

'Lovely. Chessman
beautifully
captures the rich
relationship
between sisters'

TRACY
CHEVALIER

author of

*Girl with a
Pearl Earring*

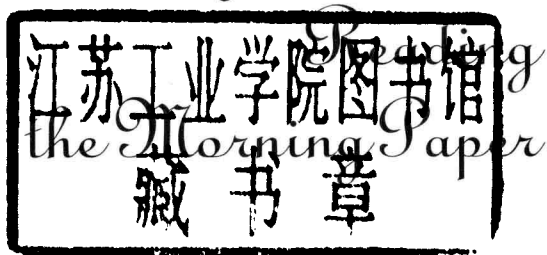
Lydia Cassatt

Reading the Morning Paper

HARRIET SCOTT CHESSMAN



Lydia Cassatt



Harriet Scott Chessman

—
C
—

CENTURY

Published by Century in 2003

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Harriet Scott Chessman 2001

Harriet Scott Chessman has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be left, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

Full-colour plates reproduced by permission of Seven Stories Press and The Permanent Press

First published in the United Kingdom in 2003 by Century

The Random House Group Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW 1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney,
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Limited
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Papers used by Random House are natural, recyclable
products made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

ISBN 0 7126 2363 9

Typeset by MATS, Southend-on-Sea, Essex
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

The imperfect is our paradise.

—Wallace Stevens, "The Poems of Our Climate"

To M. Lucia Kuppens, O.S.B.
and the Abbey of Regina Laudis

and to the memory of
Shirley Martin Prown

Recordâre

This story is based on the lives of the American Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) and her sister Lydia Cassatt (1837–1882). Each of the five chapters centers around one of Mary's paintings of Lydia. I have attempted to be as accurate as possible about the Cassatts' lives, yet this is most definitely a work of fiction. The paintings themselves, so moving and appealing, have drawn me to the figure of Lydia, painted again and again by her sister. I have thought, imagined, and dreamt my way into her world.

CHAPTERS

- I. *Woman Reading* 1
2. *Tea* 39
3. *The Garden* 75
4. *Driving* 105
5. *Lydia Seated at an Embroidery Frame* 135

Woman Reading

In my dream, I walk down the five flights of stairs to the avenue in Paris, yet when I open the heavy front door, I am on the porch at Hardwicke. Robbie is pulling May in a wagon on the pebbled drive, and out in the meadow, I know, Aleck is already beginning to urge his horse over the jumps. The day is bright, and I run toward the barn to saddle up Juno, when suddenly

Paris, septembre, 1878

i.

"Could you model for me tomorrow, Lyd?"

May's looking at me with a kind of urgency and hopefulness. I've been showing her some new dress patterns, as we linger at the table after breakfast. She looks sweet for a moment, and worried, and I say, "I think so."

"Mother thinks it will make you too tired."

"Yes, I do," calls Mother, from her room.

"*N'importe quoi*. I'm so much better now."

I drink my coffee, picturing the walk to May's studio. It's only a few streets away, just off the place Pigalle, but I haven't been well, and in any case I've become attached to this perch, our apartment on avenue Trudaine, in the *gème arrondissement*. We're in Paris, and yet we're also in our own world, five stories up; we've become a bit like a nation, The Cassatt Nation, small and besieged, at times, and independent. In the kitchen, the new maid Lise is clattering the

dishes. Father rustles the paper in the parlor; he's been reading us bits out of *Le Petit Parisien*.

I rise to look out the window. Over the tops of the apartments across from us, I see the white and cream buildings scrambling up the hill of Montmartre, among trees and gardens. Looking down to the avenue Trudaine, I see a girl in a royal blue coat and a red hat race along the street with a dog. I'm in love with all of this, this bright and foreign life.

"I could have the carriage brought round, Lyddy."

"Such a short distance, May! Don't be silly!"

"The carriage is a good idea," Mother says, coming into the dining room. She's wearing her specs and her old white morning gown, with her light wool shawl. How old she's begun to look, I think.

I know May needs me to model. It's partly the cost, of course, to hire someone else. To pay a model—well, it adds up, and Father's at her constantly now about making her way, and covering all of her own expenses, for the studio too. "Think for yourself, May," he said this morning, as we sat down to breakfast, "think what this costs us, and tally up your sales this year. Got to consider this."

I glimpse two young men on the avenue, elegantly dressed, talking and gesturing energetically as they stroll. I open the long window and lean over the small *balcon* for a moment, to catch a better look.

