

# **Rameau's Nephew**

Diderot



# Table of Contents

<u>Rameau's Nephew</u> .....	1
<u>Diderot</u> .....	2

# Rameau's Nephew

**Diderot**

This page copyright © 2003 Blackmask Online.  
<http://www.blackmask.com>

[This translation, which has been prepared by Ian C. Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, is in the public domain, and may be used, in whole or in part, by anyone, without permission and without charge, provided the source is acknowledged. Released October 2002. For comments and suggestions for improvements, please contact Ian Johnston]

---

Vertumnis, quotquot sunt, natus iniquis

*(Horat., Lib. II, Satyr. VII)*

*[Born under every changeful star]*

No matter what the weather, rain or shine, it's my habit every evening at about five o'clock to take a walk around the Palais Royal. I'm the one you see dreaming on the bench in Argenson's Alley, always alone. I talk to myself about politics, love, taste, or philosophy. I let my spirit roam at will, allowing it to follow the first idea, wise or foolish, which presents itself, just as we see our dissolute young men on Foy's Walk following in the footsteps of a prostitute with a smiling face, an inviting air, and a turned-up nose, then leaving her for another, going after all of them and sticking to none. For me, my thoughts are my prostitutes.

If the weather is too cold or too rainy, I take refuge in the Regency Café. I like to watch the games of chess. The best chess players in the world are in Paris, and the best players in Paris are in the Regency Café. Here, in Rey's establishment, they battle it out—Legal the Profound, Philidor the Subtle, Mayot the Solid. One sees the most surprising moves and hears the stupidest remarks. For one can be an intelligent man and a great chess player, like Legal, but one can also be a great chess player and a fool, like Foubert and Mayot.

One day I was there after dinner, looking on a great deal but not saying much, listening as little as possible, when I was accosted by one of the most bizarre people in this country (and God has made sure we don't lack such types). He is a mixture of loftiness and depravity, of good sense and buffoonery. The notions of honesty and dishonesty must be really badly confused in his head, for he shows without ostentation that nature has given him fine qualities, and has no shame in revealing that he has also received some bad ones. Beyond that, he's endowed with a strong constitution, a remarkably warm imagination, and an extraordinary lung power. If you ever meet him and his originality does not hold your attention, you'll either put your fingers in your ears or run off. God, what terrible lungs!

Nothing is more unlike him than himself. Sometimes he is thin and haggard, like an invalid in the final stages of consumption. You can count his teeth through his cheeks. You'd say he'd spent several days without a meal or had just left a Trappist monastery. The next month, he's sleek and plump, as if he'd been eating steadily at a banker's table or had been shut up inside a Bernadine convent. Today, in dirty linen and torn trousers, dressed in rags, almost barefoot, he slinks along with his head down. One is tempted to call to him to give him a hand out. Tomorrow, he marches along with his head high, powdered, his hair curled, well dressed, with fine shoes. He shows himself off, and you'd almost take him for a gentleman. He lives from day to day, sad or happy, according to circumstances. His first concern in the morning, when he gets up, is to know where he'll have lunch. After lunch, he thinks about where he'll go for supper.

Night time also brings uncertainties. Should he return on foot to the little garret where he lives, assuming that the caretaker, in her irritation at not getting the rent, has not asked him to return his key, or should he settle for a working-class tavern to wait for daylight over a slice of bread and a mug of beer? When he hasn't got even six pennies in his pocket, which happens sometimes, he resorts to one of his friends who drives a cab or the

## Rameau's Nephew

coachman of a noble lord who gives him a pallet in the straw beside the horses. In the morning there are still bits of his mattress in his hair. If the season is mild, he paces all night along the Cours or the Champs Élysées. He reappears in town with the dawn, dressed up for today in yesterday's clothes, and dressed up today perhaps for the rest of the week.

I don't think much of these eccentrics. Some people turn them into familiar acquaintances, even friends. Once a year they interest me, when I meet them, because their character stands in contrast to others and they break that fastidious uniformity which our education, our social conventions, and our habitual proprieties have introduced. If one of them appears in company, he's a grain of yeast which ferments and gives back to everyone some part of his natural individuality. He shakes things up. He agitates us. He makes us praise or blame. He makes the truth come out, revealing who has value. He unmasks the scoundrels. So that's the time a man with sense pays attention and sorts his world out.

The man I've described I knew from some time back. He used to hang about a house where his talent had opened doors for him. There was an only daughter. He swore to the father and mother that he would marry their daughter. They shrugged their shoulders and laughed in his face, telling him he was mad. I saw it happen. He used to ask me for money, which I gave him. He got himself introduced, I don't know how, into some good homes, where he had a place for dinner, but on condition he didn't speak without first getting permission. He kept silent and ate in anger. It was really good to see him under this constraint. If he was seized by a desire to break this agreement and opened his mouth, with his first word all the guests would cry out "O Rameau!" Then his fury would burn in his eyes, and he'd go back to his meal even more enraged.

