

Marc Décimo

A Sentimental Conversation: Marcel Duchamp and Lydie Sarazin-Levassor.

“Do you remember our hearts’ rapture?”
“Why ask me now if I remember?”

“My name enflames your heart and soul
You see me in your dreams, say—” “No.”

Paul Verlaine, “*Colloque sentimental*”, *Fêtes galantes* (1869).¹

A readymade induces the viewer to discover the world anew. Instead of letting habit determine what is seen—what is no longer seen—the object must once more become an object of experience. And so, with nostalgia for the pre-verbal state that characterises the *infans* (he who does not speak), Marcel Duchamp would appear to have been able to re-experience the sensations procured in infancy by inert objects, living things, words and situations that were all still unfixed. Readymades recreate that ineffable moment in life, the pre-linguistic stage, during which the child is at the mercy of the other and of the world, and must develop his cognitive powers when confronted with animate and inanimate objects, all of them exotic, all of them just hanging suspended in the air. Around 1917/1918, Duchamp took a urinal, a hat rack, a snow shovel and bits of rubber and hung them up from the ceiling of his New York studio, making them strange again. Once put into such an arrangement, the objects conspired to recreate a state that exists before naming, when nothing in the world is completely laid down nor completely finalised, when nothing is built, and when everything has yet to be experienced. Duchamp’s quest is to search for these first sensations, which means always beginning again. Everything has to be thought through again, at every moment. Like chess. It is important for the world to be always on the other side. Naturally, the pieces in the game are

1. Paul Verlaine, “Sentimental Conversation”, from *Fêtes galantes*, in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, edited by Y.-G. Le Dantec, “Pléiade” edition, Gallimard, Paris, 1951, p. 97. [Translator’s note.]

visible, but a veil has to be lifted all the same, all the time. And it must remain tempting to do so—a temptation as enigmatic as eroticism—so that thinking brings with it the hard-won sensation of being alive. Just as he was about to embark upon a game of chess, Duchamp said: “Now I’m going to feel alive. That’s how things stand. This game will be more important than the small number of things I may do afterwards.”² Duchamp endeavours to overcome inertia. In his opinion, an idea is outdated as soon as it is generally adopted. As good as covered in rust. In order to protect himself from the corrosive climate of the times, which might cause him to become rusty, he isolates himself. Having chosen preservation, he squeezes himself between two plates of glass and invents a life for himself written in minium. To play with time, to be oneself and truly one’s own self, never *belong*. To anyone or anything. Never conform to the dead weight of custom, never observe the proprieties nor bow to the dictates, or as little as possible. After having interiorised a social norm or some element of social practice, leave it behind, let it go hang. In this scheme of things, memory is his worst enemy. It is necessary for him to attain that state of innocence and ignorance, that “purity” (of knowledge?) that came before pressures of all kinds contaminated the mind. He has to discover the world and its contents, without prejudice or preconceived ideas. He must never cease to be born into the world. “It’s a scar, a sort of wound, but the right kind of wound. It’s style. It means cutting your own umbilical chord, if you see what I mean. Because I don’t think about myself, not having lived before then.”³ This attitude makes for a confrontation between memory (which fixes the world with knowledge and habits) and regression (evoking a time when nothing has been fixed), and makes it a matter of life and death. If you do not want to be a pawn in the hand of your opponent, do not espouse his logic: it is always deadly. Checkmate every time. Once sucked into this maelstrom, Duchamp has no other choice but to countermove, to think for himself in order to survive. In order to feel fully alive, he must not be what others are. He must cut short, break away. In order not to be made a game of, he must make a game of.

On the whole, Duchamp made choices according to what was before him, necessary choices. The game will be close-fought if the aim is to break

2. Jean-Marie Drot (director), *Jeu d’échecs avec Marcel Duchamp, Pasadena* [A Game of Chess with Marcel Duchamp, Pasadena], filmed late 1963, black and white, 16 mm, 56 minutes, colour version, 1979.

3. *Ibid.*

free from the social norm. Is it possible to not let anything be interiorised? To annihilate the social self within and completely ignore the tastes and political beliefs of the other, his moral code, opinions and desires? It is sometimes difficult to set course for extreme singularity and stick to it, for this island we call the Self is not won in a day. There are dangers on the way, compromises to be made, and, sometimes, damage is done, inevitably. Biographers, and those who interviewed Duchamp, have attempted to relate those ups and downs. Lydie Fischer Sarazin-Levassor’s firsthand account presents a close-up view of Duchamp’s odyssey as he embarked upon it with every new day, and in less than three hours, the time needed to reach the end of this book, the reader will have seen how that insular Self guarded its coastlines in 1927, during the period of a few months that their marriage lasted. Now that so many anecdotes about Duchamp’s life have become common knowledge, and that critical approaches have matured in the wake of major exhibitions, we can better appreciate Lydie Sarazin-Levassor’s having set herself the task, above all, of painting a rounder portrait of Marcel Duchamp (a dynamic one at that), and providing a psychological character study that adds to our knowledge of his distinctive traits. Looking back today, it is clear that Duchamp was of his time, for he shared with the Symbolists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century the need to break with the values of society and the desire to turn in upon himself. That individualism, sustained to the point of being a categorical imperative, cannot but entail emotional consequences. Duchamp set up his different methods of defence to protect his inner Self, sometimes by violent means. He will strenuously avoid anything he cannot reconcile with himself since it increases the tension inside him unbearably, anything that comes from living in society and which is or threatens to become force of habit—such as the whole idea of marriage and living together. Very quickly evaded. For Duchamp, habit is the proof that he is no longer esteemed. No sooner does it loom upon the horizon, than he packs up and runs. He flees anything and everything that would imprison him within the terms of a “given”: submitting to others, adopting common ideas, being brought down to the level of commonplaces, having to wade through what is established, drowning in memory. This obsession with Self condemns him to never accept (or very sparingly) prejudice or practicalities, for they bear the stigma of renunciation, of renouncing the Self, and, like so many harbingers of death, they sign the death warrant of thought itself. So as to restore his equilibrium and come to Life again, he must select interpersonal modes

that suit him: isolation and confrontation at a distance. The latter taking place on a chessboard or in a studio, intermediary spaces more intimate than the rooms of an exhibition. An ineffable delight springs from this: he can exercise his difference. He does not leave it all up to the other. He does not expose himself unduly. He strives to concede as little as possible and avoids as many traps as he can, just as he defies whatever might be attractive, that is to say whatever gives the impression of seeking to attract him. Duchamp has a real phobia of the other's seductiveness, especially if the conquest looks easy. Adam-Duchamp⁴ would never have taken the apple like some chess player falling for a gambit. No more would he be likely to believe in the apparent truth that words seem to relay.

Duchamp's Paradise does not reside in the moment when he has to choose between yielding to the other and asserting oneself, but more generally in the mutual resistance of two opponents. No, Duchamp does not allow himself to be tempted by the see-through ploys of a would-be seducer. And, as if to prove it, he was often happy to play chess against a naked young woman, as in the famous photograph taken in Pasadena, in 1963, by Julian Wasser. And though it seems almost too good to be true, the young woman in the photograph was actually called Eve. The resistance that each party puts up, coupled with the awareness that they are playing an exciting match, means the fascination that beauty holds on the surface does not gain the upper hand. The readymade does not operate any differently. Each one is so very remarkable because the viewer has to elaborate for himself an idea of its inner workings, its logic, mechanism, complexity and construction, in order to try to comprehend the simple object placed before him. Such are the demands that are made, and if they are met, then the viewer becomes Duchamp's accomplice.

Adam himself did not simply leave the decision-making up to Eve, though it may seem so in the Old Testament when it came to the crunch. The game was to defy God, which is devilishly more thrilling. It was a question of supplanting him as the giver of values and refusing the Law, adding to phallic *jouissance* the pleasure of disobedience, a non-phallic *jouissance* comparable to that procured by the intricacies of a complicated play on

4. Duchamp played the role of Adam in *Entr'acte*, the 1924 film by René Clair and Francis Picabia, and took the idea up again in 1967 when working on *Morceaux choisis* (selected details taken from Cranach, the film *Relâche*, etc.). In 1910, he gave the title *Paradise (Adam and Eve)* to a painting, which gave rise to two related works: *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree* and *Young Man and Girl in Spring* (both 1911).

words or game of chess. There is the promise of a cerebral *jouissance* more pleasurable by far than its physical counterpart. Eve's complicity is established, as is the viewer's, plotting the moves played by the readymade against all the Schools of F. Art.

If, up above, apples are not just apples, then, here below, urinals are not always urinals, bird traps trap no birds, though a coat rack may trip you up, and the word "Fountain" will lead you up the garden path. The readymade is not gratuitous; the aim is to set the mind going and promote complicity. In this adventure of the spirit, the readymade is the centre of attraction not for onlookers but for people who will look, those who will gaze as if for the first time and smile pataphysically when they think of various institutions. Since words are snares laid by speakers, they have to be distrusted, like apples and women, however seductive, unless the "real" meanings hidden behind these forms can be glimpsed in the infra-thin space of a tautology, if there is a bit of play in the works. From *m lum* (apple) to *malum* (evil), from *billard* to *pillard*,⁵ and from the frog's *coa* to the French *quoi*,⁶ words open up possibilities for play and for revelation, breaking the norms of society with the wedge of individuality. Duchamp replaces the common dictionary definitions with the verbal webs spun by Raymond Roussel and Jean-Pierre Brisset. Anyone who relies on God and observes the habits and customs of the day cannot be someone who really *looks*. He is mentally castrated and deprived of his faculty of thought. So there must be no leaving it up to God and no being easily seduced, especially physically, by seduction itself, made woman, worse still, made word. One can only rely on oneself, and try to make others play into one's hands. The other is always perceived as someone who either charms or lays down the law, someone who takes liberties, limiting one's own freedom, unless such an opponent can be turned into a much sought-after accomplice. And if not, what then? The other's power to convince rests on the authority of tradition. He makes of a show of legitimacy, for example, by continuing to foster a time-honoured idea of beauty in the minds of his audience. He is reduced to existing only so far as the tastes of the majority allow, which is not to exist at all. Who

5. Allusion to "*Parmi les noirs*" by Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), who wrote stories by trying to invent narrative links between homophonic sentences. See: Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (1996), A John Macae Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1996, p. 91. [Translator's note.]

6. See: "Verbal Constraints and Verbal Play in the Work of Jean-Pierre Brisset", an article in English contained within Marc Décimo's *Jean-Pierre Brisset, Prince des Penseurs, inventeur, grammairien et prophète*, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2001, pp. 449-455. [Translator's note.]

would live must cut short, break away, say: “No”, play according to new rules that he makes up for himself. For this, according to Duchamp, is the only way to be an individual and truly exceptional. How, then, could he possibly merge into the masonry, become part of the furniture like painters famous in their day, sooner or later forgotten, condemned to the vaults and oblivion; the idea of passing unnoticed or becoming a creature of habit is too awful for him to contemplate. In his eyes it is important to define an individual’s being as *becoming*, constantly evolving, and to be constantly *at stake*, as if in a game, and so he prefers movement, desiring to distinguish himself and be distinguished not once and for all but every day, as if to reassure himself and check in the eyes of the other that he is still alive. This provides the theoretical justification for Duchamp’s repeated comment that a painting is the product of the painter and the viewer in more or less equal proportion. It also explains why chess was like a drug that he sometimes could not go without: he needed certain well-defined conditions to be able to fix his attention and exist. For example, he needed to put himself in a position where he could feel himself at the mercy of the other all while keeping him at bay—defending his personal interests was indispensable, and playing a round without owing anyone anything was a vital necessity. None of these attitudes were likely to be compatible with married life or the bourgeois dreams of a young woman at the age of twenty-four, caught up in the hustle and bustle of the Roaring Twenties while all the post-war values were being put into question. Though she was very open-minded and very much in love, getting to know Duchamp was understandably a disarming experience. The facts have to be faced: whilst Francis Picabia and Henri-Pierre Roché led sensational lives, Duchamp’s existence remains that much more astonishing that we are still trying to unravel its logic today. Is it humanly possible to lead one’s life with so little respect for the affairs of this world, not to mention one’s family and friends? The principles and lifestyles of this couple did not agree.

