taste for women but by the exclusive character of this taste.

Two types of lesbians are often distinguished (as by Jones and Hesnard): the "masculine," who "wish to imitate the male," and the "feminine," who "are afraid of the male." It is true that one can, on the whole, discern two tendencies in inversion; certain women decline passivity, whereas others choose feminine arms in which to abandon themselves passively. But these attitudes react the one on the other; the relations to the object chosen, to the object rejected, are explained the one by the other. For many reasons, as will appear, the distinction made above seems to me to be rather arbitrary.

To define the "masculine" lesbian by her will to "imitate the male" is to stamp her as inauthentic. I have already noted how many ambiguities the psychoanalysts create by accepting the masculine-feminine categories as society currently defines them. The truth is that man today represents the positive and the neutral—that is to say, the male and the human being—whereas woman is only the negative, the female. Whenever she behaves as a human being, she is declared to be identifying herself with the male. Her activities in sports, politics, and intellectual matters, her sexual desire for other women, are all interpreted as a "masculine protest"; the common refusal to take account of the values toward which she aims, or transcends herself, evidently leads to the conclusion that she is, as subject, making an inauthentic choice.

The chief misunderstanding underlying this line of interpretation is that it is *natural* for the female human being to make herself a *feminine* woman: it is not enough to be a heterosexual, even a mother, to realize this ideal; the "true woman" is an artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. Her presumed "instincts" for coquetry, docility, are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man. Man, as a matter of fact, does not always accept his virile vocation; and woman has good reasons for accepting with even less docility the one assigned to her. The concepts of the "inferiority complex" and the "masculine complex" remind me of the story told by Denis de Rougemont in the *Part du Diable*: a woman believed that the birds attacked her when she strolled in the country; after some months of psychoanalytic treatment, which failed to cure the obsession, the doctor went into the garden of the clinic with his patient and saw that the birds actually *did* attack her! Woman feels inferior

because, in fact, the requirements of femininity *do* belittle her. She spontaneously chooses to be a complete person, a subject and a free being with the world and the future open before her; if this choice has a virile cast, it is so to the extent that femininity today means mutilation. Various statements made by female inverts to physicians clearly show that what outrages them, even in childhood, is to be regarded as feminine. They feel contempt for girlish pursuits, demand boys' games and playthings; they feel sorry for women, they are afraid of becoming effeminate, they object to being put in girls' schools.<sup>7</sup>

This revolt by no means implies a predetermined homosexuality; most little girls feel the same sense of outrage and the same desperation when they learn that the chance conformation of their bodies renders their tastes and aspirations blameworthy. Colette Audry<sup>8</sup> was enraged to discover at twelve that she could never become a sailor. It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel indignant at the limitations imposed upon her by her sex. The real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is rather to understand why she accepts them. She conforms through docility and timidity; but this resignation will easily become transformed into revolt if the compensations offered by society seem inadequate. This is what will happen in cases where the adolescent girl feels she is unattractive, as a woman; it is in this way particularly that anatomical endowments are important; ugly of face and figure, or believing herself to be so, woman rejects a feminine destiny for which she feels poorly equipped. But it would be erroneous to say that a mannish bent is acquired in order to compensate for a lack of feminine attributes; the truth is rather that the opportunities offered to the adolescent girl seem too meager to be a fair exchange for the required sacrifice of masculine advantages. All little girls who are brought up conventionally envy the convenient clothing worn by boys; their reflections in the mirror and the promising futures they foresee for themselves are what make them come little by little to value their furbelows; if the harshly truthful mirror reflects an ordinary face, if it holds no promise, laces and ribbons continue to seem an irksome livery, even a ridiculous one, and the "*garçon manqué*" stubbornly retains her boyishness.

Even when she has a good figure and a pretty face, a woman who is absorbed in ambitious projects of her own or one who simply wants

<sup>7</sup> As in cases reported by Ellis and Stekel.

