ALDOUS HUXLEY

IMAGINARY CONVERSATION

M. DE COLIGNY'S bed was an heirloom. His father and mother had had it made against their wedding night, and surely the voyage to Cythera was never undertaken in a more splendid galleon—a ship whose hull was of carved and polished walnut wood, embellished by gilding and heraldic panels, whose masts were four twisted pillars all inlaid with ivory, and the sails of yellow damask and the ensigns of stiffly worked brocade. The heaven of the bed was a tapestry representing the story of Leda, and when the yellow curtains were drawn it formed the ceiling of a little scented chamber that was entirely shut off from the outer world. That Flemish Leda embracing a swan whose home was some leaden canal between high houses in Bruges, had seen and heard many secret things in her time. To-night, when the curtains were drawn and the little silver lamp, fastened by a bracket to one of the posts of the bed, had been lit, she beheld a more than usually delightful spectacle.

Two persons, both of them in the flower of their youth and beauty, were sitting in the broad bed, propped up against the mountainous pillows of down. One of them was a girl of marvellous loveliness and, to judge from her appearance, not above seventeen or eighteen years of age. She was clad only in a smock, and even that had a habit of slipping off her shoulders to reveal the exquisite contours of a young breast. She was engaged in combing out a great mass of curling brown hair that tumbled in a wild cascade, full of glinting golden lights, about her face. The other was M. de Coligny, the owner of the bed. He was a young man of twenty-two or three, with dark hair and a dark pointed beard and moustache, under which his teeth showed white and regular when he smiled. He was of a Roman

cast of countenance and strikingly handsome. His eyes, brown and piercing, were fixed on his companion as, with body bent forward and hair over her eyes, she tugged at the recalcitrant tangled curls with her comb. She straightened herself up and shook her hair back with a little quick movement that made him catch his breath with delight to see—it was so beautiful and his desire was so great.

"Coligny," she said, turning to him with one of those smiles that had already made Mlle. de Lenclos famous, "I am quite exhausted with carding my fleece. I wish you would tease it out for me. These curls are the plague of my life."

"They are the delight of mine," responded Coligny, gallantly, as he took the comb from her, and began to pass it through the tangled tresses.

"Harder, harder!" cried Ninon, turning round to look at him over her shoulder. "You'll never get the tangles out unless you comb harder."

"But doesn't it hurt?" Coligny was horrified at the prospect of inflicting pain on his mistress.

"Of course not, if you're not clumsy."

Coligny went on combing with a set and careful face. He winced at every tug he had to give, as though it were his own hair that were being pulled. Besides, her bare shoulders were so beautiful and so close to him, and the nape of her neck, when he lifted the clustering curls to look at it, was so inviting where the white skin was shadowed by the first tiniest tendrils of her hair. He threw down the comb.

"There!" he said, "that's enough. I won't comb any more." And he put his arm round her and began to kiss her neck and shoulder.

A little shiver ran through her at the touch of his lips, and she laughed.

"What will happen to my poor tangled hair then?" she asked.

"It will get more tangled," Coligny replied.

"Very well," said Ninon, and she lay back on the pillow with an air of smiling resignation.

This was not the first, nor the second, time that Ninon had passed a night in M. Coligny's *hôtel* and in M. de Coligny's family bed. Coligny had appeared on her horizon some four or five months before, and it was not long before she had given him the amplest proofs of a first love that had overwhelmed her with irresistible violence. Mme. de Lenclos, her mother, was not only respectable but pious—pious to the verge, Ninon considered, of bigotry. She even cherished a secret hope that Ninon might some day feel moved to embrace the religious life; meanwhile, she kept a very good eye on her daughter. Necessity, however, is the mother of invention, and since the satisfaction of desire is the first of necessities to one in love, Ninon and Coligny were at no loss to devise schemes for outwitting Mme. de Lenclos' severe vigilance. Ninon, for instance, went very often to pass a night or two with a girl friend who lived at Saint Cloud: she was staying at Saint Cloud to-night, and when she returned home to-morrow she would have a whole fund of stories about Marie and her sisters, Anne and Barbe, to divert her mother with at dinner. She was always very tired and sleepy when she got back from St. Cloud, and Mme. de Lenclos would explain to her friends that the air in that neighbourhood was too nimble, too pure and keen and bracing; so much so that it kept the animal spirits in a state of perpetual activity, not suffering them to stagnate and repose in their canals; so that, paradoxical as it might sound, the sluggish, impure atmosphere of the city was in a sense healthier than the country air, because its very sluggishness was a curb upon the spirits and therefore conducive to sleep—a fact which was empirically proved by her daughter Ninon, who always slept heartily when at home in Paris, while, at Saint Cloud, she never closed an eyelid.