Not that the Sarazin-Levassors were either conservative or uppity. Lydie’s father, Henri Sarazin-Levassor, turned down the Legion of Honour and was seeking to divorce. He was on such close terms with the Picabias that he had a house built at Mougins almost opposite the Château de Mai where the Picabias had been living since 1925. Henri Sarazin-Levassor had known Germaine Everling (Mrs Francis Picabia) since they were children: they took their First Communion at the same time at their local Protestant oratory. As for Lydie Sarazin-Levassor, she had been quite happy to declare

herself in favour of the Russian Revolution. Her grandfather on her father’s side was an automobile manufacturer, a freemason, a republican and a radical; on her mother’s side, her grandfather was a painter and a free-thinker, and her grandmother being almost an aristocrat, Lydie had allowed herself to reject proposals that came from the ranks of the bourgeoisie.⁷ Certain sociological aspects of her family resemble those of her future husband’s: Marcel’s father was a notary public, and his maternal grandfather, after having made a fortune as a ship-broker in the port of Rouen, had decided to devote himself to the art of engraving. The social status of the Cubist painters was now quite different to what it had been, and Marcel was perhaps not as bohemian as his reputation would have it. What ought perhaps to have remained an amorous episode became marriage. In gleaning items from this brief period, Lydie Sarazin-Levassor writes out all sorts of memories and anecdotes, not excepting the little facts that hit home. The experience had an inhibitory influence upon her: for years she would sign certain of her letters “Lydiote”, varying the spelling. Everything she has to say is of interest, since it concerns Duchamp, but she is not content to simply draw a psychological portrait of “her” Marcel, however accurate, and it probably is very accurate, she also grasps what *she* was and what she was supposed to be. Duchamp can only be understood in relation to his ex-wife’s state of mind, during each step of this confrontation. Biographies and interviews are necessary to establish facts and precise dates and Lydie Sarazin-Levassor’s narrative provides that kind of help. It adds to our knowledge of Duchamp. The unifying thread of scholarly interpretation can be drawn from the elements included here, from Duchamp’s own pronouncements, other eyewitness accounts at our disposal and the semiotic strategies adopted in his works, but that is another story and exceeds the bounds of the present volume.

Among the thousand and one life-experiences that made up Lydie’s life, her time with Duchamp, though brief, must certainly have touched her to the quick, and remained with her. She tells us all that she can remember; her memory is excellent and she commits it all to writing in a straightforward manner. Our curiosity is satisfied, as is to be expected from such a text. Her account shows just how much Duchamp’s neurosis was not supererogatory but deep-seated and highly-structured, a working-logic, in fact, working

7. Correspondence with Claude-Olivier Fischer (21 December 2003, 12 & 17 January 2004).

Signature dans lettre à sa mère à Paris
depuis 'La Passelle', près les Fondables, EUREAT 1966-68

Un peu vite, les hommes sont d'habitude, la
température au-dessus. On trouve ces choses de
très en couleurs plus jolies la une que les
autres. de l'oriental.

Lydiotte du coin

Essaye de venir - d'échapper quelque peu
à ton travail de l'année et d'arriver - à l'école
à t. elle l'année en plus de l'enseignement ? -
Bien affectueux comme d'habitude.

Lydiote Hott

Celle fois je te pousse et t'encourage -
Et si tu n'as rien en ce, ne fais rien et tout
et tout - Bien et t'encourage -

Lydiote Hott

Tous les le font la liste -

Sursum corda -

Lydiote

itself out energetically both in his work and in the choices to be made in his day-to-day existence. He appears to have been guided by a mindset determined in childhood. Duchamp's maniacal individualism, often practised to the detriment of others, his deliberately Spartan lifestyle, his phobia of practicalities, which prevented him from ever assuming a normal role in society, or indeed any role, his rejection of the decorative in Art, which he considered demeaning and repulsive, his relationship with money, his personal charm and intelligence, all contribute to the picture we have of his emotional life.

Duchamp's idea of liberty also suggests nostalgia for his childhood, when the child was at the mercy of the other—parents satisfy a child's every need—and when he had little else to do but play and amuse himself. Being incapable of breaking with a situation that prolongs that Adamic state, Duchamp made do with temporary jobs and commissions on the sale of artworks (most notably, he made a large speculative purchase of Brancusi's). That he might have nothing to do (or as little as possible) and time to do as he pleased, he chose to live off his father, and be the “adopted son”⁸ of a wealthy patron, and, who knows, maybe live off a dowry. Rather than paint or work and find himself in a situation that would have nailed him to his perch as everyone's pet avant-garde artist, rather than being confined to a role, he drops everything. He leaves it all to hang, himself included. But at that point in his life he was as incapable of accepting a favourable business contract as he was of putting up with the marriage contract.⁹ He thought it was better to have no possessions, or very few, and live as a bachelor, in order to preserve the freedom essential to his creative energies. This attitude is all the more surprising since the resulting financial independence would have given him the means, just as paradoxically, to be free, no longer at the mercy of the other. So why should he have adopted the plan of action that he did? There is no doubt that he was emotionally involved in the affair, but we can only wonder what game he was really playing, or playing out again. We can only conclude that, after the final outcome, Marcel Duchamp found the equilibrium he required.

8. Letter from Katherine Dreier to Marcel Duchamp, 5 August 1927 (Yale Collection of American Literature), quoted by Calvin Tomkins in *Duchamp: A Biography* (1996), A John Macrae Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1996, p. 280.

9. If Man Ray is to be believed, in the 1920s Duchamp turned down a contract that would have brought him a yearly salary of ten thousand dollars in exchange for painting just one picture a year! (*Self Portrait*, An Atlantic Monthly Press Book/Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1963, p. 234; Calvin Tomkins, *op. cit.*, p. 285; Marcel Duchamp, *Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne* [Belfond, 1967], Somogy, Paris, 1995, p. 130).

Fragments reproduced from letters written by Lydie Sarazin-Levassor in which she signs herself “The Idiot” or “The Local Idiot” (“*Lydiotte du coin*”), using one phonetic spelling or another. (Courtesy of Sophie Fisher.)

Lydie Fischer Sarazin-Levassor

A Marriage in Check. The Heart of the Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor, Even

I. The Heart of the Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor, Even

“I know a Don Juan who is half from the Auvergne and half from Normandy [...]”
Francis Picabia, *Jésus-Christ rastaquouère*.¹

When I met Marcel Duchamp for the first time, I had just turned twenty-four.² Was I an intellectual and an artist? No, but I was good at sport. There were two things that pleaded in my favour: I had had an unhappy love affair when I was an adolescent, and I was leading an idle existence with no idea what to do with myself. But mostly I was in turmoil at the prospect of my parents’ impending divorce. My father wanted to untie the knot in order to marry Jeanne Montjovet—who was still Madame de Morsier—and my mother was in tears all the time, desperately trying to keep her family together and win back the husband she loved.³ When she had no more energy left to fight, she agreed on divorce. It was a ploy to win time, for she

1. Lydie Sarazin-Levassor quotes from memory; Picabia in fact wrote: “And this reminds me of a curious story I heard from the mouth of a painter who is half from Normandy and half from the Auvergne, a neo-Cubist and a neo-Don Juan [...]”, *Jésus-Christ rastaquouère* (1920), Allia, Paris, 1992, pp. 43-44. Duchamp’s family originated from Massiac in the Cantal before they settled in Normandy. [Unless otherwise indicated, all notes are by Marc Décimo. Notes signed “L. S.L.” are by the author.]

Picabia’s novel appears never to have been translated into English. “*Rastaquouère*”: a pejorative word for a rich foreigner who likes to get himself noticed. [Translator’s note.]

2. At the beginning of March 1927.

3. Henri Sarazin-Levassor (1880-1961), son of Édouard Sarazin and Louise Cayrol. Obtained a degree in Law in 1900, was called to the bar in Paris, and became secretary to the lawyer Henri Robert. Married Marthe Olivié in 1901. Gave up the legal profession in 1904 to become sales representative and manager for France of the Charleroi-based Belgium automobile company Germain. Resigned to become manager of the French automobile company Panhard & Levassor, and remained with them from 1914 until his death. Was a volunteer in the Supply Corps at the outbreak of the war, but was invalided out in 1915, and went on to set up, at the government’s request, an aeroplane repair facility, known as Sarazin Frères. Was elected Mayor of Étretat in 1924. [L. S.-L.] The firm of Panhard & Levassor had been set up in Paris by René Panhard and Émile Levassor in association with Édouard Sarazin (†1887), who had bought the Daimler patent rights for France.

Marthe Olivié (1881-1954), daughter of Léon Olivié and Marie Frebourg. Educated at the Bon Secours convent, Rouen. Married in 1901. Divorced in 1928. [L. S.-L.]

still hoped that this flash in the pan would fizzle out in due course. She had, however, laid down one condition: no divorce until I was married, which was tantamount to putting the thing off indefinitely, since there was no one in view and, better still, I had just given a couple of hopefuls their marching orders—they were impossible anyway. So the atmosphere at home was tense to say the least. Everyone was looking after number one and nobody paid any attention to me while the crisis was on. In the end I felt so dispirited I stopped worrying about my parents' problems and concentrated instead on my own future. What was I going to do? Get out, run away from home, find a place to live, somewhere I could breathe! But although I was desperate to live my own life, I knew deep down that I could never throw in my lot with the first young man to come my way, especially if he turned out to be a goody-two-shoes I could never see eye to eye with. It also has to be remembered that marriage, for a girl of my generation, was a difficult operation to get right, but the only possible option when one had not chosen the sort of education that leads to a good job and total independence. To complicate matters, "marriage", in my simple idealism, rhymed with "love", the one naturally entailing the other. The choice was limited too, most of the young men five or ten years older than us having been killed in the war. Those who came back unconsciously traumatised by the brutality of military action were like demigods to me; they were awe-inspiring, but a little terrifying too. It was one thing to have what it takes to be a hero on the front, quite another to carry the stench of violence and impress a horror of bloodshed upon the sentiments of a young maiden. I was duly reverent, but I was hardly tempted to build my nest under such psychological conditions. Some of my friends succumbed, but not me. I had dreamt of something else. I had not yet come across the tall dark handsome stranger that every young girl hopes will come along. Just *meeting* eligible types was a problem in itself, but my friends and I would hear nothing of formal presentations arranged by family or well-wishers. So when I learnt that a long-time friend, Germaine Everling, thought I should meet a friend of

Jeanne Montjovet (1887-1955), opera singer, studied under Vierne. Made her début singing sacred music in 1910. Prince de Broglie Mission in Italy (1915). Sung the most challenging pieces in the classical repertory under the baton of Toscanini and other great conductors at the Augusteo, San Carlo and Scala opera houses. Offered a class at the Brussels Conservatoire by Queen Elisabeth of Belgium (1921). Numerous European tours. Had married the Swiss national Louis de Morsier, director in France of the Milanese publishing house Ricordi, in 1917. [L. S.-L.]

