

# IMAGINARY PORTRAITS

BY

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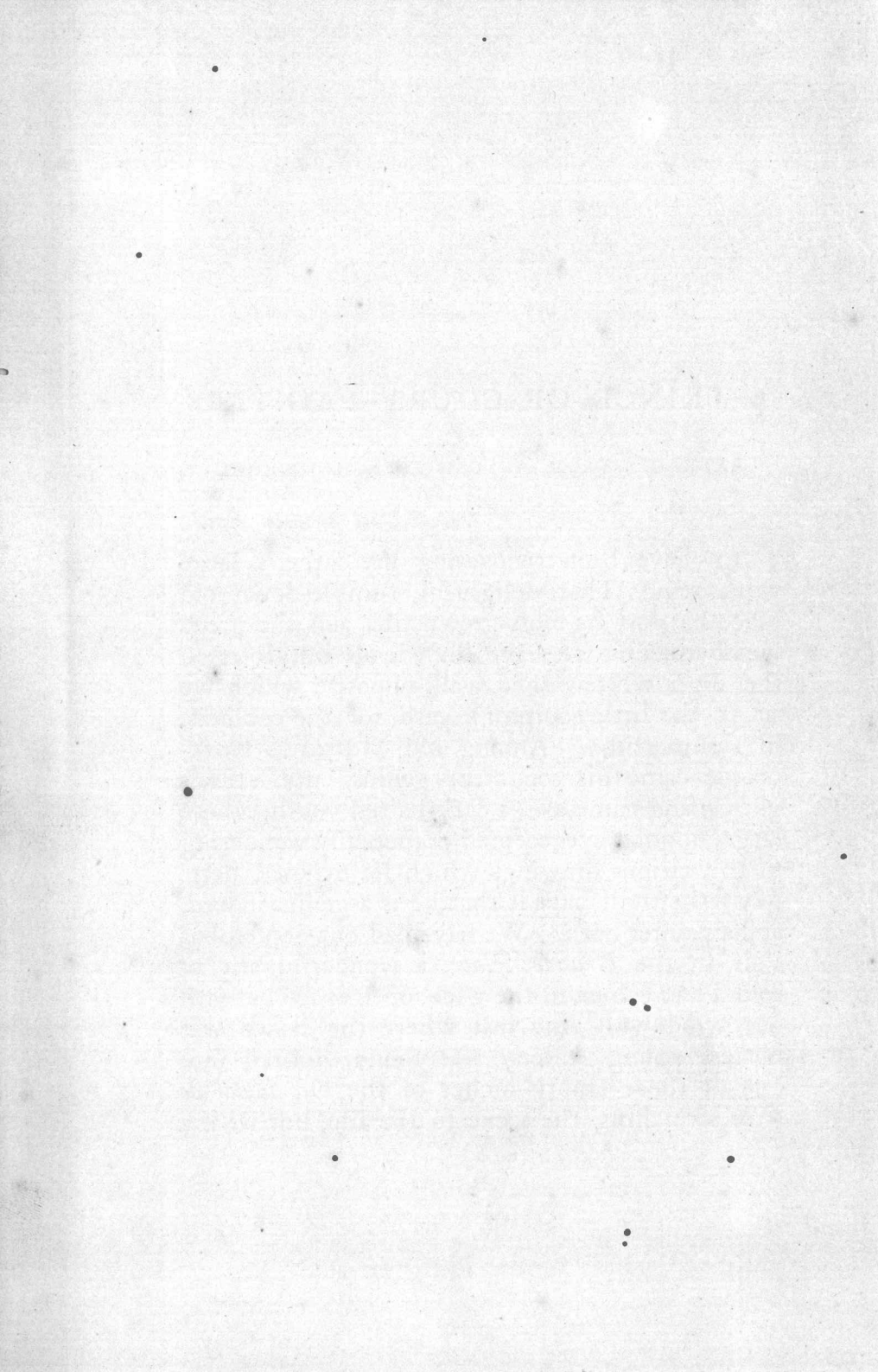
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A PRINCE OF COURT PAINTERS