<sup>8</sup> *Aux yeux du souvenir*.

liberty in general will decline to abdicate in favor of another human being; she perceives herself in her activities, not merely in her immanent person: the masculine desire that reduces her to the confines of her body shocks her as much as it shocks the young boy; she feels the same disgust for submissive females as does the virile man for the passive pederast. She adopts a masculine attitude in part to repudiate any appearance of complicity with such women; she assumes masculine attire, manner, language, she forms with a feminine woman companion a couple in which she represents the male person: play-acting that is, indeed, a "masculine protest." But it is a secondary phenomenon; what is primary is the shamed repugnance of the conquering and sovereign subject at the thought of being transformed into fleshly prey. Many athletic women are homosexual; they do not regard as passive flesh a body that denotes muscle, activity, reactivity, dash; it does not magically inspire caresses, it is a means for dealing with the world, not a mere objective thing in the world: the gulf existing between the body-for-the-self and the body-for-others seems in this case to be impassable. Analogous resistance is to be found in women of executive and intellectual types, for whom submission, even of the body, is impossible.

If the equality of the sexes were actually brought about, the obstacle just referred to would in many cases be done away with; but man is still imbued with a sense of superiority, and that state of mind is annoying for woman if she does not share it. It should be said, however, that the most willful and domineering women show little hesitation in confronting the male: the "virile" woman is often perfectly heterosexual. She does not wish to relinquish her claims as a human being; but she is no more willing to be deprived of her femininity; she chooses to join the masculine world, even to make use of it. Her strong sensuality has no fear of male violence; in seeking pleasure from the male body, she has less inner resistance to overcome than the timid virgin has. A very rough, very animal nature will not feel the humiliation of coitus; an intellectual of intrepid spirit will deny it; if sure of herself and pugnaciously inclined, woman will cheerfully engage in a duel in which she is bound to win. George Sand had a taste for young men and "effeminate" types; but Mme de Staël looked for youth and beauty in her lovers only late in life: dominating the men through her vigorous mentality and accepting their admiration with pride, she could hardly feel like prey in their arms. Such a

sovereign as Catherine the Great could even permit herself masochistic debauches: in these sports she remained sole ruler. Isabelle Eberhardt, who in male costume rode horseback over the Sahara, felt in no way belittled when she gave herself to some vigorous sharpshooter. The woman who does not wish to be man's vassal is by no means one who always avoids him: she endeavors rather to make him the instrument of her pleasure. In favorable circumstances—dependent in large part on her partner—the very notion of competition disappears, and she enjoys experiencing to the full her womanly situation just as he enjoys his masculine estate.

But this reconciliation between the active personality and the sexual role is, in spite of any favorable circumstances, much more difficult for woman than for man; and there will be many women who will avoid the attempt, rather than wear themselves out in making the effort involved. Among women artists and writers there are many lesbians. The point is not that their sexual peculiarity is the source of the creative energy or that it indicates the existence of this superior type of energy; it is rather that, being absorbed in serious work, they do not propose to waste time in playing a feminine role or in struggling with men. Not admitting male superiority, they do not wish to make a pretense of recognizing it or to weary themselves in contesting it. They are looking for relaxation, appeasement, and diversion in sexual pleasure: they do better to avoid a partner who appears in the guise of an adversary; and in this way they rid themselves of the fetters implied in femininity. Very often, of course, it is the nature of her heterosexual experiences that leads the active "virile" woman to make the choice between assuming and repudiating her normal sexuality. Masculine disdain confirms the homely woman in her feeling that she is unattractive; a woman of pride will be wounded by a lover's arrogance. Here we encounter again all the reasons for frigidity already noted: resentment, spite, fear of pregnancy, the trauma of a previous abortion, and so on. The more mistrustful woman is in her approach to man, the more weighty these reasons become.

Homosexuality, however, does not always seem to be an entirely satisfactory solution when a woman of dominating personality is concerned. Since she seeks self-affirmation, it is displeasing for her not to realize wholly her feminine possibilities; heterosexual relations seem to her at once belittling and enriching; in repudiating the limitations im-

plied by her sex, it appears that she limits herself in another way. Just as the frigid woman wants sexual pleasure while she refuses it, so the lesbian may often wish she were a normal and complete woman while preferring not to be. This indecision is evident in the case of the transvestite studied by Stekel<sup>0</sup> and referred to above. At sixteen this patient began lesbian affairs, feeling contempt and disgust for girls who yielded to her. She took up serious studies and began to drink. She married, and though she took the aggressive role, she failed to find sexual satisfaction. She shortly left her husband, whom she said she "loved madly," and resumed relations with women. During creative periods she felt completely male and consorted with females; at other times she felt she was feminine and had male lovers. She underwent analysis because she was sexually dissatisfied either way.