You were curious to know this man's name, and now you do. He is the nephew of that famous musician who delivered us from the plain song of Lully, which we've been chanting for more than a century, and who wrote so much unintelligible visionary stuff and apocalyptic truths about the theory of music, none of which ever made sense either to him or anyone else. He left us a certain number of operas where there is some harmony, scraps of song, some disconnected ideas, noise, flights, triumphal marches, lances, glories, murmurs, victories that leave one breathless, and dance tunes which will last forever. He buried the Florentine but will now be buried by Italian virtuosi, a fact which he saw coming and which made him gloomy, sad, and surly. For no one, not even a pretty woman who wakes up with a pimple on her nose, is as moody as an author who threatens to outlive his reputation—just look at Marivaux and the younger Crebillon.

He greets me. "Ah, ha, so there you are, Mister Philosopher. What are you doing here in this pile of idlers? Are you also wasting time pushing wood around?" That's how people speak contemptuously of chess or checkers.

**ME:** No. But when I don't have anything better to do, I amuse myself for a bit by watching those who push well.

**HIM:** In that case you don't get to enjoy yourself often. Except for Legal and Philidor, the others have no idea about the game.

**ME:** What about Mr. de Bissy?

**HIM:** That man plays chess the way Miss Clairon acts. They both know everything about their respective games that one can learn.

**ME:** You're harsh. I see you honour only men of genius.

**HIM:** Yes. In chess, in checkers, poetry, oratory, music and other similar nonsense. What good is mediocrity in things like that?

**ME:** Not much, I agree. But large numbers of men must work at them before the man of genius appears, one man in a multitude. But let's drop that subject. It's been an eternity since I last saw you. I hardly think of you when I don't see you. But I'm always pleased to see you again. What have you been doing?

**HIM:** What you, I, and all the other do—some good, some bad—and nothing. Then when I was hungry, I ate when I had a chance. After eating, I was thirsty and I drank sometimes. However, I grew a beard, and when that came, I shaved it off.

**ME:** You shouldn't have done that. It's the one thing you need to be a wise man.

**HIM:** That's right. I have a lofty wrinkled forehead, a burning eye, a jutting nose, large cheeks, black bushy eyebrows, a clean-cut mouth, curving lips, a square face. If this vast chin was covered with a long beard, can you imagine how splendid that would look in bronze or marble?

**ME:** Up there beside Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, and Socrates.

## Rameau's Nephew

**HIM:** No. I'd go better between Diogenes the philosopher and Phryne the prostitute. Like one of them I'm impudent, and I happily hang around the houses of the other.

**ME:** Is your health still good?

**HIM:** Yes, normally it is. But it's not so marvelous today.

**ME:** Why's that? There you are with a belly like Silenus and a face . . .

**HIM:** A face one might mistake for what's behind the belly. That's because the humour which is making my uncle waste away is apparently making his dear nephew fat.

**ME:** What about your uncle—do you ever see him?

**HIM:** Yes—he walks past me in the street.

**ME:** Hasn't he done anything for you?

**HIM:** If he's done anything for anyone, he's done it without being aware of what he's doing. The man's a philosopher in his own way. He thinks only of himself. To him the rest of the universe isn't worth a damn. His daughter and his wife might as well die whenever they want. So long as the parish bells which toll for them continue to resonate at the twelfth and seventeenth intervals, all will be fine. That's a good thing for him. And that's what I especially value in people of genius. They are good at only one thing. Other than that, nothing. They've no idea what it is to be citizens, fathers, mothers, brothers, parents, friends. Just between us, we should try to be like them in every way, but without wanting their breed to become something common. We must have men, but men of genius, no. No, my goodness, we don't need them. They're the ones who change the face of the earth. And in the smallest things stupidity is so common and so powerful that no one can reform it without making a great fuss. That sets up, at least in part, what men of vision see. And part remains just as it was. Thus, we have two gospels, the costume of Harlequin. The wisdom of the monk Rabelais is true wisdom, for his own peace of mind and that of others—do one's duty, somehow or other, always speak well of your master the prior, and leave the world to its fantasies. That works well, because the majority is happy with it. If I understood history, I'd show you that evil has always come here below from some man of genius. But I don't know history, because I don't know anything. The devil take me if I've ever learned a thing and if I'm any the worse off for having learned nothing. One day I was at the table of one of the King's ministers who had brains enough for four men. Well, he demonstrated to us, as clearly as one and one adds up to two, that nothing is more useful to nations than lies, nothing more harmful than the truth. I don't recall his proofs very well, but it evidently follows that people of genius are detestable and that if a child at birth bears on its forehead the characteristics of this dangerous natural gift, one should either smother the child or throw it to the dogs.

**ME:** But people like that, so hostile to genius, all pretend to have some.

**HIM:** I'm sure they think that about themselves deep inside, but I don't think they dare admit the fact.

**ME:** That's just their modesty. So from that point on you've developed a terrible hatred against genius.

**HIM:** Something I'll never put behind me.

**ME:** But I've seen the time when you were desperate to be anything but an ordinary person. You'll never be happy if the arguments for and against affect you equally. You have to pick a side and stick to it. I quite agree with you that men of genius are usually odd or, as the proverb states, that there are no great minds without a grain of folly. One can't deny the fact. But we despise the ages which have not produced men of genius, and men will honour those nations among whom genius has lived. Sooner or later, we raise statutes to them and consider them benefactors of the human race. I don't mean to disparage the sublime minister you mentioned to me, but I think that if a lie can be useful momentarily, it is necessarily harmful in the long run, and by contrast, the truth is useful over time, even though it could be harmful at a particular moment. From that I'm tempted to conclude that the man of genius who speaks out against a common error or who establishes a great truth is always a being worthy of our veneration. It could happen that such a being is the victim of prejudice and the law, but there are two kinds of laws, those which are based on equity, which are universally true, and others which are peculiar and derive their authority only from blindness or from the needs of certain circumstances. This second type confers upon the man who breaks them merely a passing ignominy, a shame which time turns back on the judges and countries who condemned him. The shame stays with them for ever. Think of Socrates and the magistrate who made him drink the hemlock—which of those two is the dishonourable man today?