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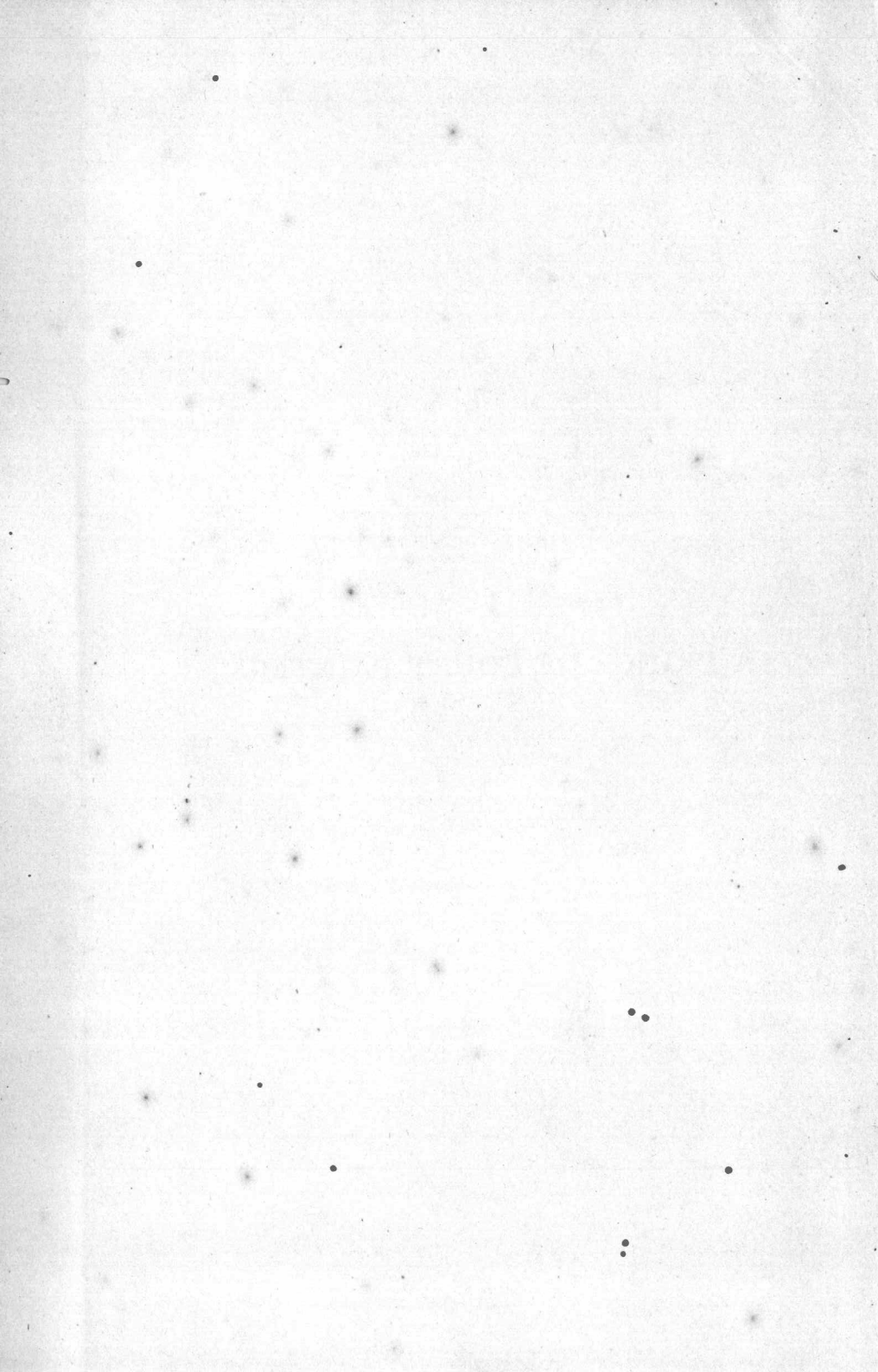
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EXTRACTS FROM AN OLD FRENCH JOURNAL