The lesbian could readily accept the loss of her femininity if in doing so she gained a successful virility; though she can employ artificial means for deflowering and possessing her loved one, she is none the less a castrate and may suffer acutely from the realization of that fact. She is unfulfilled as a woman, impotent as a man, and her disorder may lead to psychosis. One patient said to Dalbiez: "If I only had something to penetrate with, it would be better." Another wished that her breasts were rigid. The lesbian will often try to compensate for her virile inferiority by an arrogance, an exhibitionism, by which, in fact, an inner disequilibrium is betrayed. Sometimes, again, she will succeed in establishing with other women a type of relation quite analogous to those which a "feminine" man or a youth still uncertain of his virility might have with them. A very striking case of this kind is that of "Count Sandor" reported by Krafft-Ebing.<sup>2</sup> By means of the expedient just mentioned, this woman had attained a state of equilibrium, which was destroyed only by the intervention of society.

Sarolta came of a titled Hungarian family known for its eccentricities. Her father had her reared as a boy, calling her Sandor; she rode horseback, hunted, and so on. She was under such influences until, at thirteen, she was placed in an institution. A little later she

<sup>0</sup> Reported at length in *Frigidity in Woman*, Vol. II, Ch. xiv.

<sup>1</sup> *La Méthode psychanalytique et la doctrine freudienne*.

<sup>2</sup> *Psychopathia Sexualis* (English translation, Physicians and Surgeons Book Co., 1931), p. 428.

fell in love with an English girl, pretending to be a boy, and ran away with her. At home again, later, she resumed the name Sandor and wore boy's clothing, while being carefully educated. She went on long trips with her father, always in male attire; she was addicted to sports, drank, and visited brothels. She felt particularly drawn toward actresses and other such detached women, preferably not too young but "feminine" in nature. "It delighted me," she related, "if the passion of a lady was disclosed under a poetic veil. All immodesty in a woman was disgusting to me. I had an indescribable aversion to female attire—indeed, for everything feminine, but only in so far as it concerned me; for, on the other hand, I was all enthusiasm for the beautiful sex." She had numerous affairs with women and spent a good deal of money. At the same time she was a valued contributor to two important journals.

She lived for three years in "marriage" with a woman ten years older than herself, from whom she broke away only with great difficulty. She was able to inspire violent passions. Falling in love with a young teacher, she was married to her in an elaborate ceremony, the girl and her family believing her to be a man; her father-in-law on one occasion noticed what seemed to be an erection (probably a priapus); she shaved as a matter of form, but servants in the hotel suspected the truth from seeing blood on her bedclothes and from spying through the keyhole.

Thus unmasked, Sandor was put in prison and later acquitted, after thorough investigation. She was greatly saddened by her enforced separation from her beloved Marie, to whom she wrote long and impassioned letters from her cell.

The examination showed that her conformation was not wholly feminine: her pelvis was small and she had no waist. Her breasts were developed, her sexual parts quite feminine but not maturely formed. Her menstruation appeared late, at seventeen, and she felt a profound horror of the function. She was equally horrified at the thought of sexual relations with the male; her sense of modesty was developed only in regard to women and to the point that she would feel less shyness in going to bed with a man than with a woman. It was very embarrassing for her to be treated as a woman, and she was truly in anguish at having to wear feminine clothes. She felt that she was "drawn as by a magnetic force toward women

of twenty-four to thirty." She found sexual satisfaction exclusively in caressing her loved one, never in being caressed. At times she made use of a stocking stuffed with oakum as a priapus. She detested men. She was very sensitive to the moral esteem of others, and she had much literary talent, wide culture, and a colossal memory.

Sandor was not psychoanalyzed, but a number of salient points emerge from the simple statement of the facts. It would appear that without a "masculine protest," quite spontaneously, she always thought of herself as a man, thanks to her upbringing and her natural constitution; the manner in which her father included her in his traveling and in his life evidently had a decisive influence. Her manishness was so well established that she showed no ambivalence in regard to women; loving them like a man, she did not feel herself compromised by them; she loved them in a purely dominating, active way, without accepting reciprocal attentions. But it is remarkable that she "detested men" and that she liked older women especially. This suggests that she had a *masculine* Oedipus complex in regard to her mother; she retained the childish attitude of the very little girl who, forming a couple with her mother, nourishes the hope of protecting her and some day dominating her.