Jeanne Montjovet had left the composer Louis Vierne in 1915.

Picabia's, a painter like himself and likewise said to be "avant-garde", I did not exactly back away. I was tempted because he was from a completely different milieu, and I was curious to hear the doctrines and ideas of these eccentrics that everyone around me was laughing about and that I had no contact with.

Germaine Everling, and her brother and sister, were all childhood friends of my father, and of his brother and sister, their two fathers having made acquaintance during the siege of Paris: they were both in the light infantry and discovered they both had Belgian origins. Their friendship continued undiminished over the years, and their trials and joys were shared by the two families as marriages, births and bereavements succeeded one another. When Germaine was still very young, sixteen or seventeen, she had married Georges Corlin, another friend of my father's. He worked in the car industry by day, and wrote music reviews for *Comœdia* in the evenings. The two married couples saw each other often. My mother, a young provincial, was always warmly welcomed by her new friend Germaine. As for their son Michel Corlin and myself, we had spent nearly all our Sundays together ever since we were little, making him my first playfellow. Georges and Germaine's couple did not, however, survive the war. Germaine confided to my mother that she was having an affair with Picabia and my mother had initially been understanding, then she saw *Procession à Séville* and was horror-stricken.⁴ No! One could not really be in love with someone who had conceived a hoax as monstrous as that! The Dada movement,⁵ free love and the birth of Lorenzo finally proved to my mother that Germaine was a fallen woman and one could not continue to frequent someone who had chosen to ostracise themselves from polite society.⁶ So when Germaine

4. Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* and Picabia's *Procession à Séville* (1912, 1.2 m x 1.2 m) were exhibited at the "Salon de la Section d'Or" exhibition in Paris, at the Galerie La Boétie and at the International Exhibition of Modern Art held from February through to March 1913 inside the former armoury (hence its name "the Armoury Show") of the 69th United States Infantry Regiment, 26th Street, Lexington Avenue, New York. *Procession à Séville* was given to Germaine Everling. Duchamp sold it at the Hôtel Drouot auction house (Paris) along with other paintings. Formerly in the Prince Troubetzkoy Collection, it is today in a private collection in New York. In her memoirs, Germaine Everling states she had a great liking for this painting (*L'Anneau de Saturne*, Fayard, Paris, 1970, p. 172). The atmosphere at Mougins (where Germaine lived with Picabia opposite Lydie's father's new house) is described in detail (p. 162 to the end).

5. *Sic*. To call Dada a "movement" is of course heresy to its supporters. [Translator's note.]

6. Germaine Everling and her son Michel Corlin met Picabia in 1917. Their son Lorenzo was born in 1919 [*sic*]. [L. S.-L.]

Picabia became the father of two sons in less than four months. His wife Gabrielle Buffet gave birth to Laurente Vicente on 15 September 1919, and his mistress Germaine Everling (Madame Corlin) gave birth to Lorenzo on 5 January the following year. Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet, a young avant-garde musician, had met in September 1908 and were married in January 1909. Gabrielle Buffet met Duchamp at the end of 1910 or at the beginning of 1911. She finally divorced Picabia in 1931.



Mrs Marthe Sarazin-Levassor (née Olivié), Henri Sarazin-Levassor, Lydie and their dog "Flic" (slang for a policeman). (Courtesy of Claude-Olivier Fischer.)



Portrait of Lydie Sarazin-Levassor, c. 1910. (Courtesy of Claude-Olivier Fischer.)

and Picabia came to Étretat to stay at the home of the devout Mademoiselle Maigret, my mother adamantly refused to admit the sinful couple into her home, and even to bid them good day on the beach or in the casino. Germaine was cut to the quick; she had hoped for more indulgence since she was only partly responsible for the current state of affairs: Gabrielle Buffet, to whom Francis was still legally wed, did not want to divorce. As for Picabia, he found my mother's attitude petty and ridiculous, thinking that he was someone to be courted rather than avoided. Relations had become strained, but not to breaking point. My father had recently drawn closer to Francis and Germaine, turning up with Jeanne Montjovet, now that he firmly intended to start a new life with her.

So it is easy to understand why my mother and family should have reacted as they did to the idea of a "date" let alone a "match" suggested by Germaine. It had to be a penniless nobody picked up off the streets, a mere puppet, a pawn in a diabolical scheme thought up by Picabia and Montjovet in order to precipitate my father's divorce. All hell broke loose! Even before a date had been fixed, my uncles, aunts, cousins, friends and *tutti quanti* thought it their beholden duty to warn the poor little idiot of the trap that was lying in wait for her. Beware! they said. Anyone coming from those unscrupulous professions was not *necessarily* an outright crook, but you *never can tell*, and the whole affair was *terribly* suspect.

I listened and held my tongue, but that did not mean that I agreed with them. I trusted my father implicitly, confident that he would not have got me mixed up in any risky business, even if he stood to gain his freedom from it. I refused to believe that all humanity could be separated out into two neat categories, with one hundred per cent good guys on one side and the blackest of black ones on the other. It was too naïve! Anyway, though I knew precious little about this Marcel Duchamp person, I was intrigued by his personal history. How curious, a forty-year-old man wanting to get married but unable to find a suitable wife on his own. And how strange to be a painter and temporarily give up painting in order to play chess. Naturally, Germaine had not made a secret of the fact that Marcel Duchamp was seeking to settle down, have a home life and put an end to the life of pleasure he had been leading up to now. She also gave me strong hints to the effect that he had a temporary cash-flow problem. Up to the death of his parents he had received enough parental aid to ensure a meagre existence, but in a move that showed both generosity and lack of foresight, he had used the totality of his inheritance to buy the Brancusi sculptures that John



Lydie Sarazin-Levassor (centre) and two friends, c. 1925. (Courtesy of Claude-Olivier Fischer.)

Quinn had collected and which stood to be sold off at disastrously low prices now that Quinn had died.⁷ As a result, all that Duchamp possessed was stones, and stones do not bring in the daily bread! I found all that rather appealing, and together with the fact that he was a non-combatant, that he did not worship Mammon, and that he asserted his personality in everything he did, it all constituted favourable circumstances, but most important for me was the fact that he came from outside the narrow circle of gossipy relations that had been hemming me in. Here at last was someone I could confide in, and with whom I could talk about my problems.

The formal introduction took place in an ordinary restaurant, whose name I have forgotten.⁸ It was a friendly dinner in the presence of my father, Germaine and Picabia. Germaine asked me a thousand questions, doubtless so that Marcel would be able to deduce certain things about my character; Picabia broached the question of modern art with me. He could not believe that I had never heard of a single contemporary painter bar one or two. He quoted names: so-and-so who sends a painting every year to the salon representing a Breton landscape with pink sheep grazing on purple grass—his pet hate, apparently. No, never heard of him. No more than painter number two, whose canvases dissolve before the eyes like sweets in the mouth, or the painter with nothing but chocolate on his palette and brush, or the portraitist who will only do corpses. Then turning to Marcel, he said: “It’s simply marvellous, to be so completely unaware! She’s a clean slate, a fresh pair of eyes!”

I was not particularly impressed by Marcel on that particular day. I thought he was handsome, friendly, elegant, but nothing special. I was struck by his sober apparel: navy blue suit, pink-striped silk shirt, dark tie. I did not exactly expect him to turn up in a black velvet jacket with a loosely-tied bow and a hat like Aristide Bruant, but still... A little idiosyncrasy would not have surprised me. As far as Marcel was concerned, his first impression—as Germaine later told me—had been: “Ah! She’s quite alright. Simple and straightforward, and she does her hair with a lick and a promise!”

7. Brancusi. Rumanian sculptor. Sought Form in its purest, most absolute state. [L. S.-L.] Eugène Duchamp, Marcel’s father, died in January 1925, on the very evening of the funeral of his wife, Lucie Nicolle-Duchamp. Marcel Duchamp was a friend of Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) and bought the Brancusis in the Quinn collection in 1927. It was John Quinn (1870-1924) who, in 1915, had helped Duchamp to find a job when he arrived in New York. Duchamp came back to Paris at the end of February 1927.

8. Probably the Grand Veneur.



Henri Sarazin-Levassor with Jeanne Montjovet, and a pupil of Jeanne Montjovet bottom left, Mougins, c. 1935. (Courtesy of Claude-Olivier Fischer.)

True enough, as I came out of the car the wind had ruffled my hair without my realising it, and it never occurred to me to use the little comb I had in my bag.

The dinner did not leave me with a strong impression, and all I retained was that, all things considered, this “gentleman” was a distinct possibility, but nothing more than that.

Forty-eight hours later, I received a letter by express delivery inviting me to dine at one of the celebrated Prunier restaurants on the corner of the Avenue Victor Hugo and the Rue de Traktir. I must admit that this was the first time ever I was going to dine alone with a young man who was not a member of the family; whatever the outcome, it was a momentous event for me.

And it was a marvellous evening. Marcel used all his charm—he possessed it in abundance, it has to be said—and I left the restaurant head over heels in love with him. I had been seduced by what he had said about his work, his experiments, his friends. I was held enthralled. I had glimpsed a new world of possibility, far more interesting than the daily grind of gossip that I had come to expect from my set. Another thing that excited me was the impression I had that he was very happy to be with me. He said that he had left the United States with no regrets, or very few, mostly for the nightlife, not spent partying as in Paris, but the province of numerous workers whose hidden labours made life simpler for everyone during the day. Shops and restaurants stayed open all through the night. It was possible to buy anything, in any district, at any time of the day or night. Marcel had got into the habit of nibbling a little something before going home to bed and would buy a few household items on the way so as to avoid having to carry them about with him during the day. He missed not having that option in Paris.

He also missed the comfort of new American designs that had made draughts a thing of the past, and Venetian blinds which screened windows and did away with the need for double curtains, the latter, as I was later to learn, being to his eyes merely “decorative”—a pejorative term for him if ever there was one.

I pointed out to him that in old houses, those built in the eighteenth century for example, wooden shutters tucked behind windows performed the same office as his American blinds. Marcel conceded the point, only deploring the fact that landlords should have been so tight-fisted as to have removed those articles of comfort, forcing people to protect themselves against draughts by textile curtains the necessity of which he abhorred.

That outing made me wonder whether Marcel’s completely negative attitude towards certain everyday inconveniences might not have been prompted by a hidden desire to go back to a former standard of living. As for the people he had known in New York, he was very discreet about them, letting slip not a single name (not that I would have heard of any of them anyway). He let it be clearly understood that he had felt imposed upon by an excess of kindness and thoughtfulness and that everyone had tried to net him for themselves. He was delighted to have escaped and had no intention of going back.

After that first dinner together we were to see each other almost every day. Several times he came to the house to fetch me and we would go out to eat—the start of our gastronomical excursions round Paris which would last right up until we left for Mougins.