VALENCIENNES, *September 1701.*

THEY have been renovating my father's large workroom. That delightful, tumble-down old place has lost its moss-grown tiles and the green weather-stains we have known all our lives on the high whitewashed wall, opposite which we sit, in the little sculptor's yard, for the coolness, in summertime. Among old Watteau's work-people came his son, "the genius," my father's godson and namesake, a dark-haired youth, whose large, unquiet eyes seemed perpetually wandering to the various drawings which lie exposed here. My father will have it that he is a genius indeed, and a painter born. We have had our September Fair in the *Grande Place*, a wonderful stir of sound and colour in the wide, open space beneath our windows. And just where the crowd was busiest young Antony was found, hoisted into one of those empty niches of the old *Hôtel de Ville*, sketching the scene to the life, but with a

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kind of grace—a marvellous tact of omission, as my father pointed out to us, in dealing with the vulgar reality seen from one's own window—which has made trite old Harlequin, Clown, and Columbine, seem like people in some fairyland ; or like infinitely clever tragic actors, who, for the humour of the thing, have put on motley for once, and are able to throw a world of serious innuendo into their burlesque looks, with a sort of comedy which shall be but tragedy seen from the other side. He brought his sketch to our house to-day, and I was present when my father questioned him and commended his work. But the lad seemed not greatly pleased, and left untasted the glass of old Malaga which was offered to him. His father will hear nothing of educating him as a painter. Yet he is not ill-to-do, and has lately built himself a new stone house, big and grey and cold. Their old plastered house with the black timbers, in the *Rue des Cardinaux*, was prettier ; dating from the time of the Spaniards, and one of the oldest in Valenciennes.

October 1701.

Chiefly through the solicitations of my father, old Watteau has consented to place Antony with a teacher of painting here. I meet him betimes on the way to his lessons, as I return from Mass ; for he still works with the masons,



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but making the most of late and early hours, of every moment of liberty. And then he has the feast-days, of which there are so many in this old-fashioned place. Ah! such gifts as his, surely, may once in a way make much industry seem worth while. He makes a wonderful progress. And yet, far from being set-up, and too easily pleased with what, after all, comes to him so easily, he has, my father thinks, too little self-approval for ultimate success. He is apt, in truth, to fall out too hastily with himself and what he produces. Yet here also there is the "golden mean." Yes! I could fancy myself offended by a sort of irony which sometimes crosses the half-melancholy sweetness of manner habitual with him; only that as I can see, he treats himself to the same quality.

*October 1701.*

Antony Watteau comes here often now. It is the instinct of a natural fineness in him, to escape when he can from that blank stone house, with so little to interest, and that homely old man and woman. The rudeness of his home has turned his feeling for even the simpler graces of life into a physical want, like hunger or thirst, which might come to greed; and methinks he perhaps overvalues these things. Still, made as he is, his hard fate in that rude place must needs touch one. And then, he profits by the experience of

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my father, who has much knowledge in matters of art beyond his own art of sculpture; and Antony is not unwelcome to him. In these last rainy weeks especially, when he can't sketch out of doors, when the wind only half dries the pavement before another torrent comes, and people stay at home, and the only sound from without is the creaking of a restless shutter on its hinges, or the march across the *Place* of those weary soldiers, coming and going so interminably, one hardly knows whether to or from battle with the English and the Austrians, from victory or defeat:—Well! he has become like one of our family. “He will go far!” my father declares. He would go far, in the literal sense, if he might—to Paris, to Rome. It must be admitted that our Valenciennes is a quiet, nay! a sleepy place; sleepier than ever since it became French, and ceased to be so near the frontier. The grass is growing deep on our old ramparts, and it is pleasant to walk there—to walk there and muse; pleasant for a tame, unambitious soul such as mine.