It often happens that when the child has felt a lack of maternal affection, she is haunted all her life by the need for it: reared by her father, Sandor must have dreamed of a loving and dear mother, whom she sought, later, in other women; that explains her profound envy of other men, bound up with her respect, her "poetic" love, for detached women and older women, who seemed in her eyes to bear a sacred character. Her attitude toward women was precisely that of Rousseau with Mme de Warens, of the young Benjamin Constant with Mme de Charrière: sensitive and "feminine" adolescents, they also turned to motherly mistresses. We frequently meet with the lesbian, more or less markedly of this type, who has never identified herself with her mother—because she either admired or detested her too much—but who, while declining to be a woman, wishes to have around her the soft delight of feminine protection; from the warm shelter of that womb she can emerge into the outer world with manish boldness; she behaves like a man, but as a man she is fragile, weak, and this makes her desire an older mistress; the pair will corre-

spond to that well-known heterosexual couple: matron and adolescent.<sup>3</sup>

The psychoanalysts have strongly emphasized the importance of the early relations established between the homosexual woman and her mother. There are two cases in which the adolescent girl finds difficulty in escaping her mother's influence: if she has been too lovingly watched over by an anxious mother, or if she has been maltreated by a "bad mother," who has inspired in the girl a deep sense of guilt. In the first case their relation often verges upon homosexuality: they sleep together, caress each other, or indulge in breast kisses; the young girl will later seek the same happiness in other arms. In the second case she will feel keenly the need for a "good mother," who will protect her from the first and ward off the curse she feels has been placed upon her. One of Havelock Ellis's subjects, who had detested her mother throughout her childhood, describes the love she felt at sixteen for an older woman, as follows: <sup>4</sup>

I felt like an orphaned child who had suddenly acquired a mother, and through her I began to feel less antagonistic to grown people and to feel the first respect I had ever felt for what they said. . . . My love for her was perfectly pure, and I thought of hers as simply maternal. . . . I liked her to touch me and she sometimes held me in her arms or let me sit on her lap. At bedtime she used to come and say good-night and kiss me upon the mouth.

If the older woman is so inclined, the younger will be delighted to abandon herself to more ardent embraces. She will ordinarily assume the passive role, for she wishes to be dominated, protected, cradled, and caressed like a small child. Whether such relations remain platonic or become physical, they frequently have the character of a true amorous passion. But from the very fact that they form a classic stage in adolescent development, it is clear that they are insufficient to explain a definite choice of homosexuality. In them the young girl seeks at once a liberation and a security that she could find also in masculine arms. After having passed through the period of amorous enthusiasm, the younger woman often feels toward the older the same

<sup>3</sup> Like the Marschallin and Octavian in Richard Strauss's opera *Der Rosenkavalier*.—Tr.

<sup>4</sup> *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. II, Part 2, p. 238.

ambivalent sentiment that she felt toward her mother; she submits to her influence while desiring to escape from it; if her friend insists on holding her, she will remain for a time her "captive";<sup>5</sup> but she finally escapes, after bitter scenes or in friendly fashion; having done with adolescence, she feels ripe for the life of a normal woman. To become a confirmed lesbian she must either refuse—like Sandor—to accept her femininity or let it flower in feminine arms. This is to say that fixation on the mother is not by itself enough to explain inversion. And this condition may indeed be chosen for quite other reasons. The woman may discover or foresee through complete or partial experiences that she will not derive pleasure from heterosexual relations, that only another woman can fully provide it: to the woman who makes a religion of her femininity, especially, the homosexual embrace may prove most satisfying.