Perhaps May knows them? Maybe they're on their way to one of the cafés at the place Pigalle, to smoke cigarettes, and drink coffee, and argue about art. I see such men, often, sitting outside a café like Degas' favorite, Le Rat Mort. Women too go there; sometimes, as I walk with May, I see mothers and grandmothers sitting happily, with pretty children, eating sliced melon or apricot pie.

Once I saw a woman sitting close to a young man. I glimpsed him nuzzling her, kissing her neck, and, before I could look away, I caught the expression on her face, a mixture of coolness and knowledge and pleasure.

"I think I'll go to the Bois today, give your horse some exercise," Father says cheerfully to May.

I look over May's shoulder. She's studying a pattern I chose at Worth's, for an evening gown with an off-the-shoulder *décolleté*.

"It would look delicious on you, in a yellow silk," I say.

May looks up. I can see she's studying me with her painter's eyes. Inwardly, I flinch; I feel shy, always, when someone looks at me. She's my younger sister, by a full seven years, I remind myself, even if she's thirty-four now, and yet I feel so much younger than May sometimes. I can't help wondering what she sees. I'm as plain as a loaf of bread.

As if divining my thoughts, May smiles. She peels an orange with a little knife. "You can look away. You can be reading this time."

"Ah, yes." I smile as I sit down across the table from her. May knows me well, for within this Cassatt Nation, my own small acre has treasures of books stashed everywhere, in the elbows of trees, beneath berry bushes, on benches by streams. My little house is composed of books: English and French novels, and books of poetry too, gold-edged. I, who am moderate in so much, who bend myself to family life, am most immoderate once I'm in my acre. I read for hours, with passion, ardently wishing the stone wall around me to hold, the little gate to feel the pressure of no hand, the latch to grow rusty.

"I wish we had brought more of that honey back to Paris from the country," Mother says, her specs slipping down her nose. She's writing a list for Lise's shopping today.

"I'm sure we can find good honey somewhere in Paris," May says drily. "You didn't have any orange this morning, Lyddy, did you?" she asks, holding out a section of hers. The peelings make a sphere on her plate.

I accept the orange sliver.

"Maybe you can just do the back of my head," I suggest.

"*Mais non*, Lyddy. I want your lovely face."

She looks at me teasingly, and *for a moment I am riding in the country again, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. It's early spring, snow still on the*

ground in places, and we must have been back from our long stay in Europe for a year or so. We had buried Robbie in Germany. I picture myself riding with Aleck and his friend from Yale, Thomas Houghton. The day is chilly, and, once we've dismounted, I take off my gloves and rub my hands together, holding them to my mouth. Thomas is close to me. "Cold?" he asks, catching my hands in his, chafing, bringing them halfway to his mouth.

"How about a profile?" May asks.

"If it helps you out, May, yes."

"You're helping me immensely. We'll begin tomorrow morning."

I think of the quiet day tomorrow would have been, West Chester swirled away into the past now, along with Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, my life a new one here in Paris, talking to Mother and Father, reading a novel, looking through my patterns, hoping through it all to make some miraculous leap out of my condition, to become healthy again. I contemplate the slow descent down five flights to the avenue, and the slow walk by May's side, through a late September morning. I prefer the longer journey, along avenue Trudaine to the park at the place d'Anvers, because of the trees, the green island. Then up we walk to the busy boulevard de Rochechouart and the boulevard de Clichy, coming at last to the place Pigalle, my body increasingly assaulted and aroused by a myriad of things: the trolleys, the laborers, the shop assistants, the

pavements in front of cafés still damp from being washed, the scent of coffee and bread, and of manure too.

"Tomorrow morning, yes," I say, feeling worried but brave, and picturing my little boat, leaks and all, bobbing along in the wake of my sister's grander vessel, sailing to Heaven knows where.

ii.

I sink into the plump green chair in May's studio, holding the paper.

After breakfast this morning, Mother asked me a dozen times if I really felt well enough, demanding that May paint only for an hour, or at most two. As I put on my bonnet and gloves, Father too began to fret. "Are you warm, Lyddy?" he asked. "Make sure she stands up to stretch, at least every half-hour, May." Then he called to Lise to "bring Mademoiselle Cassatt's slippers, and—what about a small pillow?" After all this fuss, as always, I questioned the entire idea of modeling. If I became exhausted before I arrived at the door of our apartment, how could I possibly think of helping May?

I listen to the city's constant clatter and clamor outside the windows of May's studio, and I think of the shops we passed this