Once I started to feel at ease with him, I tried to explain the mental distress I was in, the painful circumstances of my parents’ separation, the actual role I had played in it, and the ignoble role I was accused of playing, the nausea I felt at the reactions of my mother’s close relations, and finally my need to escape which, ultimately, could have led me to fling myself into the arms of the first person who proposed to whisk me away from it all. But my personal concerns did not interest him. After all, he said, there is nothing extraordinary about divorcing, even after twenty-five years of living together, and there will always be someone who thinks they are a victim and so on. I had to accept that what was such a big deal for me did not concern him, that the best thing to do was never to mention it again and, since the page was probably about to be turned anyway, it was more important to think about the future than fret about the past.

That was at the end of March, a fortnight before the Easter holidays which I was going to spend at our villa in Étretat with my friend Édith Nouvion. My mother had come to accept her future son-in-law and was feeling better inclined towards him. There were two good reasons for this. First, she knew the Crottis⁹ as they had been living for years in the same building as her sister de Chauffour and she had already received them at “Les Fondrets”¹⁰. Secondly, she acknowledged that not all Norman notaries¹¹ are corrupt and that it was possible to frequent Picabia without being a

9. The Dada painter Jean Crotti had married Suzanne Duchamp, Marcel’s sister, in 1919.

10. The name of their villa in Étretat. [Translator’s note.]

11. Marcel’s father had been a notary at Blainville-Crevon and then in Rouen.



“Les Fondrets”, Étretat, 1978. Lydie’s bedroom was on the first floor. (Courtesy of Claude-Olivier Fischer.)

bandit oneself. She came around quite quickly to my proposal of inviting Marcel Duchamp to spend a few days with us, as long as his stay was short and discreet and I did not present him to any of our friends who might be there at the time, seeing that we were not yet engaged.

So Edith and I set off in my little Citroën Trèfle 5 CV, your standard yellow and black three-seater, and Marcel joined us a few days later. Édith, who was not in love, was particularly struck by the state of his clothes: his striped silk shirts, though fashionable, were badly scuffed, his suit showed its age and his coat was shabby and worn. “Your suitor looks like something the cat brought in. He must be terribly poor.”

I did not know what to say in reply, for I had remarked nothing apart from his being correctly dressed and in any case his lack of means did not particularly frighten me since I had few needs myself. The stay was a very merry one. The weather being bad, we were shut up indoors, which made it easy to avoid meeting people. We lit roaring fires in the big fireplace, had

delicious meals, shamelessly washed down with the oldest vintages found in the cellar, played mah-jong, cards and chess. We compared the merits of my uncle’s old calvados, matured in wooden casks, with the Napoleon III *fine champagne*. We emptied whatever we could find in the matter of aperitifs and liqueurs left over from the summer before, and got to know each other. We both knew full well why we had been introduced to each other, and it was not long before we broached the subject of a common future. Marcel had not beaten about the bush when raising the issue of the two flats: the first, his studio, was necessary to him for working and thinking; the other would be my responsibility, mine to look after and live in—and, eventually, with the children. I did not find the idea shocking. Men always have their office outside the home, and why should he not sometimes stay there overnight to finish a job, talk with friends or just take a night’s rest? In any case, although I had decided to take an interest in his work, it would only be to the extent that he wanted to explain it to me. The wives of doctors or lawyers do not feel obliged to study medicine or law when they marry. The “wife and collaborator” is only a viable concept and practical possibility if husband and wife have followed similar paths in life and if what brings them together is a shared professional ideal. It was not our case, and I would have been furious with myself had I trespassed upon a domain that was foreign to me.

We had envisaged announcing our official engagement as soon as we were back in Paris, but before “asking for my hand”—since my father required this custom to be observed—Marcel wanted me to meet his family. I already knew Suzanne and her husband; no problem there. That left the Villons, so Marcel took me to see them the following Sunday. A wonderful visit! Gaston, the eldest brother, radiated kindness and generosity, self-effacing as he was and modest in his manners, blushing like a little girl. What an affectionate welcome! What peace and calm they radiated! Gaby was certainly inhibited, but she greeted me with open arms. She came across to me as sweet, kind and sensitive. The surroundings were extraordinary. It was only a stone’s throw away from the Défense and yet you would have thought you were in the open country. In front of their suburban house there were fields, yes, fields! green fields smelling of freshly-mown hay, and you could hear a goat bleating not very far away. Gaby told me that she bought her milk and fresh eggs at a neighbouring farm. Incredible! And all that next door to the factories in Puteaux and the hustle and bustle of the Avenue de Neuilly. How restful and reassuring was

the atmosphere in their house in the Rue Lemaître, far from the bohemian, disorderly life that, deep down, I had feared. The Crottis were there too, and Raymond's tall widow Yvonne,¹² all having a quiet cup of tea. The Duchamp family seemed very close-knit. They had remained very provincial, and lived comfortably, in keeping with their Normandy origins. They were also somewhat reactionary, in marked contrast to the avant-garde ideas they discussed. Little was said of Jean Crotti's work, or of Gaston's—and less still of Marcel's research. I was, however, treated to a tour of the studio adjoining the house. A special favour, for the studio was closely guarded: the Louvre had entrusted a number of paintings by famous artists to Gaston, and he was in perpetual fear lest an accident should befall them.

The tall Yvonne likewise took me round the house she lived in with her brother Jacques Bon, and which had been the home of Raymond Duchamp-Villon. I was particularly struck by the *Baudelaire* and the horse's head that sat in state in the main room.¹³ I was flabbergasted; never before had I seen anything so striking. There was also the kitchen that had been decorated by friends of Raymond, and I saw there the only work by Marcel that I had ever seen up till then: the celebrated *Coffee Mill*,¹⁴ which I did not take to at all. I found it disturbing.

Protocol had been observed and all that was left now was for Marcel to officially ask for my hand in marriage. It was unfortunate at the time that Picabia and Germaine had gone back to Mougins¹⁵ and that Gaston or Jean Crotti had not been entrusted with the mission of approaching my father, for Marcel was far too ticklish to go into money matters, and a third party could easily have explained the problem of the Brancusi sculptures: my father would have been understanding, and a fair amount of the money problems that were later to arise would have been avoided. But Marcel, who was nearly forty, was not to be taken for a child: he was an adult who would not

12. Born Yvonne Bon, she had married the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, who had died in October 1918.

13. *Baudelaire* dates from 1911 and was exhibited in the Armory Show in 1913. *Cheval majeur* dates from 1914.

14. *Coffee Mill* dates from November-December 1911. In his conversations with Pierre Cabanne, Marcel Duchamp recalled that Raymond Duchamp-Villon had asked "Gleizes, Metzinger, La Fresnaye, and Léger too I think, to paint him little pictures of the same size that together would make a kind of frieze. He asked me too, and I did a coffee mill which I broke up: the powder falls to the side, the gearwheels are at the top and the handle is seen simultaneously at several points in its circuit, with an arrow to indicate direction." (Marcel Duchamp, *Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne*, Somogy, Paris, 1995, p. 38.)

15. Picabia and Germaine Everling had moved into the Château de Mai in 1925.

be patronised, a man who shoulders his responsibilities and takes his decisions alone.

Their talk together was brief. Marcel stayed for dinner; my mother, although she had to some extent overcome her prejudice against her future son-in-law, nevertheless gave him a very guarded welcome. She still thought that Marcel and Madame Montjovet were hand in glove—whereas they did not even know each other—and it was with deep sorrow that she saw her only daughter, the object of so much love and tenderness, turn against her and fall so stupidly into such an obvious trap. As for the sincerity of our feelings towards each other, she never wanted to believe it, and the quick divorce that was to follow proved her right, on the face of it at least. So, predictably, the dinner was none too euphoric, and even rather frosty to begin with. And yet Marcel was happy and very relaxed and seemed oblivious to all this. He turned on the charm, and my poor dear mother, despite herself, was not insensitive to its appeal. We spoke of Rouen, where my mother had lived till her marriage. We tried to see if we did not know some of the same people there, whether his grandfather, Émile Nicolle, had not frequented my grandfather, the painter Léon Olivié, who had been a close friend of the curator of the museum.¹⁶ The conversation subsequently veered to the subject of painting. My mother apologised for my ignorance in such matters saying that, as she knew I had no talent for art, she had steered me away from such pursuits lest I should become—horror of horrors—the type of young lady that paints watercolour flowers on fans. Little by little, she set forth her own standpoint: the traditionalists bored her; the Impressionists, Manet, Renoir, delighted her, especially Sisley; but as for the Cubists, she just could not figure them out, despite the explanations furnished by Juliette Roche (Madame Gleizes) whom she sometimes met at the houses of friends. My father was happy now the atmosphere was becoming more relaxed. He topped up our glasses with champagne, put in a witty comment here and there, and agreed with my mother that DADA was a huge farce, a well-organised hoax in the style of those invented by artists and writers in their youth to give the bourgeoisie a kick up the pants. We exchanged funny stories about Maupassant and Léon Fontaine, and my mother related anecdotes dating from that period in

16. After having been a ship-broker and having made a fortune with the expansion of the port of Rouen, Émile Nicolle (1830-1894), Duchamp's maternal grandfather, devoted himself to painting and more especially to etching. Lydie Sarazin-Levassor's maternal grandfather was the painter Léon Olivié (1834-1901).

Normandy with surprising verve and spirit.¹⁷ Everyone laughed and the evening ended much better than it had started.

As soon as Marcel had left, mother said to me: “My poor child, I don’t know whether I should congratulate you or not. He is certainly a remarkably intelligent man, perhaps too much so for you, my plump darling. Though he does seem very attached to his family, I’m not sure that he has a kind heart. I hope you’ll be happy, but I doubt you will. Anyway, it’s your choice, and you’re at an age when you must know what you’re doing.”

All that was left now was to announce the engagement officially, and as soon as possible because Marcel wanted the marriage to be celebrated before the summer. One particular was to cause a delay of several days: I was to be bridesmaid along with Édith Nouvion at Violette Héritage and Bob de Knyff’s wedding, and inaugurate a ravishing sky-blue tulle dress for the occasion. I also intended to wear it at our engagement party, as I did not want to clutter up my future wardrobe with smart dresses that could no longer serve. And so our official engagement was deferred till the beginning of May. Given the imminence of the wedding itself, it was not much of a to-do: the two families simply had afternoon tea together with the future witnesses and some close friends. Marcel sent a superb basket of flowers, in accordance with etiquette. We had to give up the idea of the black charmond,¹⁸ which was to have been a fine piece of bright coal, like Belgian coal, cut and mounted on a platinum ring like a solitaire. Unfortunately, we were unable to find coal of sufficient quality to permit its being cut! We therefore settled on an ordinary ring, which my parents deemed to be a little on the modest side and which, in the end, was exchanged for a very large pearl which was not quite round but impressive all the same.

Now that marriage had been decided upon, there came the vexed question of which religious ceremony was to be chosen, not that the

17. Léon Fontaine and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) met for the first time at the Lycée Corneille in Rouen.

18. “Charmond” (charcoal+diamond): English approximation for the French portmanteau word “*charmant*”, made from the combination of *charbon* and *diamant* (coal and diamond) and a pun on “charming”.

“Bright coal”: Lydie Sarazin-Levassor uses the correct term “*charbon brillant*” for what is known in English as “*vitrain*” or, just as correctly, “bright coal”. Its surface is shiny.