It is most important to emphasize the fact that refusal to make herself the object is not always what turns woman to homosexuality; most lesbians, on the contrary, seek to cultivate the treasures of their femininity. To be willing to be changed into a passive object is not to renounce all claim to subjectivity: woman hopes in this way to find self-realization under the aspect of herself as a thing; but then she will be trying to find herself in her otherness, her alterity. When alone she does not succeed in really creating her double; if she caresses her own bosom, she still does not know how her breasts seem to a strange hand, nor how they are felt to react under a strange hand; a man can reveal to her the existence of her flesh *for herself*—that is to say, as she herself perceives it, but not what it is *to others*. It is only when her fingers trace the body of a woman whose fingers in turn trace her body that the miracle of the mirror is accomplished. Between man and woman love is an act; each torn from self becomes other: what fills the woman in love with wonder is that the languorous passivity of her flesh should be reflected in the male's impetuosity; the narcissistic woman, however, recognizes her enticements but dimly in the man's erected flesh. Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to re-create the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality. Says Colette in *Ces plaisirs*: "The close resemblance gives certitude of

<sup>5</sup> As in Dorothy Baker's novel *Trio*, otherwise quite superficial.

pleasure. The lover takes delight in being sure of caressing a body the secrets of which she knows, and whose preferences her own body indicates to her." And Renée Vivien's poem (from *Sortilèges*) expresses the same idea: "Our bodies are made alike . . . Our destiny the same . . . In you I love my child, my darling, and my sister."

This mirroring may assume a maternal cast; the mother who sees herself and projects herself in her daughter often has a sexual attachment for her; she has in common with the lesbian the longing to protect and cradle a soft carnal object in her arms. Colette brings out this analogy when she writes in *Vrilles de la vigne* as follows: "You will delight me, bending over me, when, with your eyes filled with maternal concern, you seek in your passionate one the child you have not borne"; and Renée Vivien enlarges on the same sentiment in another of her poems: ". . . And my arms were made the better to shelter you . . . Like a warm cradle where you shall find repose."

In all love—sexual or maternal—exist at once selfishness and generosity, desire to possess the other and to give the other all; but the mother and the lesbian are similar especially in the degree to which both are narcissistic, enamored respectively in the child or the woman friend, each of her own projection or reflection.

But narcissism—like the mother fixation—does not always lead to homosexuality, as is proved, for example, in the case of Marie Bashkirtsev, in whose writings no trace of affection for women is to be found. Cerebral rather than sensual, and extremely conceited, she dreamed from childhood of being highly regarded by men: she was interested only in what could add to her renown. A woman who idolizes herself alone and whose aim is success in general is incapable of a warm attachment to other women; she sees in them only enemies and rivals.

The truth is that there is never a single determining factor; it is always a matter of a choice, arrived at in a complex total situation and based upon a free decision; no sexual fate governs the life of the individual woman: her type of eroticism, on the contrary, expresses her general outlook on life.

Environmental circumstances, however, have a considerable influence on the choice. Today the two sexes still live largely separated lives: in boarding schools and seminaries for young women the transition from intimacy to sexuality is rapid; lesbians are far less numerous in environments where the association of girls and boys facilitates

heterosexual experiences. Many women who are employed in work-shops and offices, surrounded by women, and who see little of men, will tend to form amorous friendships with females: they will find it materially and morally simple to associate their lives. The absence or difficulty of heterosexual contacts will doom them to inversion. It is hard to draw the line between resignation and predilection: a woman can devote herself to women because man has disappointed her, but sometimes man has disappointed her because in him she was really seeking a woman.

For all these reasons it is erroneous to distinguish sharply between the homosexual and the heterosexual woman. Once past the uncertain period of adolescence, the normal male no longer permits himself homosexual amusements; but the normal woman often returns to the amours—platonic or not—which have enchanted her youth. Disappointed in man, she may seek in woman a lover to replace the male who has betrayed her. Colette indicated in her *Vagabonde* this consoling role that forbidden pleasures may frequently play in woman's existence: some women, as it happens, spend their whole lives in being thus consoled. Even a woman with no lack of masculine embraces may not disdain calmer pleasures. If she is passive and sensual, she will not be repelled by the caresses of a woman friend, since she will in this case have only to give way and let herself be gratified. If she is active and fiery, she will seem "androgynous," not on account of some mysterious combination of male and female hormones, but simply because aggressiveness and lust for possession are regarded as virile qualities; Colette's Claudine, in love with Renaud, is none the less attracted by Rézi's charms; she is entirely a woman without losing for all that the wish to take and caress. Among "nice women," of course, these "perverse" desires are carefully repressed, but nevertheless they are manifested in the form of pure but intense friendships or under the cover of maternal affection; sometimes they burst forth violently during a psychosis or in the crisis of the menopause.