**HIM:** That's a great help to Socrates! Does that make him any less condemned, any less put to death? Was he any less a rebellious citizen? With his contempt for a bad law, didn't he encourage fools to disregard good laws?

## Rameau's Nephew

Was he any less an audacious and odd individual? Just now you were not so far from expressing how little you liked men of genius.

**ME:** My dear fellow, listen to me. A society should never have bad laws. And if it had only good ones, it would never be in a position to persecute a man of genius. I didn't say that genius was inseparably attached to malice or malice to genius. A fool is more often an evil person than a man of intelligence is. And if a man of genius were characteristically hard to get along with, difficult, prickly, and unbearable, even if he were bad, what would you conclude from that?

**HIM:** He should be drowned.

**ME:** Gently, my dear fellow. Now, tell me—I won't take your uncle as an example. He's a hard man, brutal, inhuman, and miserly. He's a bad father, a bad husband, a bad uncle. And it's by no means clear that he's a man of genius who has pushed his art a long way, so that in ten years we'll be discussing his works. But what about Racine? He certainly had genius, and he didn't have much of a reputation as a good man. What about Voltaire?

**HIM:** Don't press me on this question. I can give you an argument.

**ME:** Which of these two options would you prefer—that Racine had been a good man, known for his business, like Briasson, or for his yardstick, like Barbier, getting his wife regularly pregnant every year with legitimate children, a good husband, a good father, a good uncle, a good neighbour, an honest merchant, but nothing more—or that he had been deceitful, treacherous, ambitious, envious, and nasty, but the author of *Andromache*, *Britannicus*, *Iphigeneia*, *Phedre*, and *Athalie*?

**HIM:** For him I imagine it would perhaps have been better if he'd been the first of the two.

**ME:** What you've just said is infinitely truer than you think.

**HIM:** There you go, you others! If we say something good, it's as if we're mad or inspired—just a fluke. It's only you others who really understand what you're saying. Yes, Mister Philosopher, I understand what I'm saying, and I understand that just as much as you understand what you're saying.

**ME:** All right, let's see. Why would that have been better for Racine?

**HIM:** The point is that all these beautiful things he created didn't bring him twenty thousand francs. If he'd been a good silk merchant on Saint Denis or Saint Honore street, a fine wholesale grocer, or a well-connected apothecary, he'd have amassed an immense fortune, and, in the process of getting it, he could've enjoyed no end of pleasures. From time to time he could've given a few coins to a poor foolish devil like myself, who'd have made him laugh and occasionally procured for him a young woman to relieve the boredom of his eternal co-habitation with his wife. We'd have had some excellent meals at his home, played for high stakes, drunk some fine wines, fine liqueurs, fine coffees, and gone for picnics in the country. You see I know what I'm talking about. You laugh. But let me continue. That would've been better for those around him.

**ME:** No disagreement there, provided he didn't use the money he got from legitimate business for dishonest purposes and kept far away from his home all gamblers, hangers on, all those self-satisfied tasteless people, all those layabouts, all those useless perverts, and made his shop assistants beat senseless the officious gentlemen who in various ways relieve husbands of the disgust they feel at a never-ending life with their wives.

**HIM:** Beat senseless, my dear chap, beat up! We don't beat anyone senseless in a well-policed town. Pimping is a respectable profession. Many people, even those with titles, are mixed up in it. And what in the devil do you want us to use our money for, if not for a good table, good company, good wines, fine women, pleasures of all sorts, amusement of all kinds. I'd have no desire to possess a large fortune without these enjoyments. But let's get back to Racine. The man was good only for those he didn't know and for a time when he was no longer alive.

**ME:** I agree. But weigh the good and bad. A thousand years from now, he'll still make people cry and win men's admiration. In all countries of the world he will inspire humanity, sympathy, tenderness. People will ask who he was, what country he came from, and they'll envy France. He made a few people suffer who are no longer alive and in whom we have hardly any interest. We have nothing to fear from his vices or faults. No doubt it would've been better if nature had given him the virtues of a good man along with the talents of a great man. He's a tree which has caused some trees planted near him to wither up and has suffocated the plants growing at his feet. But he carried his top right up into the sky—his branches stretched a long way. He provided shade to those who came, who come, and who will come to rest alongside his majestic trunk. He produced fruits with an exquisite taste which replenish themselves continuously. We could also wish that Voltaire had had the sweetness of Duclos, the ingenuousness of Abbé Trublet, the honesty of Abbé d'Olivet. But since that's impossible, let's look at the



## Rameau's Nephew

really interesting side of this issue. Let's forget for the moment the point which we occupy in space and time and extend our vision into the centuries to come, into the most distant regions, into nations yet to be born. Let's think of the well being of our species. If we are not generous enough, let's at least forgive nature for having been wiser than we are. If you throw cold water on Greuze's head, perhaps you will extinguish his talent along with his vanity. If you make Voltaire less sensitive to criticism, he will not know how to descend into the soul of Merope. He will no longer move you.