*December 1702.*

Antony Watteau left us for Paris this morning. It came upon us quite suddenly. They amuse themselves in Paris. A scene-painter we have here, well known in Flanders, has been engaged to work in one of the Parisian play-houses; and young Watteau, of whom he had some slight

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knowledge, has departed in his company. He doesn't know it was I who persuaded the scene-painter to take him; that he would find the lad useful. We offered him our little presents—fine thread-lace of our own making for his ruffles, and the like; for one must make a figure in Paris, and he is slim and well-formed. For myself, I presented him with a silken purse I had long ago embroidered for another. Well! we shall follow his fortunes (of which I for one feel quite sure) at a distance. Old Watteau didn't know of his departure, and has been here in great anger.

December 1703.

Twelve months to-day since Antony went to Paris! The first struggle must be a sharp one for an unknown lad in that vast, overcrowded place, even if he be as clever as young Antony Watteau. We may think, however, that he is on the way to his chosen end, for he returns not home; though, in truth, he tells those poor old people very little of himself. The apprentices of the M. Métayer for whom he works, labour all day long, each at a single part only,—*coiffure*, or robe, or hand,—of the cheap pictures of religion or fantasy he exposes for sale at a low price along the footways of the *Pont Notre-Dame*. Antony is already the most skilful of them, and seems to have been promoted of late to work on church pictures. I like the thought of that.

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He receives three *livres* a week for his pains, and his soup daily.

May 1705.

Antony Watteau has parted from the dealer in pictures à *bon marché*, and works now with a painter of furniture pieces (those headpieces for doors and the like, now in fashion) who is also *concierge* of the Palace of the Luxembourg. Antony is actually lodged somewhere in that grand place, which contains the king's collection of the Italian pictures he would so willingly copy. Its gardens also are magnificent, with something, as we understand from him, altogether of a novel kind in their disposition and embellishment. Ah ! how I delight myself, in fancy at least, in those beautiful gardens, freer and trimmed less stiffly than those of other royal houses. Methinks I see him there, when his long summer-day's work is over, enjoying the cool shade of the stately, broad-foliaged trees, each of which is a great courtier, though it has its way almost as if it belonged to that open and unbuilt country beyond, over which the sun is sinking.

His thoughts, however, in the midst of all this, are not wholly away from home, if I may judge by the subject of a picture he hopes to sell for as much as sixty *livres*—*Un Départ de Troupes*, Soldiers Departing—one of those scenes of military life one can study so well here at Valenciennes.



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June 1705.

Young Watteau has returned home—proof, with a character so independent as his, that things have gone well with him; and (it is agreed!) stays with us, instead of in the stonemason's house. The old people suppose he comes to us for the sake of my father's instruction. French people as we are become, we are still old Flemish, if not at heart, yet on the surface. Even in *French* Flanders, at Douai and Saint Omer, as I understand, in the churches and in people's houses, as may be seen from the very streets, there is noticeable a minute and scrupulous air of care-taking and neatness. Antony Watteau remarks this more than ever on returning to Valenciennes, and savours greatly, after his lodging in Paris, our Flemish cleanliness, lover as he is of distinction and elegance. Those worldly graces he seemed when a young lad almost to hunger and thirst for, as though truly the mere adornments of life were its necessities, he already takes as if he had been always used to them. And there is something noble—shall I say?—in his half-disdainful way of serving himself with what he still, as I think, secretly values over-much. There is an air of seemly thought—*le bel sérieux*—about him, which makes me think of one of those grave old Dutch statesmen in their youth, such as that famous William the Silent. And yet the effect of this first success

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of his (of more importance than its mere money value, as insuring for the future the full play of his natural powers) I can trace like the bloom of a flower upon him; and he has, now and then, the gaieties which from time to time, surely, must refresh all true artists, however hard-working and "painful."