For still better reasons, it is useless to try to classify lesbians in two well-marked categories. Because they often are pleased to imitate a bisexual couple, superposing a social make-believe upon their true relations, they themselves suggest dividing lesbians into "virile" and "feminine" types. But the fact that one wears severe suits and the other feminine frocks should give rise to no illusion. On closer observation it is to be seen that, except in a few cases, their sexuality is

ambiguous. The woman who turns lesbian because she haughtily declines male domination is often pleased to find the same proud amazon in another. Formerly lesbians flourished among the women students at Sèvres, who lived together far from men; they took pride in belonging to a feminine elite and wished to remain autonomous subjects; the common feeling that united them against the privileged caste enabled each to admire in a friend the impressive being whom she idolized in herself; in their mutual embraces each was at once man and woman and each was enchanted with the other's androgynous qualities.

On the other hand, a woman who wishes to enjoy her femininity in feminine arms can also know the pride of obeying no master. Renée Vivien dearly loved feminine beauty, and she wished to be beautiful; she adorned herself, she was proud of her long hair; but she took pleasure in feeling free, inviolate. In her poems she expresses her scorn for the women who in marriage consent to become men's serfs. Her liking for strong drink, her sometimes obscene language, showed her desire for virility. The fact is that in most couples the caresses are reciprocal. In consequence the respective roles of the two partners are by no means definitely fixed: the woman of more childish nature can play the part of the adolescent youth associated with the protective matron or that of the mistress on her lover's arm. They can enjoy their love in a state of equality. Because the partners are homologous, basically alike, all kinds of combinations, transpositions, exchanges, *comédies* are possible. Their relations become balanced according to the psychological tendencies of each of the two friends and in accordance with the total situation. If one of them helps and supports the other, she assumes male functions: tyrannical protector, exploited dupe, respected lord and master, or sometimes even pimp; a moral, social, or intellectual superiority may confer authority upon her; however, the one most loved will enjoy privileges bestowed upon her by the passionate attachment of the one who is most loving. The association of two women, like that of a man and a woman, assumes many different forms; it may be based upon sentiment, material interest, or habit; it may be conjugal or romantic; it has room for sadism, masochism, generosity, fidelity, devotion, capriciousness, egotism, betrayal: among lesbians there are prostitutes and also great lovers.

But certain circumstances give these liaisons special characteristics. They are not sanctioned by an institution or by the mores, nor are



they regulated by conventions; hence they are marked by especial sincerity. Man and woman—even husband and wife—are in some degree playing a part before one another, and in particular woman, upon whom the male always imposes some requirement: virtue beyond suspicion, charm, coquettishness, childishness, or austerity. Never in the presence of husband or lover can she feel wholly herself; but with her woman friend she need not be on parade, need not pretend: they are too much of a kind not to show themselves frankly as they are. This similarity engenders complete intimacy. Frequently eroticism has but a small part in these unions; here sex pleasure is of a nature less violent and vertiginous than between man and woman, it does not bring about such overwhelming transformations; but when male and female lovers have withdrawn from the carnal embrace, they again become strangers; the male body in itself becomes repulsive to the woman; and the man often feels a kind of flat loathing for his companion's female body. Carnal affection between women is more even, has more continuity; they are not carried away in frenetic ecstasies, but they never sink back into hostile indifference; to look at each other, to touch each other is a tranquil pleasure, prolonging that of the bed. The union of Sarah Ponsonby with her woman companion lasted for almost fifty years without a cloud: apparently they were able to create a peaceful Eden apart from the ordinary world.<sup>6</sup>

But sincerity also exacts a price. Because they show themselves frankly as they are, unconcerned with dissimulation or self-control, a feminine couple may engage in remarkably violent scenes. A man and a woman are intimidated by the fact that they are different: he feels pity and concern for her; he feels bound to treat her with courtesy, indulgence, restraint; she respects him and fears him somewhat, she endeavors to control herself in his presence; each is careful to spare the mysterious other, being uncertain of his or her feelings and reactions. But women are pitiless toward each other; they thwart, provoke, pursue, fall upon one another tooth and nail, and drag each other down into bottomless abjection. Masculine imperturbability, whether due to indifference or self-control, is a barrier against which feminine scenes break in vain like swirling waters against a dike; but between two women tears and frenzies rise in alternate crescendo; their