**HIM:** But if nature was as powerful as she was wise, why didn't she make those men good in the same way she made them great?

**ME:** But don't you see that with that sort of reasoning you confound the general order. If everything here below were excellent, then nothing would be excellent.

**HIM:** You're right. The important point is that you and I exist and that we exist as you and I. Let everything beyond that go ahead however it can. The best order of things, in my view, is one in which I had to exist. Who cares about the most perfect of worlds, if I'm not on it? I prefer to exist, even as an impertinent quibbler, than not to exist at all.

**ME:** There's no one who doesn't think just as you do and who doesn't put existing order on trial, without noticing he's renouncing his own existence.

**HIM:** That's true.

**ME:** So let's accept things as they are. Let's see what they cost us and what they bring us, leaving aside everything we don't know well enough to assign praise or blame—what's perhaps neither good nor bad, but what's necessary, as many respectable people think.

**HIM:** I don't understand much about that spiel you've just given me. It seems like philosophy, and I warn you I'll not get mixed up in that. All I know is that I'd be quite happy to be someone else, on the off-chance I'd be a genius, a great man. Yes, I have to admit it. There's something there which speaks to me. I've never heard a single genius praised without such tributes to him making me secretly enraged. I get envious. When I learn about some detail of their private lives which demeans them, I listen with pleasure. That brings us closer together, and I bear my mediocrity more easily. I say to myself, "It's true you never could have created *Mahomet*, but you'd never have praised Maupeou." So I've been mediocre, and I'm angry with my mediocrity. Yes, yes, I am mediocre and angry. I've never heard the overture to *Les Indes Galantes* or heard anyone sing *Profonds Abîmes du Ténair, Nuit, Éternelle Nuit*, without feeling pain and saying to myself, "There's something you'd never create." Hence I was jealous of my uncle, and if at his death there'd been some fine compositions for the keyboard in his portfolio, I wouldn't have hesitated to remain myself and to be him as well.

**ME:** If that's the only thing bothering you, it's not worth the trouble.

**HIM:** It's nothing—they're just passing moments.

Then he started to sing the overture to *Indes Galantes* and the song *Profonds Abîmes*, adding, "That something or other inside me which talks to me says, 'Rameau, you'd love to have composed those two pieces. If you'd done these two, you'd probably have done two others. And when you'd composed a certain number, people would play and sing you all over the place. When you walked along, you'd hold your head high. Your own awareness would confirm your own merit for you. Others would point you out. They'd say 'There's the man who wrote those lovely gavottes.'" "

He sang the gavottes, and then, looking like a man deeply moved, swimming in joy, his eyes damp, he added, rubbing his hands together, "You'd have a fine house"—he measured its extent with his arms—"a fine bed"—he pretended to stretch himself out on it nonchalantly—"good wines"—which he tasted by smacking his tongue against his palate—"a fine horse and carriage"—he raised his foot as if to climb in—"beautiful women"—he embraced their breasts and gazed at them voluptuously—"A hundred hangers-on would come to sing my praises every day"—he imagined he saw them all around him—Palissot, Poincinet, the two Frérons, father and son, La Porte—he listened to them, he puffed himself up, agreed with what they said, smiled at them, ignored them, scorned them, sent them off, called them back. Then he continued "That's the way people would tell you every morning that you're a great man. You'd read in the history of *Trois Siècles* that you were a great man. You'd be convinced in the evening that you were great man, and that great man, Rameau the nephew, would fall asleep to the soft murmur of praise which echoed in his ears. Even while he was sleeping, he would have a satisfied air—his chest would expand, rise, and fall with assurance, and he'd snore like a great man." As he was saying this,

## Rameau's Nephew

he moved over and lay gently on a bench. He closed his eyes and imitated the happy sleep he'd just imagined. After having enjoyed this relaxed repose for a few moments, he woke up, stretched his arms, yawned, rubbed his eyes, and looked around him for any dull admirers still there.

**ME:** So you think that a happy man sleeps like that?

**HIM:** Do I think so! I'm a poor wretch, and when I go back to my garret in the evening and tuck myself in on my pallet, I'm shriveled up under my coverlet—my chest is tight and my breathing short, like a weak moan that's hardly audible; whereas, a financier makes his apartment reverberate and amazes his entire street. But what bothers me today is not that I sleep and snore meanly like someone destitute.

**ME:** But that's sad.

**HIM:** What's happened to me is much worse.

**ME:** So what is it?

**HIM:** You've always taken some interest in me because I'm a good little devil whom deep down you despise—but I amuse you.

**ME:** That's true.

**HIM:** And I'm going to tell you.

Before beginning, he sighs deeply and puts both hands on his forehead. Then he recovers his calm appearance and says to me: “You know that I'm ignorant—a silly man, a fool—impertinent, lazy, what we Burgundians call an incorrigible crook, a swindler, a thief . . .”