“Belgian coal” (“*flambant belge*”) is presumably flammable, bituminous coal, since *flambant* is the normal French adjective and noun for the type of coal that burns with a flame. Was such coal imported from Belgium or is there a humorous reference to the supposed perversity of the Belgians: a “Belgian diamond” being slang for a lump of coal? Whatever the case, this paragraph testifies to the puns, portmanteau words and oxymorons that must have been the staple of Marcel and Lydie’s conversations. [Translator’s note.]



Portrait of Lydie Sarazin-Levassor, c. 1920-1922. (Courtesy of Claude-Olivier Fischer.)

question was in any way vexed. Marcel was an atheist, and though he had been brought up a Catholic, he saw no objection to a Protestant marriage, the Protestant religion being mine, more or less. A few violently sectarian, antipapist remarks by a Protestant minister in charge of my religious instruction had estranged me from the Church and, as a result, I had not been confirmed. I was worried in case I needed to accomplish this act before a minister could solemnise our union, but everything turned out alright in the end. I was friends with the children of Monsieur Maroger, a former missionary and a very open-minded minister in Clichy. So off we went to ask him if he would solemnise our union. He received us very amiably, though he was not unaware that our faith was shaky to say the least, but God's minister is always there to care for the lost sheep, and the very fact that we sought his blessing could be read as a step on the way towards a return to the fold. He readily accepted to officiate at our wedding and he even agreed, at Marcel's request, to declare us man and wife without employing the traditional wedding rings, as we had determined upon wedding bracelets. "Oh!" he said, "the use of rings is a relatively recent convention. I would only ask you not to opt for ankle-rings, for it little behoves a minister to grovel on his knees, save in prayer before God."

It was therefore decided that the ceremony would take place at the Temple de l'Étoile¹⁹ on 7 June. Marcel would have preferred a small, intimate wedding, but I would hear nothing of it. Apart from the childish pleasure of wanting a wedding to be as glorious as possible and with all the frills, such as every little girl dreams of, the circumstances were such that I was keen to assert myself. An intimate marriage would have been cowardly on my part. No, I was not ashamed of my choice, nor of my act, and I had had occasion to observe that intimate weddings were generally followed by births after less than the regulatory number of months. My situation did not call for such drastic measures, and Marcel let himself be won over. It has to be said too that when it came down to details, Marcel did what he could to make me happy and spontaneously agreed to all my whims and wishes. Being myself rather more used to obeying, I could not believe the ease with which I made him give in to my entreaties, and I was

19. Protestant churches in Paris are named after their districts. The Temple de l'Étoile still stands at number 54 on the Avenue de la Grande Armée in the sixteenth *arrondissement*. The "Étoile" refers neither to the Star of David nor to the star that led the shepherds to Bethlehem, but to the star-shape composed of the avenues that radiate from the Arc de Triomphe. [Translator's note.]

never able to convince myself that in reality he could not have cared less. Clearly, what mattered to him was to get married as quickly as possible, and on that point everyone had let him have his way.

I sometimes wondered whether he was not trying to put a barrier between himself and someone else, something definitive that would justify their break-up. But every man has his past history and I was not going to torture myself over that. After all, he was free to choose what he wanted to tell me of his past life. Perhaps later—but what did it matter since we were happy and together, the present was wonderful and the future was ours for the taking.

The short number of weeks between our engagement and our wedding were spent in a frantic rush to secure what was needed: the trousseau, the bridal gown, the bridesmaids, the printed invitations. Marcel insisted that the latter be in a different format from the usual one, in bold with no capitals and not the usual light-faced type. I discovered for the first time how small detail brought out the perfectionist in him.

Marcel was unable to find anybody suitably young in his circle of family and friends to accompany my bridesmaids, so it was decided that they would process two by two, in matching dresses, to escort the bride. As most of my friends were already married, I had to seek my graceful adolescents among a younger generation. What trouble they gave me! The first candidates to have been approached now went back on their word, finding some pretext or other. Hardly had I achieved my quorum of six young girls and chosen their virginal dresses in white organdie set off by pink velvet belts and pink horsehair hats with wide brims, when Zette Piat, my oldest friend, went down with bronchitis. I had to find a replacement as quick as a flash. Having done the rounds of friends and relations, and nobody else being free, I was happy to make do with a young English student who was lodging with the family of a friend. Vera was pleased to accept but as her income was small she shrank from the expense. I had no other option but to give part of the outfit to her on the quiet. It had to come out of my pocket money, which was very vexing as my purse was already almost empty.

Given the housing crisis, it was decided that the young couple would set up home in the studio on the Rue Larrey²⁰ until conditions improved. It goes without saying that while I was rushing back and forth to the fitting-room,

20. Duchamp had been renting a studio on the seventh (top) floor (no lift), at 11 Rue Larrey, near the Jardin des Plantes, since the beginning of October 1926.

Marcel was busy flat-hunting. He sometimes took me along to visit domestic premises that turned out to be complete fiascos. They would be charging an inflated price for the furniture and fittings, whereas everything still had to be done, including the bathroom. It did not stop us from discussing our idea of the perfect flat. No furniture, just cupboards hidden behind walls of plywood. Marcel taught me to appreciate the beauty of raw materials. No need for exotic wood or other rare and costly materials to fit out a flat that would be pleasant to live in. A plaster wall has a splendour and delicacy of its own if an effort is made to keep it matt and immaculate; whitewood has a delicate satiny grain that needs neither a coat of walnut stain to pass it off as oak, nor thick coats of paint to cover it up completely; a lead pipe can glisten with a dull sheen and add a touch of light where it was not expected, or a gay band of colour if coated with minium (which is not paint but a natural protective medium).²¹

At first I thought his taste for natural things was a reaction against the “refined” aesthetic propounded by the recent Art Deco exhibition. I spoke to him about it: “As far as *lizards* go, I have only encountered the variety that basks in the sun. What are these *lizards décoratifs*? Is it a new species?”²² To which he replied: “If a butcher makes a sculpture out of lard, is it culinary art or culinary lard? And what about domestic lard, and the lard of war?”²³ So tell me about the Arts. Art is simply the technical knowledge that goes with a profession. Look it up in the Larousse dictionary. So what are the Fine Arts? All the arts are fine. The knife-grinder’s art is particularly fine, and fascinating with it. But he is an artisan. Artisan, artist, what’s the difference? My hairdresser calls himself an artist, so does the man in the patisserie, but Gaston’s art is manual, so that makes him an artisan.”

His ironic tone suggested that there was much left unsaid, but I did not insist as I feared I might have got it all wrong.

“There is no such thing as ‘decoration’,” he continued. “The whole concept needs to be buried. We take furniture in, that’s all. We buy the

21. “Trilead tetroxide (known as red lead, or minium) [...] is the orange-red to brick-red pigment commonly used in corrosion-resistant paints for exposed iron and steel” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Duchamp elected to use minium rather than paint in the *Large Glass*. [Marc Décimo and Translator’s note.]

22. *Les Arts* sounds exactly like *lizards*. The pun is an old one (Félicien Champsaur and his illustrator dwell on it in *Entrée de Clowns*, 1884), but it still seems to give pleasure in Paris today. [Translator’s note.]

23. The punning reaches a climax with “*gros lard militaire*”, a combination of *gros lard* (fat slob) and *l’art militaire* (the art of war). There may be a silent pun: Duchamp employed the word *saindoux* at the start of his speech and the military slang for a corporal is *saindoux* (lard). [Translator’s note.]

things we need for our comfort. Keep desires to a minimum and do away with what is not strictly practical. That’s it in a nutshell: fittings must be useful.”

“No curtains for the windows, then?” I asked.

“It’s impossible to know in advance in what direction the windows will face. Oil-paper, held in place by rubber suction-cups, makes an efficient screen.”

“Granted. What do we lay on the floor?”

“In winter: skins, for they are soft and warm; in summer: rush-matting or straw-matting, for they are cool.”

Then we amused ourselves trying to think up tableware with other shapes and substances than the usual round, porcelain plates. Such as a dinner service consisting of those rectangular photographic developing-dishes with a pouring-lip at one corner, to serve for the soup plates, or all the plates. Forks for pickles, with two prongs instead of four. Wooden spoons or the porcelain ones used by the Chinese. As for knives, dear me! The time we spent discussing how to avoid fancy handles, and the ability to cut was a criterion, all the same! One-piece stainless steel knives had not yet been invented. Glasses had to be as ordinary as possible—so that we could break them afterwards, Russian-style! Sometimes we went window-shopping in the Rue de l’École de Médecine where there was a shop that sold laboratory accessories. We would daydream in front of the window display, wondering if there was anything that could be used for cooking among the retorts and beakers that had been blown into so many different shapes and sizes. We laughed a lot, proposing this or that: I was happy to stir with the glass rods, but the idea of using a round hospital basin made of enamel to serve up jugged hare, well no, frankly! The joke seemed a trifle too scatological, but it did remind me of a readymade he had mentioned to me: the urinal which he had called “Fountain”. Such practical jokes, of which he was fond, amused me greatly and they reminded me of the famous evening when Guy de Maupassant served the punch in umbrella stands. Now, what could be more comfortable than a padded bench in a café? We did not know whether it was for a dining room, a dining hall or simply a breakfast corner,²⁴ but we bought one and fixed it up with the

24. “Breakfast corner”: in English in the original. [Translator’s note.]

simplest of simple marble-topped tables. Another day, in I don't know which big department store, we chanced upon a whole series of articles for outdoor use which turned out to be just what we needed. We immediately adopted the idea of hammocks for beds and swings attached to the ceiling by beautiful hempen ropes like the rigging on a ship. A plank of wood on an incline, fixed to the wall, became a writing desk. We were later delighted to learn that Georges Sand used to sleep in a hammock in her study at Nohant and that she wrote on a plank, hinged to a cupboard. The words "salon" and "drawing room" were of course banished: "The ladies may retire to the drawing room"—horrid! A salon is a hairdressing salon, a drawling room and a drunken brawling room.²⁵ We preferred "parlour", the talking room, or better still "confervatory".²⁶

On those days, after dinner in a brasserie in the Latin Quarter, we would go to Montparnasse to see Man Ray, an avant-garde photographer who was completely unknown to the French. He was part of that strange American colony that had invaded Paris, a crowd made up of artists and writers who rubbed shoulders with one another but whose contact with the French was limited to waiters in cafés and girls behind counters, excepting a small coterie of snobs who called themselves patrons of the arts. These foreigners criticised our way of life, without seeking to understand it, and said of us in a tone of voice that reeked of condescension: "They don't live as they should."²⁷

I knew that ever since Man Ray had arrived from New York, Marcel had gone to great pains to help him, putting him up, presenting him right and left to all his friends, backing him up, supporting him in every way possible until he was able to fend for himself. I had been profoundly moved, and saw evidence of a kind-heartedness that could not have been easily extrapolated from the apparent coldness of my future husband.

I did not particularly like Man Ray and thought that he clung like a leech, but I was very touched to see with what affection and deference he treated Marcel. So, almost every evening, after dinner, they began their inevitable game of chess, which could be counted on to last over two hours.

25. The objectionable word in French was *salon*. The original portmanteau word was "saoulooner", from *saouler* (to get drunk) and *saloon*. [Translator's note.]

26. The original portmanteau word was "discutoir", from *discuter* (to talk) and *parloir* (parlour). [Translator's note.]