"My love, my life . . ." Ninon murmured between two kisses.

"You are my soul," said Coligny; "for life comes to an end, but the soul is immortal, even as my love for you."

The prettiness of the phrase pleased them both, for they belonged to a courtly society which delighted in giving and

receiving compliments; the manifest artificiality of M. de Coligny's wit in no way cooled the ardour of their emotions and their senses, but served rather to quicken and refine and beat up the flames.

"My soul, then," whispered Ninon; "but be careful I don't damn you." And she put her arms round his neck and crushed him close and closer against her.

"What's this?" asked Coligny, whose caressing fingers had come upon a little metal disk which hung by a thread round Ninon's neck and lay low down between her breasts. "What's this?" He lifted it out into the light and began to scrutinise it closely.

"Let it be, my love," said Ninon. "It is a medal of the Blessed Virgin that was sent me to-day from Rome, where it was blessed by the Holy Father himself."

Coligny laughed contemptuously. "Take it off," he said. "There shall be nothing between us when we love, not even so much as this counterfeit silver crown. As our souls escape from our bodies to join together, so our bodies must escape from their clothes—yes, down to the last thread and medal. Besides, it is all a vain superstition."

He made as though to snap the thread by which the medal hung, but Ninon put up her hand and checked him. "No, no. I have promised to wear it always. I forbid you to take it off; I shall never forgive you if you do."

Her tone was so serious that Coligny let the medal fall again and kissed it where it lay on her breast.

"It's the first time," he said with a laugh, "that I've ever kissed such a bit of trumpery, and if it were in any other place in the world but where it now is, I wouldn't touch it. But your bosom has blessed it as a legion of popes couldn't do."

Ninon lay a little while in pensive silence. "You know," she said at last, "you know, Coligny, I am often very much troubled in mind at the thought that you are a heretic. It is terrible to think that people should endanger their souls when it is such an easy thing to believe what is true and be saved."

Coligny laughed rather bitterly. "You may have heard, my Ninon, of one Gaspard de Coligny, who was my grandfather's brother and Admiral of France, and who on a certain twenty-fourth of August, on the eve of St. Bartholomew's Day . . ."

"Hush, hush," said Ninon, putting her hand across his mouth. "I know; but it is all over now. It is not the past we have to think about, but the present, and," she added significantly, "the future. Why won't you think as other people do, my beloved? It is madness to be a heretic when one might belong to the true Church."

The one flaw in Coligny's perfect good manners was his deplorable habit of arguing about religion. All unwittingly Ninon had called up this combative devil from its lurking-place in a corner of his mind.

"My dear child," began Coligny, in a sententious and didactic tone, which was peculiarly irritating, "I do not believe in what you are pleased to call the true Church, because I consider it to be false. The pretensions made by the Bishop of Rome are based upon the so-called Donation of Constantine," and he went on to explain at considerable length how and why the Pope was a pretender. Ninon could only stop him with a kiss.

"Darling," she said, "all this happened very long ago, and I know nothing and believe less than nothing of it. You do not explain to me why it was necessary for such demons as Luther and Calvin to crucify the Mother Church, and tear the world in pieces over a few foolish words."

"They wished to reform the crying abuses within the Church, and to bring back religion into its primitive purity. The lives of the Popes were an open scandal."

"So was Luther's," retorted Ninon. "Why, he ravished a nun, disgusting beast!"

Coligny did not heed the interruption. "The religious houses," he continued, "were full of abominable corruptions. They pillaged the people and then quarrelled over the spoils. The one thing on which monks and nuns ever agreed was disregarding their vows of chastity."

"Poor people!" said Ninon, commiseratingly. "But can you blame them if they erred occasionally?"

Coligny looked at her a moment, and the cloud of seriousness cleared from his face, and he laughed. "No, I honestly can't blame them," he said, "if they ever saw any one as beautiful as you."