**ME:** What a panegyric!

**HIM:** It's true, all of it. I don't take back a word of it. Let's please not argue about it. No one knows me better than I do, and I'm not saying everything.

**ME:** I don't want to upset you, so I'll accept everything you say.

**HIM:** All right. I used to live with people who liked me precisely because I was endowed with all those qualities to an unusual extent.

**ME:** That's odd. Up to the present I believed that people hid them from themselves or forgave them in themselves and condemned them in other people.

**HIM:** Hide them from oneself—is that possible? Rest assured that when Palissot is alone and reflects on himself, he tells himself something different. You can be sure that in a tête-à-tête with his colleague, they frankly confess that they are nothing but two outstanding rogues. Despise such defects in others! My people were fairer than that—their character made me a marvelous success in their company. I was in clover. They fêted me. They were sorry every moment I was away from them. I was their little Rameau, their beautiful Rameau, their Rameau the foolish, the impertinent, the ignorant, the lazy, the greedy, the clown, the great beast. There wasn't one of these familiar labels which didn't earn me a smile, a caress, a pat on the shoulder, a slap, a kick, at table a fine morsel tossed onto my plate for me, away from the table a liberty which I tolerated as of no consequence, for I myself was of no consequence. People make of me, with me, and in front of me anything they want, without my taking exception. And all the small presents which showered down on me? I'm such a stupid dog I lost them all! I lost everything because once—the only time in my life—I had common sense. May that never happen to me again!

**ME:** What was it about?

**HIM:** It was an incomparable stupidity—incredible, unpardonable.

**ME:** What stupidity?

**HIM:** Rameau, Rameau, people didn't accept you for your common sense! The idiocy of having had a little taste, a little intelligence, a little reason. Rameau, my friend, this will teach you to remain the man God made you, the man your patrons wanted you to be. So they grabbed you by the scruff of the neck, marched you to the door, and said: “Imposter, get out. And don't come back. I believe it wants to have some sense, some reason! Beat it. We have these qualities to spare.” You went off biting your nails. You should've bitten off your damned tongue long before that. Because you didn't think about it, here you are on the pavement, the ground, with no idea where to go next. You'd been eating high on the hog, and now you'll return to slops; you'd been well lodged, and now you'll be very lucky if they let you have your garret back; you had a nice place to sleep, and now the straw is waiting for you between Mr. de Soubise's coachman and your friend Robbé. Instead of a soft and peaceful sleep, as you used to have, you'll be listening with one ear to the neighing and stomping of horses and with the other to a

## Rameau's Nephew

sound a thousand times more unbearable—dry, hard, and barbarous verse. Miserable, stupid fool, possessed by a million devils!

**ME:** But isn't there some way to go back? Is the fault you committed unforgivable? In your place, I'd go to find my people again. You're more necessary to them than you think.

**HIM:** Oh, I'm certain that right now, when they don't have me around to make them laugh, they're bored to death.

**ME:** Then I'd go get them back. I wouldn't leave them the time to learn to do without me, to turn to some decent amusement. Who knows what could happen?

**HIM:** That's not what I'm afraid of. That won't happen.

**ME:** No matter how wonderful you are, another could replace you.

**HIM:** That would be difficult.

**ME:** I agree. However, I'd go back with this dejected face, these wild eyes, this disheveled collar, tousled hair—in the truly tragic state you're in right now. I'd throw myself at the feet of that goddess, stick my face against the earth, and, without getting up, I'd say to her in a low and sobbing voice, “Pardon, madame! Forgive me! I'm unworthy, despicable. That was an unfortunate moment, for you know I'm not subject to having common sense, and I promise you I'll never have it again in my life.”

What was amusing was that while I was having this conversation with him, he carried out the pantomime. He threw himself down, stuck his face against the ground, and seemed to hold between his two hands the toe of a slipper. He was crying and sobbing the words, “Yes, my little queen. Yes, I do promise. I'll never have it in my life, never.” Then he got up quickly and added in a serious and deliberate tone:

**HIM:** Yes, you're right. I think that would be best. She's a good woman. Mr. Viellard says that she is so kind. And I know a little bit that she is. Nonetheless, to go humiliate oneself in front of an ugly bitch! To cry for pity at the feet of a miserable little actress who's always followed by the hissing from the theatre stalls! Me, Rameau, son of Mr. Rameau, apothecary of Dijon, a man of means, who's never bent his knee to anyone at all! Me, Rameau, nephew of the man who calls himself the Great Rameau, the man people see walking upright on the Palais Royal with his arms waving in the air, ever since Mr. Carmontelle made that drawing of him bent over with his hand under the tails of his coat. I, who have composed pieces for the keyboard which no one plays but which may well be the only ones which our posterity finds agreeable enough to play. I, well, I . . . I would go . . . but look here, sir, it's impossible.

Then, putting his right hand to his chest, he added, “I feel something there rising up—it says to me, 'Rameau, you'll do none of that.' There must be a certain dignity attached to human nature which nothing can extinguish. The most trivial thing will awaken it—something trifling. There are other days when it would cost me nothing to be as vile as anyone could wish. On those days for a penny I'd kiss the ass of the little Hus girl.”