<sup>6</sup> See Mary Gordon's *Chase of the Wild Goose* (London: Hogarth Press, 1937), in which the story of the lifelong association of Miss Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler is beautifully—and reticently—told.—TR.

appetite for outdoing each other in reproaches and for endlessly "having it out" is insatiable. Demands, recriminations, jealousy, tyrannizing—all these plagues of married life are here let loose with redoubled intensity.

If such amours are often stormy, it is also true that they are ordinarily carried on under more threatening conditions than are heterosexual affairs. They are condemned by a society with which they can hardly be integrated successfully. The woman who assumes the virile role—through her nature, her situation, or her strength of passion—will regret not giving her loved one a normal and respectable life, not being able to marry her; and she will reproach herself for leading her friend into questionable ways: such are the sentiments that Radclyffe Hall attributes to her heroine in *The Well of Loneliness*. This remorse is manifested in a morbid anxiety and especially in a torturing jealousy. The passive or less deeply smitten partner, on her side, will in fact suffer from the weight of social censure; she will believe herself degraded, perverted, frustrated, she will feel resentment against the woman who brings all this upon her. It may happen that one of the two women wants to have a child; if so, she can sadly resign herself to her sterility, or the two can adopt a child, or the one who longs for maternity can appeal to a man; the child may serve to unite them more firmly, or it may be a new source of friction.

What gives homosexual women a masculine cast is not their erotic life, which, on the contrary, confines them to a feminine universe; it is rather the whole group of responsibilities they are forced to assume because they dispense with men. Their situation is the reverse of the courtesan's, for she sometimes takes on a virile character from living among men—as did Ninon de Lenclos—but still depends upon them. The peculiar atmosphere that surrounds lesbians comes from the contrast between the gynæceum-like climate of their private lives and the masculine freedom of their public existence. They act like men in a world without men. Woman by herself, apart from man, seems somewhat unusual; it is not true that men respect women; they respect one another through their women—wives, mistresses, or the prostitutes they pimp for. Without masculine protection woman is helpless before a superior caste that is aggressive, sneeringly amused, or hostile. As an erotic "perversion," feminine homosexuality may elicit a smile; but as implying a mode of life, it arouses contempt or scandalized disapproval. If there is a good deal of aggressiveness and affectation

in the attitude of lesbians, it is because there is no way in which they can live naturally in their situation: being natural implies being unselfconscious, not picturing one's acts to oneself; but the attitude of other people constantly directs the lesbian's attention upon herself. She can go her own way in calm indifference only when she is old enough or backed by considerable social prestige.

It is difficult to state with certainty, for example, whether the lesbian commonly dresses in mannish fashion by preference or as a defense reaction. Certainly it is often a matter of spontaneous choice. Nothing is less *natural* than to dress in feminine fashion; no doubt masculine garb is artificial also, but it is simpler and more convenient, being intended to facilitate rather than to hinder activity; George Sand wore male clothing; in her last book, *Moi*, Thyde Monnier confessed her preference for trousers; every active woman likes low heels and sturdy materials. The significance of woman's attire is evident: it is decoration, and to be decorated means to be offered. The heterosexual feminists were formerly as intransigent in this matter as the lesbians: declining to make themselves into merchandise, offered for sale, they affected severe tailor-made suits and felt hats; elaborate low-necked gowns seemed to them symbolical of the social order they were fighting. Today they have succeeded in gaining the reality, and so in their eyes the symbol is of less importance. But it remains important for the lesbian to the extent that she must still assert her claim. It may happen also that severe dress is more becoming to her, if physical traits have motivated her choice of lesbianism.

It should be pointed out, further, that one function of finery is to gratify woman's tactile sensuousness; but the lesbian disdains the appeal of velvet and silk: like Sandor she enjoys them on her friends, or her friend's body itself may take their place. For similarly, also, the lesbian often likes to drink hard liquor, smoke strong tobacco, use rough language, take violent exercise: in her eroticism she gets enough soft feminine sweetness, and by way of contrast she enjoys a climate that is not so mild. Thus she may come to enjoy the company of men.