"Well, then," cried Ninon, triumphantly, "I can't see why you should remain a heretic. Consider, my darling, the company you're in. There are some Frenchmen of your belief, to be sure, but most of them burgess, dowdy people. How can you associate with them? or with these square-toed Geneva republicans? or nasty, gross, drunken Germans? or ill-mannered Englishmen? I really can't imagine. You can't deny that all the best people do belong to the true Church."

"But what would become of my conscience if I deserted my faith?" inquired Coligny.

"Conscience? I don't know what you mean. You will just go and acknowledge your errors and confess your sins, and they will make it quite all right for you."

"Ah, yes," said Coligny, scornfully; his controversial spirit was roused again. "I know their Jesuit morality. It can condone anything if there's any profit to be got from doing so. It can swallow a camel . . ."

"Swallow a camel . . .?" echoed Ninon, in perplexity.

"Yes, swallow a camel. It's a phrase out of the Bible."

Ninon nodded comprehendingly. "Oh, I see; I've never read it."

"They can swallow more than a camel," cried Coligny, waving a bare muscular arm above the bed-clothes; they can swallow elephants, leviathans, and mountains with their pernicious doctrine of Probable Opinions and all their devilish casuistical arts. My conscience is tender and nice, but it would soon grow robust enough if I put it into the hands of Escobar and his crew. No, Ninon, my conscience forbids me absolutely to desert the faith in which I was brought up for a faith which has persecuted my ancestors, and which I regard as false to the core."

Ninon drew close and rubbed herself like a kitten against his side. " Wouldn't you give up being a heretic even for my sake ?"

Coligny took her in his arms and began kissing her urgently, violently. " You ask me what is impossible, Ninon. I can't, even for you."

" Heretics never will listen to reason," said Ninon, making a profound generalisation. " Ah, my beloved . . ."

There was a long silence. From her position in the canopy of the bed the Flemish Leda regarded the lovers with equanimity, unmoved as ever. The tiny flame of the lamp burned motionlessly. Time passed, but Ninon and Coligny were beyond time in the dusk of one another's hair.

They were lying quietly and happily side by side when Ninon spoke again. Her thoughts had evidently strayed back to the old subject. " My beloved," she said, " suppose I were to have a baby—I say 'suppose,' for I hope I shan't—but suppose I were to ; would it be a Protestant baby or a Catholic baby ?"

" That," said Coligny, who had been perhaps a little too well educated for a nobleman's son, " raises the whole question of generation. If you have read philosophy . . ."

" But I haven't," said Ninon.

" . . . you will remember," Coligny continued, " that God's two most important instruments in creation are Form and Matter. Matter without form is shapeless and gross ; it is chaos, in fact. Form without matter is angelic and altogether too spiritual to be perceived by creatures of our stamp who are a mixture of both. Now, just as the Holy Ghost brooded upon the waters of chaos and informed them so that out of them emerged a world of beauty, shape, and life, appearing where before had been a mere lumpish stagnation ; so in the creation of the Little World—for you must know that man is a Microcosm exactly corresponding in little to the universe—in the creation of the Little World, the male seed plays the part of form and the woman's womb of matter. Woman supplies the material for

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EDWARD WADSWORTH

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creation, the microcosmic chaos, if you take me; man provides the informing spirit which gives it life and shape. The soul is transmitted, therefore, by the man; and so, since religion is essentially and fundamentally a quality and attribute of the soul, any child of ours would belong to the Reformed Religion."

"Poor baby!" said Ninon. "But I should have him baptized into the true Church at once. My darling, I love you so much, almost too much to be true. Lay your head close to mine, and I will sing you a little lullaby, and we will go to sleep, for I am so tired. There, my baby, shut your eyes and go to sleep." She smoothed the hair back from his forehead and kissed his eyelids close. Then she sang softly and clearly, in a voice of flawless purity, this little song that they used to sing when the poets of the Pléiade were the arbiters of taste at court:

> "'Après la feuille la fleur;
> Après l'épine la rose;
> L'heure après le malheur.
> Le jour on est en labeur,
> Mais la nuit on se repose.'"

"'La nuit on se repose,'" repeated Ninon, with a little laugh. "Entends-tu, mon ami?" and a moment later she was fast asleep.