27. In American in the original. [Translator's note.] *Lélia*, André Maurois. In the introduction to his biography *Lélia, or The Life of Georges Sand* (1952), Maurois wrote: "Kindred minds are brought together by chance meeting and chain reaction, as are kindred hearts." [L. S.-L.]

I fretted the time away by chain-smoking, waiting impatiently for the moment when we could return to Rue Larrey and be alone again. It was not that chess did not interest me, as has been said of me since, but I was so in love with Marcel that I was jealous when time with him was stolen from me. It seemed to me that these interminable matches interrupted and quite destroyed the climate in which we were living, and I thought that Man Ray was decidedly lacking in tact to monopolise the man I considered to be my personal property. I did not yet know that the escapism procured by playing chess was absolutely necessary to Marcel, like the air he so liked to breathe in deeply, and that the abstract side of speculative thought chases away the petty ideas that cloud the mind. For some people it is telling their beads that allows them to empty their minds. Playing chess was just as indispensable to him as his daily meals. Nor did I know that he absolutely needed to keep his hand moving intelligently, and moving daily, that artist's hand weaned from paintbrushes. He had at all costs to express himself by means of a tool, whatever it was. It was absolutely imperative for Marcel to do so, for it provided him with a sort of *physical* liberation, just as his games of chess were the necessary cerebral gymnastics required for his psychic equilibrium.

And all the while the fateful day was approaching. At home, the tense atmosphere had returned. The iron was entering the soul of my poor mother. She withdrew into herself. She thought each hour tolled the death-knell of all that had constituted her love and happiness: her husband and her daughter. I felt very bad about it but there was nothing more I could do for her. Now that all her attention was fixed on her own suffering, she did not try to help me in any way, did not give me any advice, and even avoided talking to me. My father had bought a flat for Jeanne Montjovet and had decreed that he would move in with her on the very day of my wedding. This flat in the Square Alboni weighed on our hearts. We said nothing, nobody mentioned it again, but we thought about it all the time.

As I prepared to move into the Rue Larrey, I had the removal men carry away a very spacious wardrobe, capable of containing linen and clothes, the deal table, my book-binding tools and—unfortunately for me as it later turned out—a small cabinet that was supposed to look japanned. Yes, it was cheap and tacky, but just fine for putting my tools away. And easy to store out of sight, as it was only about 30 cm high, 25 cm long and 10 cm deep. I grant that it was an unfortunate choice, but I had not really been thinking when I jumbled together and carted off everything that was in the little

workshop set up in an outbuilding on the Square du Bois.²⁸ Much as I had been pleasantly indoctrinated into the ways and use of raw materials, I am ashamed to admit that I had not fully understood the importance that Marcel attached to a certain appearance that his den had to have. It was seven floors up with no lift, the latter lying like a corpse in a cage on a ground floor far away. The only lavatory was a seatless toilet, a communal toilet for all the garrets. The fitted carpet was threadbare. The much-vaunted wall plaster was grey and pitted. There was plywood here and whitewood there, a hideous cast-iron stove and a gas-burner of the same metal. All this appeared to me finally as being rather sordid, and could only be considered beautiful in the dreams of an artist whose spirit soared above such base contingencies. True, I had accepted to live there, and true I felt happy and proud to live my life with such an eminently superior person, but the Rue Larrey flat, with its glass ceiling all mucky, well, it was not exactly a palace.

When Marcel saw my furniture arrive, with the inevitable addition of a small trunk and several suitcases, he felt his gorge rise. It was worse than he had predicted. The limit of endurance was reached when he clapped eyes on my little lacquered cabinet. “I might at least have been spared the indignity of *that*,” he said. I tried to pass the incident off with humour. I tried begging for forgiveness. He would have none of it. For the first time in my life, I saw his friendly, cheerful, handsome face become closed, hard and more and more surly.²⁹ For my part, I am hot-tempered and easily fly into a passion, but I am quick to forgive and forget, and sulks and grudges are not part of my vocabulary. I could never have imagined that something so insignificant would be held against me as a serious ground for complaint.

The following day, believing the incident to be over, I proposed to unpack, tidy away and arrange what I had brought. I was surprised to discover that Marcel was still bitter: his whole attitude betrayed it, his words were sour and his face retained the cold, hard expression of the day before. I deduced that lodging me in his Rue Larrey flat was a greater sacrifice for him than originally anticipated, and that my presence was going to importune him to no small degree—but it only made me love him all the

28. The Avenue du Bois (now the Avenue Foch), where the Sarazin-Levassor family lived, abuts on a square with a public garden. [Translator’s note.]

29. The actress Beatrice Wood, an intimate friend of Marcel Duchamp from 1916 onwards, made a similar remark: “When he smiled the heavens opened. But when his face was still it was as blank as a death mask. This curious emptiness puzzled many and gave the impression that he had been hurt in childhood.” (*I Shock Myself: The Autobiography of Beatrice Wood* [1985], Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 1992, p. 23.)

more, and to think that he was sacrificing himself to save me from the atmosphere at home that I could no longer endure!

Before pushing under the table the old trunk containing all his private treasures, Marcel opened it to dig out some document or other that he needed, and showed me several photos of paintings he had sold in America. I looked, I stared, and I hoped that he would furnish some explanation, because, frankly, I could not make head or tail of what I saw. Perhaps I would learn why he had given up painting? That he should have given up painting did not particularly shock me in itself, as I perfectly understood that one can evolve with time, grow tired of the same medium and seek a new form of expression so as not to become ossified. But it had nothing to do with that. All he told me was what he had already said to me: “In art, there is nothing to understand; you have to feel. It’s a question of liking or not liking. That’s the only question.” Nevertheless, looking at the photo of *Nude Descending a Staircase*, he blushed slightly and confessed:

“Nobody knows me here, but in America they love what I’ve produced. It’s now worth a fortune and I’m highly-rated,” he added, sniggering. “I sold this painting for 250 dollars, I think, in 1915. It’s perfectly true to say that I was more than pleased with the sum. It was a lot of money at the time, after all, but since then it has been bought and sold several times and the last I heard it fetched several millions!”³⁰

“Gosh! How come?” I asked.

“All because of the art dealers. They make their money on the backs of the poor buggers who pour their heart and soul into something that will enrich these worthy gentlemen. It stinks. And there’s nothing to be done about it. Writers and composers receive their royalties for fifty years, in direct proportion to the success of their works, but as for us, the painters and sculptors, we don’t get a penny. We work just so that these fine gentlemen can grow rich. Ask Picabia what he thinks!”

He spoke with great bitterness and there was a tense expression on his face; in fact, it was the same mocking grin that I had seen the day before, when he expressed his discontent concerning the little lacquered cabinet.

30. Duchamp is not exaggerating: one million old Francs is very roughly equivalent to one thousand dollars. Duchamp received 324 dollars for *Nude Descending a Staircase, N° 2*, and 972 dollars for the sale of four other paintings (C. Tomkins, p. 118). When Frederick Torrey decided to sell *Nude Descending a Staircase, N° 2* in 1919, he was offered 1,000 dollars (ibid., p. 148). [Marc Décimo and translator’s note.]

There was no violence, no anger as such, but something so hard and impenetrable that it set me thinking. I took note that some things were taboo and that I would have to learn what they were. I also surmised that it was the commercial aspect of selling paintings that had disgusted him and that perhaps that was one of the keys that explained why he had given up painting. A game of chess, at this moment, provided the necessary diversion. I played very badly, since I have never been able to concentrate for long enough to rapidly foresee all the possibilities that a move could entail. Invariably I blundered about the board making such colossal boos that Marcel had not even considered that such moves could be played, thus destroying all the carefully built plans he had pieced together! He was surprised, not to say thrown, and so the game lasted an hour or two all the same, though he was obliged to give me back several important pieces that I had lost in the opening gambit.

Our wedding was approaching and I was impatient for the day to come when this marvellous companion would be mine for life. He was the one! *He* was my brawny Stone Age man, the one who comes out of his cave with the skin of a wild beast over his shoulder, the one all the women want, and he chooses me, he drags me to his cave and makes me his wife. How bright the future would be by the side of one's own personal superman! I knew that we would not see eye to eye on everything and that I would be hard put to make up for the fifteen years that separated us, for a slice of life that long is unbreachable. I knew that there could be rough patches and friction, and that life would not always be a bed of roses, but what did it matter now that *he* was there? He was there, the prince I had dreamt of as a little girl, whose smile brings Peace, reassurance and warmth. He was the Beloved of the Song of Solomon, my heart was bursting with joy and the next day we were to be wed. He would be mine and I would be his Chosen One. All forgotten were the hang-ups about being overweight, my aborted education, my empty days and family worries, for he had chosen me. It meant he thought he could raise me to his level and, heavens above! what a level it was. It made me dizzy just thinking about it. Marcel was a whole that I did not analyse in detail, and that whole was *everything* to me. I would have been incapable of saying what colour eyes he had, but the sound of his voice set my heartstrings aflutter. No sooner was I back home than I threw myself upon the piano. We were a very musical family. My mother was an accomplished pianist and a talented composer; she spent long hours practising pieces of chamber music with her friends. She had always

insisted that I continue my studies, little progress though I had made. Sadly, I was too lazy to work up my technique. I did not have anything like perfect pitch, my voice had a wide range but no middle register, and the notes always came out false anyway. The result was not brilliant. But in spite of all that, I would have loved to sing and my head was full of melodies and catchy operatic arias that would not go away. Whilst in the throes of love, I relied on music to express the heart's overflow. It was both calming and a catalyst. I boldly attacked the most difficult passages of the repertoire, which I massacred at the top of my voice.

Sometimes, when the music had grated on my mother's ears for too long, she came and accompanied me, out of pity. I was pleased and sang more in tune. We leafed through certain songs that I particularly liked, but I was sometimes so moved by the words that I had a lump in my throat and had to stop. Those were the last moments of intimacy that I was to share with my mother for a long time. She too had her time taken up with the changes to come, trying on her new dresses, taking the necessary steps for her forthcoming divorce, not to mention the endless discussions with her friends. No doubt they meant well, but their advice was of dubious value. One day, I overheard the following conversation:

"The poor dear, head over heels in love—isn't it a shame. It can't have been difficult—such an easy prey, just waiting to be snatched up. Along came the wolf in sheep's clothing, determined to seduce her—a handsome man with handsome ways, charm and intelligence with it, and she was smitten."

"They say he's the Pope of the Surrealists, or something like that."

"The *Surrealists*? Another new lot! Now who are they? And what do they get up to?"

"Apparently they're a bunch of scribblers who want to do a kind of *literary* 'Dada'."

"Aah! I see. Well, Henri *has* found himself a nice nephew! And yet I was far from imagining that he could sacrifice his very own daughter so, just for the sake of Jeanne Montjovet."

I was indignant. White with rage. I could have pulled that lady's hat right down over her mouth to make her shut up! I swore I would never speak to her again, never see her again, but the next day I naturally had to thank her for her wedding present: a double ashtray made of two oyster shells with a lump to indicate that a pearl was on the way. Can you imagine

anything more hideous! It was awful. Nor did it answer to Marcel's request for very simple objects that looked as artless as possible.