But here a new factor is involved: that is the relation—often ambiguous—which she sustains with men. A woman fully assured in her virile powers will want only men as friends and companions; but such assurance will hardly be found in any woman who does not have in-

terests in common with them, who—in business, activities, or art—does not work and find success like a man. When Gertrude Stein entertained friends, she conversed only with the men and left to Alice Toklas the duty of talking with the ladies.<sup>7</sup> But toward women the strongly virile female homosexual will take an ambivalent attitude: she feels contempt for them, but with them she suffers from an inferiority complex both as woman and as man. She fears that to them she will seem at once a defective woman and an incomplete man, and this leads her to affect a haughty superiority or to show toward them—like Stekel's transvestite—a sadistic aggressiveness.

But such cases are rather rare. Most lesbians, as we have seen, reticently avoid men: in them, as in the frigid woman, there is a feeling of resentment, timidity, pride; they do not feel truly men's peers; to their feminine resentment is added a masculine inferiority complex; men are rivals better equipped to seduce, possess, and retain their prey; they detest the "defilement" to which men subject woman. They are incensed also to see men holding social advantages and to feel that they are the stronger: it is a burning humiliation to be unable to fight with a rival, to know that he is capable of knocking you down with a blow of his fist. This complicated hostility is one of the reasons that impel certain female homosexuals to make themselves conspicuous; they flock by themselves; they form clubs of a sort to show that they have no more need of men socially than sexually. From this the descent is easy to empty bragging and all the play-acting that springs from insincerity. The lesbians play first at being a man; then even being a lesbian becomes a game; masculine clothing, at first a disguise, becomes a uniform; and under the pretext of escaping male oppression, woman becomes enslaved to the character she plays; wishing not to be confined in woman's situation, she is imprisoned in that of the lesbian. Nothing gives a darker impression of narrow-mindedness and of mutilation than these groups of emancipated women. It should be added that many women declare themselves to be homosexual only through self-interested compliance: they adopt lesbianism only with their growing awareness of its equivocal allurements, hoping moreover to entice such men as may like "vicious"

<sup>7</sup> A heterosexual woman who believes—or can convince herself—that her merits enable her to transcend sexual differences will easily take the same attitude. So it was with Mme de Staël.

women. These noisy zealots—who are obviously the most noticeable of the lesbians—help to cast discredit upon what common opinion regards as a vice and as a pose.

The truth is that homosexuality is no more a perversion deliberately indulged in than it is a curse of fate.<sup>8</sup> It is an attitude *chosen in a certain situation*—that is, at once motivated and freely adopted. No one of the factors that mark the subject in connection with this choice—physiological conditions, psychological history, social circumstances—is the determining element, though they all contribute to its explanation. It is one way, among others, in which woman solves the problems posed by her condition in general, by her erotic situation in particular. Like all human behavior, homosexuality leads to make-believe, disequilibrium, frustration, lies, or, on the contrary, it becomes the source of rewarding experiences, in accordance with its manner of expression in actual living—whether in bad faith, laziness, and falsity, or in lucidity, generosity, and freedom.

<sup>8</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* presents a heroine with a psychophysiological determined taint. But the documentary value of this novel is very slight despite its wide repute.

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## PART V

# SITUATION

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## CHAPTER XVI

### The Married Woman

**M**ARRIAGE is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. We must therefore continue this study by analyzing marriage.

Economic evolution in woman's situation is in process of upsetting the institution of marriage: it is becoming a union freely entered upon by the consent of two independent persons; the obligations of the two contracting parties are personal and reciprocal; adultery is for both a breach of contract; divorce is obtainable by the one or the other on the same conditions. Woman is no longer limited to the reproductive function, which has lost in large part its character as natural servitude and has come to be regarded as a function to be voluntarily assumed;<sup>1</sup> and it is compatible with productive labor, since, in many cases, the time off required by a pregnancy is taken by the mother at the expense of the State or the employer. In the Soviet Union marriage was

<sup>1</sup> See Book I, pp. 117 ff.