**ME:** But, my friend, she's white, pretty, young, soft, chubby—it's an act of humility that even a man more refined than you could sometimes stoop to.

**HIM:** Let's understand each other—there's literal ass kissing and metaphorical ass kissing. Ask fat Bergier who kisses the ass of Madame de La Mark both literally and figuratively—my God, with them the literal and figurative disgust me equally.

**ME:** If the course of action I'm suggesting doesn't suit you, then have the courage to be a beggar.

**HIM:** It's hard to be poor, as long as there are so many wealthy idiots one can rely upon for one's living. And then contempt for oneself, that's unbearable.

**ME:** Do you know that feeling?

**HIM:** Do I know it? How many times have I said to myself, “How come there are ten thousand fine tables in Paris, each with fifteen or twenty places, and there's no place for you! There are purses full of gold spilling over left and right, and no piece falls on you! A thousand fine half wits without talent or merit, a thousand tiny creatures without charm, a thousand insipid schemers are well dressed, and you'd walk around naked? In this business how could you be so stupid? Couldn't you lie, swear, forswear, promise, and then perform or fail to perform, like everyone else? Couldn't you crawl on hands and knees like the others? Couldn't you promote a lady's affair and carry a love letter from a gentleman, like any other man? Couldn't you encourage this young man to speak to this young lady and persuade her to listen to him, like other men? Couldn't you tell the daughter of one of our bourgeois that she is badly dressed, that some fine earrings, a little rouge, lace, and a Polish-style dress

## Rameau's Nephew

would make her look ravishing, that those little feet of hers were not made to walk along the road, that there's a fine gentleman, young and rich, who has a coat trimmed in gold, a superb horse and carriage, and six huge footmen, who saw her passing by and who finds her charming and who, since that day, has lost his desire for food and drink, doesn't sleep, and will die for her. 'But what about my father?' 'Yes, yes, your father! He will be a little angry at first.' 'And what about Mummy? She's told me so often to be an honest girl. She says there's nothing in the world but honour' 'An ancient saying which doesn't mean a thing.' 'And my father confessor?' 'You won't see him any more. Or if you continue the fairy tale of going to him to tell the story of your amusements, it will cost you some pounds of sugar and coffee.' 'But he's a strict man who has already refused me absolution for singing *Viens dans ma cellule*.' 'That's because you didn't have anything to give him, but when you appear before him in a lace dress . . .' 'Then I'll have a lace dress?' 'There's no doubt about it, all sorts of them, and diamond earrings.' 'So I'll have beautiful diamond earrings?' 'Yes.' 'Just like the ones belonging to that marquise who comes sometimes to buy gloves in our shop?' 'That's right. In a fine carriage with dappled gray horses, two large footmen, a small Negro, and a man running in front; you'll have rouge, beauty spots, a train carried behind you.' 'To a ball.' 'To a ball, to the opera, to the theatre.' Her heart is already quivering with joy. You play with a sheet of paper between your fingers. 'What's that?' 'It's nothing.' 'It seem to me to be . . .' 'It's a letter.' 'For whom?' 'For you, if you are at all curious.' 'Curious? I'm really curious. Let's see it.' She reads. 'A meeting. That's impossible.' 'Perhaps when you are going to mass.' 'Mamma always comes with me. But if he came here early in the morning. I get up first, and I'm at the counter before they get up.' He comes. He is pleasing. One fine day at dusk the girl disappears, and I get paid my two thousand écus. How come you possess such talent and are short of bread. You wretched man, aren't you ashamed?' I remember a group of scoundrels who couldn't hold a candle to me and who were loaded with money. I was in a buckram overcoat, and they were dressed in velvet, leaning on gold-headed canes shaped like ravens' beaks, with pictures of Aristotle or Plato on cameo rings on their fingers. But who were they? For the most part they were incompetent musicians—nowadays a sort of nobility. At the time it gave me courage, raised my spirits, made my mind more subtle, capable of everything. But these happy states of mind apparently didn't last, because up to now I haven't been able to make any headway. Whatever the case, those are the words of my frequent soliloquies, which you can paraphrase however you like, provided you conclude from them that I understand disgust for oneself or the torment of conscience which arises from the uselessness of the gifts given to us by heaven. It's the cruelest thing of all. It would almost be better for a man not to be born.

I listened to him. While he was acting out the scene of the procurer and the young girl being seduced, I was pulled in two opposite directions—I didn't know whether to give in to my desire to laugh or get carried away with anger. I was perplexed. Twenty time a fit of laughter prevented my anger from bursting out—twenty times the anger arising at the bottom of my heart ended in a burst of laughter. I was taken aback by so much cleverness and base behaviour, by such valid ideas alternating with false ones, by such a general perversity of feeling and such complete depravity and such rare frankness. He noticed the conflict going on inside me. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

**ME:** Nothing.

**HIM:** You seem upset.

**ME:** Well, I am.

**HIM:** What do you think I should do?

**ME:** Change the subject. You poor man, to be born or fall into such a debased condition.

**HIM:** I agree. However don't let my condition affect you too much. In revealing myself to you I didn't mean to cause you distress. From those people I've saved up something. Remember that I didn't need anything, absolutely nothing, and they gave me a considerable allowance for my trifling pleasures.