*July 1705.*

The charm of all this—his physiognomy and manner of being—has touched even my young brother, Jean-Baptiste. He is greatly taken with Antony, clings to him almost too attentively, and will be nothing but a painter, though my father would have trained him to follow his own profession. It may do the child good. He needs the expansion of some generous sympathy or sentiment in that close little soul of his, as I have thought, watching sometimes how his small face and hands are moved in sleep. A child of ten who cares only to save and possess, to hoard his tiny savings! Yet he is not otherwise selfish, and loves us all with a warm heart. Just now it is the moments of Antony's company he counts, like a little miser. Well! that may save him perhaps from developing a certain meanness of character I have sometimes feared for him.



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*August 1705.*

We returned home late this summer evening—Antony Watteau, my father and sisters, young Jean-Baptiste, and myself—from an excursion to Saint-Amand, in celebration of Antony's last day with us. After visiting the great abbey-church and its range of chapels, with their costly encumbrance of carved shrines and golden reliquaries and funeral scutcheons in the coloured glass, half seen through a rich enclosure of marble and brass-work, we supped at the little inn in the forest. Antony, looking well in his new-fashioned, long-skirted coat, and taller than he really is, made us bring our cream and wild strawberries out of doors, ranging ourselves according to his judgment (for a hasty sketch in that big pocket-book he carries) on the soft slope of one of those fresh spaces in the wood, where the trees uncloset a little, while Jean-Baptiste and my youngest sister danced a minuet on the grass, to the notes of some strolling lutanist who had found us out. He is visibly cheerful at the thought of his return to Paris, and became for a moment freer and more animated than I have ever yet seen him, as he discoursed to us about the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens in the church here. His words, as he spoke of them, seemed full of a kind of rich sunset with some moving glory within it. Yet I like far better than any of these pictures of Rubens a work of that old Dutch

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master, Peter Porbus, which hangs, though almost out of sight indeed, in our church at home. The patron saints, simple, and standing firmly on either side, present two homely old people to Our Lady enthroned in the midst, with the look and attitude of one for whom, amid her "glories" (depicted in dim little circular pictures, set in the openings of a chaplet of pale flowers around her) all feelings are over, except a great pitifulness. Her robe of shadowy blue suits my eyes better far than the hot flesh-tints of the Medicean ladies of the great Peter Paul, in spite of that amplitude and royal ease of action under their stiff court costumes, at which Antony Watteau declares himself in dismay.

*August 1705.*

I am just returned from early Mass. I lingered long after the office was ended, watching, pondering how in the world one could help a small bird which had flown into the church but could find no way out again. I suspect it will remain there, fluttering round and round distractedly, far up under the arched roof, till it dies exhausted. I seem to have heard of a writer who likened man's life to a bird passing just once only, on some winter night, from window to window, across a cheerfully-lighted hall. The bird, taken captive by the ill-luck of a moment, re-tracing its issueless circle till it

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expires within the close vaulting of that great stone church :—human life may be like that bird too !

Antony Watteau returned to Paris yesterday. Yes !—Certainly, great heights of achievement would seem to lie before him ; access to regions whither one may find it increasingly hard to follow him even in imagination, and figure to one's self after what manner his life moves therein.

January 1709.

Antony Watteau has competed for what is called the *Prix de Rome*, desiring greatly to profit by the grand establishment founded at Rome by King Lewis the Fourteenth, for the encouragement of French artists. He obtained only the second place, but does not renounce his desire to make the journey to Italy. Could I save enough by careful economies for that purpose ? It might be conveyed to him in some indirect way that would not offend.

February 1712.

We read, with much pleasure for all of us, in the *Gazette* to-day, among other events of the great world, that Antony Watteau had been elected to the Academy of Painting under the new title of *Peintre des Fêtes Galantes*, and had been named also *Peintre du Roi*. My brother,