I was to receive another shock: my Aunt Edith, whom I adored, refused categorically to be a witness at my wedding. It had been through her that we had got to know the Crottis, since she lived at the same address (5 Rue Parmentier). She thought she was partly to blame for my having met Marcel Duchamp in the first place. Her refusal was tantamount to setting a seal of disapproval upon the marriage; it was an act of solidarity with my mother, her only sister. I was hurt by my aunt's attitude. Truly hurt, with all the pain that a little girl can feel when she is suddenly cut off from her little world of comfort. I told Marcel of my heartache. I was shocked at the levity with which he dismissed the incident. Without a thought for my emotions, he said that the simple and normal thing to do would be to ask someone else to be a witness. It ought not to be difficult, he said. But my pride revolted: I wanted Marcel to be aware that because of him and *for him* I had been led to cut precious ties with people that were dear to me. No response. Water off a duck's back. Seeing that I had become pensive, Marcel said to me, very affectionately: "Come now, you must make an effort to become an adult. Free yourself from the family mould. Shake off the weight of heredity. Find yourself, the pure self, like a child newborn." I nodded without grasping what he meant, since I did not see any difference between one's true personality and everything which accrues and clothes it. A young plant needs a stake; when it has taken root, the stake is withdrawn and it is left to fend for itself.

And so it was that every day each new incident led me to reconsider the ways I had of looking at things. I had taken them for certitudes and thought it easy and natural to lean upon them.

"No," Marcel explained, "life poses a string of problems and you have to solve them each time in a new way. Accumulated experience isn't a kind of adjustable spanner that can be used to solve all life's problems. You have to avoid prejudicing—*prejudging*—a case, which means, of course, no judging in advance. Instead, what is required is constant reflection, continual innovation, like Trotsky's permanent revolution."

"Ok. But what if the next day, having thought it over, the decision made the day before no longer seems viable?"

"It doesn't matter. An equilibrium is maintained, as in chess. You have to try to see everything as if for the first time, all the time, even if it means contradicting yourself, since the context of one day is never quite the same as that of the next."

This was not so different from the teaching I was receiving once a week at the School of Rosicrucian Studies, the director of which was my guru, Ludwig Krauss, son of the famous opera singer³¹ who rose to glory in the time of Napoleon III. In their doctrine I had found the answers to all the philosophical and spiritual questions I had been asking myself. I had found peace, a new ideal and lasting faith. Despite the marriage preparations, I found time to participate in their meetings, if only by sending my homework to California. On those days, Marcel met up with me in the Ternes district. We dined at the Brasserie Lorraine or at Reich's, but more often than not at a tiny Russian restaurant that no longer exists where they served vodka, zakuski, borsh and other specialities at prices that bore no comparison to those charged by the so-called Imperial Chefs. In my enthusiasm for all that I had just learnt, I tried to persuade Marcel to admit the possibility of reincarnation, if nothing else. To my great disappointment, it did not interest him in the least, and, as was his wont, he sidled out of it with a witticism and the inevitable pun, which I detested. I wondered how someone so refined could descend to coarse jests and such heavy handed humour. I put my reincarnation away in a little box for later use and let myself be carried along by his conversation—for conversing with him was always enchanting. He sparkled with energy and a particular spirit of his which was tempered by his critical side and reined in by the limits he imposed upon himself. Spring was exceptionally bright and hot that year, and a refreshing drink was welcome before the evening. One day at Brancusi's, soon after our return from Étretat, while Marcel was showing sculptures to possible buyers in the other studio, I felt thirsty and asked Brancusi for a glass of water. He fixed me up a *mominette*, a drink I had never heard of. And so I discovered that a *mominette* was a half-ration of absinthe, the liqueur that used to perfume the streets of Paris at the end of the working day, until the war when it was banned.³² A well-known brand had just launched a product flavoured with aniseed that bore a passing resemblance to the notorious herb, which used to be served with a sugar cube on a spoon over the glass. This first *mominette* seemed no more alcoholic than squash, and so when Marcel came with the visitors I took a second to chase the first, finding the drink rather a light one. Then Marcel took me to a

31. Marie-Gabrielle Krauss (1842-1906), Austrian prima donna. [Translator's note.]

32. The sale of absinthe was made illegal in France in 1915. [Translator's note.]

restaurant on the Quai Voltaire to taste duckling cooked Rouen-style—the house speciality. I had been promised this duckling since we had been in Étretat, the season not having been willing while we were there. I drove more or less well from the Impasse Ronsin to the banks of the Seine, though I was already startling to feel more than a bit tiddly. Unfortunately, duckling was not ready-prepared and had to be ordered, so we would have to wait, drinking aperitifs to while away the time. Marcel was amused to see me drunk and ordered two *Pernods*³³ before I could say anything, telling me that it was not a good thing to mix my drinks. Heavens! what would the result have been if on top of it all I had mixed my drinks! The double-measure I was served had nothing to do with Brancusi's little *mominettes*. Up to the brim it was. By the time the duckling arrived my head was spinning, and to cap it all, Marcel—whose head was clear as crystal—had chosen a heady wine to accompany the fowl. I tried to keep up appearances, relishing the fillets in their burning hellfire sauce, but I was losing my composure. The very strong coffee did not succeed in easing my discomfort or stop me from feeling faint. I managed to leave the restaurant in a dignified way, but once by the car, parked in a neighbouring street, I collapsed in a heap, incapable of driving anywhere. What was to be done? Call a taxi and go straight home? Impossible. Parking regulations at that time made it an offence to leave a vehicle on the public highway for more than a few hours: the owner would be booked for abandoning his vehicle. If a fine came through the post, my father would prohibit my driving in Paris from that moment on. Marcel hailed a taxi and took me instead to Rue Larrey, as this was evidently the best solution. I was very much in love. Unfortunately, spurred on by the effect of the alcohol, I put up no resistance (quite the opposite) to the premature accomplishment of an act which, in my mind, was to have made us man and wife. No sooner had dawn risen than I returned to the car—which fortunately bore no ticket—and thence to the Avenue du Bois,³⁴ where everyone was sleeping and no one would know at what hour I had come back. Phew! It had been a close shave!

Our wedding day would soon be upon us and the contract was going to have to be signed. Only Marcel was too sensitive to actually *ask* my father

33. A highly-alcoholic, aniseed-flavoured drink, and effectively the closest thing to absinthe. Usually diluted in seven parts water. [Translator's note.]

34. Now the Avenue Foch.

how much he was planning to give me as an allowance. It was only later that I learnt he had been hoping for a large sum, and that he needed it. Having invested all his capital in the purchase of the Brancusi sculptures, he now only had his meagre savings to live on. Unfortunately, the art market was at a low ebb and he wanted at least to be able to pay off his debts. The rest could come later. So why, during the interview with my father, did he not unburden his problems to him? My father might have been understanding, though he had problems of his own: Poincaré had depreciated the Franc and the family revenues had slumped to a mere quarter of their former value. To counter this, he was obliged to heighten our house by one storey and erect a main building in the courtyard of the old outhouses. The building work was to start the day after the wedding and my father needed all his assets to cover the costs of the building site. He had therefore decided to give me an allowance rather than a lump sum. This much I already knew. But Marcel had not broached the question of money with him and I could hardly have been expected to make the first move. When the contract was read out, Marcel discovered that the only sum at his disposal would be the yearly allowance, which he did not think very generous. It was barely sufficient even just for one person. The disappointment could be seen on his face despite the efforts he made to keep his composure. As soon as we were outside, Marcel took me to the Luxembourg Gardens and spoke to me very seriously for the first time about the income that we might have to live on, given the payments afforded me by my father. He painted a grim picture of our future existence and it was then that I realised, with horror, that in fact he had no source of regular income—apart from the art that he had given up—whereas I had been given to understand that he earned a living like everyone else, one way or another. All I knew was that Marcel thought patronage indispensable to an artist, to free him from material concerns and allow him to express himself.

I was shocked and hurt. It was not so much the petty means that would be our lot in the future, for I had few wants and disliked luxury in any case, nor had I fooled myself into thinking that Marcel would introduce me to a life of wealth and ease, like the very rich who can spend without thinking—it was riches of another kind that Marcel brought with him: he could make your wildest dreams come true. No, what cut to the quick was the bitter sarcasm in his voice, his disenchanted gaze, the impression he gave of realising he had been mistaken. I misunderstood what was probably just

realistic advice and coming from someone who had learnt what the cost of living was through long experience. The malicious gossip that had been dinned into me now returned with a vengeance: “a fortune hunter—the Picabia-Montjovet conspiracy—getting his daughter off his hands on the cheap”. My emotions were in such a turmoil that I had difficulty paying attention to what he said. It was then that it hit me: there was something that was not working out between us and would perhaps never work out. Maybe he had the same impression at the same time.

I came back home feeling devastated. There was no one I could open my heart to: my father was dining out and my mother would not have been of any assistance, as she would surely have said, “Oh, my poor child! Didn’t we tell you he was only interested in your money!”

I was still reeling from the shock and my imagination was running wild. No, it was not the future economic straits that frightened me. Had I not always believed a certain mutual understanding to be worth all the money in the world? The shock came entirely from Marcel’s strange attitude, seeming bitterly to regret not having substantial funds at his disposal, whereas I had thought him so disinterested, so much above it all. Gnawed by anxiety, I asked myself whether Marcel had in fact just been looking after his own welfare, manoeuvring to secure a roof over his head and his daily bread from a marriage that had been arranged by a third party. So where did that leave me? What did I mean to him? Where did I fit into the equation? What did I count for? Nothing, zero, nothing at all. How wrong I had been all along. Vanity of vanities! Little did they weigh in his eyes, youth, energy, love and understanding, everything I thought I was made of, compared to the importance of a penny or two. In the scales of his heart, the missing pennies reduced my weight even more, till I was worse than worthless. All this kept running through my head and I had in lump in my throat thinking I had been chosen merely for the dowry that had seemed promising. The idea turned into an ever more painful obsession. It was unbearable. I could only conclude that the courtship had been faked; the homage paid to my few personal qualities had been simulated. I then felt sorry for myself, regretting the enthusiasm with which I had offered him my virginity no sooner than we were back from Étretat; and to think that I had wrecked the little that remained of my parents’ marriage, ignoring everyone’s advice, not heeding the warnings, throwing caution to the wind, and forgetting my poor mother who had fallen victim to all their dirty tricks. No! It must not be! The marriage must be broken off!



Portrait of Lydie Sarazin-Levassor in the garden of the family house, “Les Fondrets”, Étretat, c. 1920. (Courtesy of Claude-Olivier Fischer.)

The crisis had reached its climax and now, all of a sudden, it subsided. I became reasonable once more. To break the engagement off now would cause a scandal. The like of which does not wash off. And what would be gained? It would not stand in the way of my father and Madame Montjovet, whose love for each other would follow its natural course. And once the scandal had blown over, I would be condemned to live alone with my mother and she would never forgive me. No, to call it off now was not an option that was open to me. Even if I had been seriously mistaken, had I not also wanted to flee my parents' broken marriage, and was not this suitor my ticket out? The wine is drawn, it must be drunk. Suppose I had been duped, then it was time to show that I was a good loser, come what may. There was no guessing what would happen in a few months' time. Little by little my anger abated. By the time I fell asleep, I no longer doubted the sincerity of Marcel's feelings for me. I was certain it had not been a mistake all along, and despite his disappointment, I knew I could trust him.