Then he began hitting his forehead again with one of his fists, biting his lip, rolling his wild eyes up to the ceiling, commenting, "But that business is over and done with. I've set something aside. Time has gone by. It's always that much more of a gain."

**ME:** You mean more of a loss.

**HIM:** No, no. More of a gain. We become richer every moment. It's one less day to go on living, or one écu more—it's all one. The important point is to keep emptying one's bowels easily, freely, pleasurably, copiously every night. *O stercus pretiosum!* That's the grand result of life in all conditions. In the last analysis, everyone is equally rich—Samuel Bernard, who by dint of robbery, pillaging, and bankruptcies leaves twenty-seven million

## Rameau's Nephew

in gold, or Rameau, who won't leave anything, Rameau, for whom charity will provide a floor cloth as a shroud to wrap him in. A dead man doesn't hear the bells tolling. It's a waste of time for one hundred priests to shout themselves hoarse on his behalf or for him to be preceded and followed by a long line of burning torches. His soul does not walk alongside the master of ceremonies. To rot under marble or to rot under the earth—it's still rotting. To have around your coffin choirboys in red and choirboys in blue or none at all—what does that matter? Take a good look at this wrist. It used to be stiff as the devil. These ten fingers were like so many sticks stuck into a wooden metacarpal. And these tendons were old cords of catgut—drier, stiffer, and more inflexible than those used to turn a lathe operator's wheel. But I've tormented, broken, and abused them so much. You don't want to move, but, by God, I say that you will and that's that!

As he said this, with his right hand he grabbed the fingers and wrist of his left hand and bent them back and forth. The tips of his fingers were touching his arm. His joints were cracking. I was afraid he'd end up dislocating the bones.

**ME:** Be careful, I say to him. You're going to hurt yourself.

**HIM:** Don't worry. They can stand it. For ten years I've given them a hard time. Whatever they felt like, the little buggers had to get used to it and learn to strike the keys and fly over the strings. So right now they're working. Yes, they're working fine.

At that moment he takes on the pose of a violin player. He hums an allegro from Locatelli, and his right arm imitates the movement of the bow, while his left hand and his fingers seem to move along the length of the neck. If he hits a wrong note, he stops, tightens or loosens the string and plucks the string with his nail, to make sure that it's just right. He resumes playing the piece where he has stopped. He keeps time with his feet, and thrashes about with his head, feet, hands, arms, and body.

Perhaps at some concert of spiritual music you've had occasion to see Ferrari or Chiabran or some other virtuoso in the same sort of convulsions, presenting a picture of the same torture. That gives me almost as much pain, for surely it's agonizing to watch the torment of someone who is busy giving me a representation of pleasure. If he simply has to show me a patient under torture, then draw a curtain between the man and me, something to conceal me. In the midst of his agitation and cries, if there was a moment when the note had to be held, one of those harmonious spots when the bow is drawn slowly across several strings at once, his face took on an ecstatic expression, his voice softened, and he listened in rapture. He was sure the harmony was resonating in his ears and mine. Then, placing his instrument under his left arm using the same hand he was holding it with and letting his right hand holding the bow fall, he said, "Well, what do you think of that?"

**ME:** Wonderful.

**HIM:** That was all right, I thought. That sounded almost like the others.

All at once he crouches down like a musician sitting down at a keyboard. I say to him, "Have mercy on yourself and me."

**HIM:** No, no. Since I've got your attention, you'll listen. I don't want anyone's approval unless they know why. You'll praise me with a more confident tone, and that might be worth another pupil to me.

**ME:** I don't go out very much, and you're going to exhaust yourself to no purpose.

**HIM:** I'm never tired.

Since I saw that my wish to pity the man was useless, for the violin sonata had left him bathed in sweat, I decided to let him do what he wanted. So there he was, seated at the keyboard, his legs bent, his head raised towards the ceiling where one would have said he was looking at a written musical score, singing, playing a prelude, working through a piece by Alberti or Galuppi, I don't know which of the two. His voice went like the wind, and his fingers flew across the keys, sometimes abandoning the upper part to play the bass, sometimes abandoning the accompaniment to return to the upper register. A series of emotions went in succession across his face. You could see there tenderness, anger, pleasure, sadness. You could feel the soft notes and the loud ones.

I'm sure that someone more astute than myself would have recognized the piece from the movement and style, from his expressions, and from some snatches of melody coming out of him now and then. But what was really strange was that from time to time he groped around and started again, as if he had made a mistake and was upset at himself for not having the piece at his finger tips. Finally he straightened up, wiped the beads of sweat running down his cheeks, and said, "You see that we also know how to play a tritone or an augmented fifth, and that we're familiar with transitions of dominants. Those enharmonic passages which my dear uncle has made such a fuss

## Rameau's Nephew

about, there's not all that much to it. We'll get a handle on it.”

**ME:** You've gone to a lot of trouble to show me that you've got great skill. But I'm a man who would've taken your word for it.

**HIM:** Great skill? Oh no! I know a few tricks of the trade, and that's more than one needs. After all, in this country does anyone have to understand what he teaches?