The next morning, the doubts had returned, but I was swept away by the cares of the day, and the wedding dress could not wait. It was the final fitting session and the length had to be decided for the train and the veil. My wedding dress was a very nice one. It was short, in silver lace, with a low waistline and a long train for a little pageboy to hold up. The fitting-room proved too small to allow the train and veil to be spread out to their full length, so the fitters put me in the fitting-room corridor. Predictably enough, out came the other ladies who worked at the tailor's to give their advice, and the big boss herself, followed by the ladies in the neighbouring booths, with the pins still sticking out of their dresses, all in order to admire the bride. It warmed my wounded heart to hear their compliments and even the routine exclamations: "Oh! Isn't the bride lovely! What a beautiful young lady! The husband's a lucky one! He *is* going to have a nice time!" After all, perhaps he *was* attracted to me despite my surplus weight. He always said he preferred stout women and the young woman I had seen on a photo, the wife of a well-known painter with whom he had had a long love affair, well, she was a good deal tubbier than me. Not to make too fine a point about it, when he drew me to his bed, he did not give the impression that it was a chore.

That evening, we would meet for dinner at Brancusi's. Marcel had rented a studio next door to exhibit the sculptures he had brought back from America. He had declared them as "stones" in order to escape paying customs duty on them. I knew he had spent all the money he had inherited

on these sculptures and that it was vital for him to recoup his costs.³⁵ And there was to be a visit that day from an interested party. It may have been for the organisation of an exhibition, or maybe they were prospective buyers, I cannot remember. When I arrived, The air was full of the wonderful aromas of a very special Rumanian meal that Brancusi was preparing on his own. His welcome was all that was needed to set my troubled mind at rest. Brancusi's closest friends called one another "Maurice".³⁶ It was not given to everyone to be a "Maurice". You had to open up your heart completely, and have a pure heart, in order to be one. So I was very flattered when, after two or three visits, Brancusi called me Maurice: "You're just perfect. Completely unsophisticated."³⁷ Sturdy and capable. Intelligent and with a good heart, just what's needed, and above all, be yourself. Nothing more, nothing less. Chase away acquired knowledge. Exercise freedom of thought. Ignore all doctrines. Don't let yourself be indoctrinated. Be ruled by instinct, always, and not by reason. Yup, you have the makings of a real Maurice." While Maurice Brancusi fixed a *mominette* for Maurice Lydie, he spoke warmly of Maurice Marcel, telling me that he was an artistic genius, disinterested in his affairs, firm in his affection and friendship, and congratulating me once more for being his chosen companion, his heart's desire! I felt bucked up by the absinthe, Brancusi's charming accent and the warmth of his gaze—everything conspired to put new spirit into me. No one was going to say that everything had been thrown overboard just because of *money*! Having felt reassured by the flattering comments at the tailor's in the morning, and by Maurice Brancusi's affectionate outpourings in the evening, not only did I decide *not* to break the engagement off, I also resolved to forget all about the bitter

35. Marcel Duchamp had inherited almost 10,000 dollars. The sum was immediately spent on producing the film *Anemic Cinema* and on the purchase of the Brancusi sculptures (Tomkins, pp. 269-270).

36. Maurice = Moritz. From the famous children's picture-book *Max und Moritz*, published in Germany round about 1885-1890. The young hero, whom everybody believes to be a simpleton, rescues the sophisticated adults from difficult situations thanks to his practical good sense. The book is a satire of a certain *Kultur*. [L. S.L.] Lydie Fischer does not give a reliable description of the story. Though it can be said that Max and Moritz are unsophisticated children who invent sophisticated tricks, our two heroes are better described as scapegraces who skip school and get up to no good, stealing food and playing tricks on people with water and explosives. One is naturally on their side, but the only good they can be said to do is to bring self-important people down a peg. The miller exterminates the little pests and the village is content. [Translator's note.] The author is Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908) and the first edition dates from 1865.

37. Brancusi uses the neologism "*désophistiquée*", since there is no single word in French for "unsophisticated". It is, however, unclear whether Brancusi is describing Lydie's permanent character or the effect of a process of "de-sophistication", especially as the context of his pronouncement allows for the conflation of both ideas. [Translator's note.]

feelings that had possessed me the night before. I reasoned with myself. Marcel had looked the figures in the eye and had thought it just as well to warn me that the future would be neither rosy nor easy. It was the proper response of a future husband who was thoughtful and serious. I had surely misinterpreted a necessary warning and, if there was a risk, I would take it all the same. Everything before me was luminous once more. There was peace in my heart, and when Marcel returned with the group of visitors I was smiling, beaming with joy, ready to put my trust in him, now and for the future, determined to do everything to keep by my side someone I considered exceptional. His eyes, his voice, everything that emanated from his sheer presence thrilled me to the core, I was so much in love.

The civil wedding took place a few days later, on the eve of the church wedding. Just as we were getting into the car to go to the town hall, a cousin of my father, Antoine Cayrol, arrived out of breath and carrying a suitcase. His daughter had just been rushed to hospital with appendicitis. He was not anxious, but still...! At any rate, he had brought Hilda's complete bridesmaid's apparel. So that was another bridesmaid quitting when the going got rough! Ok, fine! Heaven only knows all the affection I bore Hilda, who was like a little sister to me, but my egocentrism at the time was such that I did not give the seriousness of her operation a second thought. The only thing that counted for me was the fact that I had to find a replacement within twenty-four hours!

At the town hall for the sixteenth *arrondissement*, we were treated to the main reception room with its gilt furniture, potted plants, and red velvet. Our wedding party consisted of only a dozen people: the four witnesses—my Uncle René Sarazin-Levassor and René Luquet de Saint-Germain on my side, Gaston and Picabia on Marcel's side—and their wives, excepting Gaby Villon who had not wished to be present. Everybody was extremely elegant. Mother was absolutely ravishing in her pale, print dress, not to mention her little, roguish hat with bird of paradise feathers floating on it; my father was even more majestic than usual, sporting a black, embroidered jacket and pinstriped trousers (which in those days were considered very smart). I wore a very simple dress in navy blue crêpe de Chine, set off by white georgette trimming, and, of course, the traditional cluster of white carnations. A large leghorn hat, black and sober, completed the outfit which I had put together so that it could easily serve later for intimate dinners in restaurants.

Marcel, wanting to do things properly, had ordered for the wedding one or two suits as well as the morning coat at Auld Baillee's, a tailor of Scottish

extraction who for a long time had had something of an industrial approach to his business. His clients would choose the material and style in Paris where measurements were taken. The suits were then cut and sewn in Scotland, and any adjustments would be made when they arrived in Paris. As soon as Marcel mentioned the name of his tailor, it was greeted with whoops of laughter, for it appeared that Auld Baillee must have made artists a speciality: my grandfather, the painter Léon Olivié, had patronised the establishment many moons ago, as had my godfather, Wilhelm Van Kempen, the perpetual student at the Grande Chaumière Academy, and the sculptor Emmanuel Moncel de Perrin, a cousin of mine by marriage, who has lots of pieces in Paris.³⁸

The mayor in person came to wed us: he read the relevant passages of the *code civil*, pronounced his speech, and concluded with the words, "I hope, *madame*, that you will always inspire your husband." Picabia and Villon, who knew Marcel and his *œuvre*, came within an ace of bursting into laughter—they had to bite their lips to keep a serious countenance. Following the ceremony, there was lunch in one of the dining rooms of the Automobile Club, overlooking the Place de la Concorde. The décor was very nice, the dishes were exquisite, the service impeccable, the atmosphere very relaxed, everything went very well but I kept thinking about the bridesmaid I had to find, so as soon as I had drunk my coffee I slipped away to see if I could not shake Zette Piat into action. She was staying with Monsieur Maroger, the minister, and I said to her, "Bronchitis or no bronchitis, you have to come, if only to the church. Come to the house early and my chambermaids will adjust the dress to fit you." It was not easy to convince her, because she really did have a very bad cough, but when I promised that a car would be waiting for her at the door of the church to take her back home, she finally accepted.

It was our last evening, our last supper in the family home, and I felt very sad. We would never more be united at the same table with so much love in our hearts, and so many implacable decisions on the surface. It was

38. The sculptures on the façade of the town hall for the tenth *arrondissement* were completed in 1906. A series of female statues represent the principal professions that were practised in the *arrondissement* at the end of the nineteenth century. Reading from left to right, and starting with the block on the Rue Hittorf: *Les Parfums* [perfumes], by Eugène Ernest Chrestien; *Le Théâtre* [the theatre], by Gaston Veuvenot Leroux; *La Passementerie* [furnishings and trimmings], by Henri Barrau; *La Verrerie* [glassware], by Louis Demaille; and *La Broderie* [embroidery], by Count Emmanuel de Moncel de Perrin (1866-1930). He had married Suzanne de Coppet (1874-1946), Henri Sarazin-Levassor's first cousin.

true that I had suffered to see the family break apart and that I had wanted to run away from the disaster, but now that all the moves had been played, I had a lump in my throat. What I would have given to go back in time a few weeks, when, despite the break up of the family, I was still their cherished daughter, the centre of all their affection. They had made me the apple of their eye, and I wanted to cry out loud to them how much I loved them. I had to be a monster to be so ungrateful. Their sadness was the equal of mine, and I could not utter a word, my nerves were on edge. Too late to go back! It was too late! My egoism had destroyed everything! My poor mother was condemned to suffer the pains of martyrdom! It was too late! I was Mrs Marcel Duchamp—it was done! My father retired to his study, my mother, having forced herself to be with us, shut herself up in her rooms, and there was nothing left for me to do but finish packing my suitcase to take to Rue Larrey the next day. With a heavy heart I picked the objects that had framed my existence. Each one was linked to a memory of childhood or adolescence. I so liked my beautiful Directoire furniture all around the room, and everything that had surrounded me.

II. One Bone and One Flesh¹

The big day finally arrived. It was a beautiful, hot, 7 June. Fortunately, there was no last-minute family discussion, for we were all fully occupied giving instructions, making final preparations and putting the last touches to our personal appearance. Everything was fixed, everything had been planned. No panic, no mad rush. I was the first to be ready, since the trying-on sessions had gone very smoothly and the veil had proved very simple to adjust. A few months earlier, a replacement hairdresser had over-bleached my hair and then singed it while perming it. As a result of this total catastrophe, I was obliged to wear my hair extremely short—a hairstyle usually reserved for men. So there was little difficulty fitting the veil. It was held in place by a sort of cheap-looking tiara or kokoshnick,² which was the fashion.

My father, meanwhile, had distributed his old top hats to the members of the bridal procession. This article was required by the strict rules of etiquette to go with the morning coat, and yet it had gone completely out of fashion and was unthinkable in all but the most formal occasions. Nobody possessed one and the idea of buying something at once so expensive and so useless put everyone's back up. By lucky chance, my father had piles of them in a boxroom. They dated from a time long ago when people wore them as a matter of course. Their shape and size had varied over the years, growing taller or shorter to keep in fashion: there was the stovepipe hat, the Kronstadt, the tall, bell-shaped Bolivar... How they

1. Marginal notes indicate that L.S-L. hesitated between *Une Mariée en chair et en noces* (wedded to a bride in the flesh) and the final version *En chaire et en noces* (in flesh and blood, or, the pulpit and the wedding). Her wordplay derives from Duchamp's pun of March 1919: *Des* [illegible] *en cher, en hausse* (Xs in flesh and blood, or, higher bidding for Xs, or, some dear Xs are going up in value).

2. Traditional Russian headdress in the form of a diadem. [Translator's note.]