**ME:** No more than people have to understand what they learn.

**HIM:** That's well said, my God, very apt. There, Mister Philosopher, cross your heart and tell the truth. There was a time when you weren't as well off as you are today.

**HE:** I'm not all that well off even now.

**HIM:** But you'll no longer be going to the Luxembourg in summer. You remember . . .

**ME:** Drop that subject. Yes, I do remember.

**HIM:** In a gray plush frock coat.

**ME:** Yes, yes.

**HIM:** All worn out on one side, with frayed cuffs and black wool stockings stitched up the back with white thread.

**ME:** Yes, indeed. Everything just as you like.

**HIM:** What did you do then in the Alley of Sighs?

**ME:** I was a sorry enough sight.

**HIM:** When you left there, you used to scurry along the pavement.

**ME:** That's right.

**HIM:** You gave lessons in mathematics.

**ME:** Without understanding a word of it. Isn't that where you want to go?

**HIM:** Exactly.

**ME:** I learned by teaching others, and I produced some good students.

**HIM:** That may well be, but with music things aren't the same as in algebra or geometry. Now, these days you are a grand gentleman . . .

**ME:** Not so grand.

**HIM:** But you're well-to-do.

**ME:** Not really.

**HIM:** You provide tutors for your daughter.

**ME:** Not any more. It's her mother who's concerned about her education, and one has to have peace at home

**HIM:** Peace at home? My God, one only has that when one is the servant or the master. And it's essential to be the master. I had a wife. God rest her soul, but when she got the idea now and then to answer back, my hackles rose. I let go with my thunder and said, like God, “Let there be light.” And there was light. So over a four-year period, we didn't raise our voices in a row ten times. How old is your child?

**ME:** That's got nothing to do with it.

**HIM:** How old is your child?

**ME:** What the devil—leave my child and her age out of it, and let's get back to the teachers she'll have.

**HIM:** My goodness, I know nothing as stubborn as a philosopher. If one supplicates you very humbly, might one not be able to learn from Monsieur the Philosopher the approximate age of Mademoiselle his daughter?

**ME:** Let's assume she's eight years old.

**HIM:** Eight! She should have had her fingers on the keys four years ago.

**ME:** But perhaps I don't worry very much about putting into the plan for her education a study which is so time-consuming and which is so little use.

**HIM:** And what are you intending to teach her? Please tell me.

**ME:** To reason correctly, if I can. That's something uncommon among men and even rarer still among women.

**HIM:** Let her reason badly, as much as she likes, provided she's pretty, amusing, and flirtatious.

**ME:** Since in her case nature has been so ungrateful as to give her a delicate constitution with a sensible soul and to expose her to the same pains of life as if she had a strong constitution and a heart made of bronze, I'll teach her, if I can, to bear those pains bravely.

**HIM:** Oh, leave her to cry, suffer, and simper, with delicate nerves, like the others, provided she is pretty,

## Rameau's Nephew

amusing, and flirtatious. What, no dancing?

**ME:** No more than what's necessary for her to curtsy and have a decent carriage, to present herself well, and to know how to move.

**HIM:** No singing?

**ME:** No more than is necessary for her to enunciate well.

**HIM:** No music?

**ME:** If there was a good teacher of harmony, I would willingly entrust her to him for two hours a day for one or two years, no more.

**HIM:** And in the place of these essential things you are cutting out . . .

**ME:** I put grammar, literature, history, geography, a little drawing, and a great deal of moral instruction.

**HIM:** It would be so easy for me to prove to you the uselessness of all those subjects in a world like ours. Did I say uselessness—perhaps I should have said danger. But for the moment I'll confine myself to one question: Won't one or two teachers be necessary?

**ME:** Undoubtedly.

**HIM:** Ah, well there we are again! And these teachers—you hope they'll know something about the grammar, literature, history, geography, and morality which they're teaching her in her lessons? That's just a song and dance, my dear sir, a song and dance. If they grasped these matters well enough to teach them, they wouldn't be teaching them.

**ME:** Why not?

**HIM:** Because they would have spent their lives studying them. It's necessary to be profound in art or in science in order to grasp the basics well. Educational works can only be properly produced by those who have grown white in harness. It's the middle and the end which illuminate the shadows at the beginning. Ask your friend Mr. d'Alembert, the leading light in the mathematical sciences, if he would be too good to teach the basics. Only after twenty or thirty years of practice did my uncle glimpse the first faint light of musical theory.

**ME:** Oh you idiot, you total idiot! How is it that in your wretched head there are such reasonable ideas all mixed up higgledy piggledy with so many absurdities?

**HIM:** Who the devil knows? Chance throws them out to you, and they stay with you. Still, when we doesn't know everything, we don't know anything well. We don't know where something is going or where something else comes from, where this or that should fit, which should go first or whether it would be better to go second. Can anyone teach well without a method? And where is that method born? You see, my philosopher, I have this notion that physics will always be a poor science, a drop of water picked up by a needle from the vast ocean, a grain detached from the mountain range of the Alps. And the reasons for phenomena? In truth, it would be just as good to be ignorant about them as to understand them so little and so badly. That was exactly where I was when I made myself a teacher of accompaniment and composition. What are you dreaming about?

**ME:** I'm dreaming that everything you've just said is more specious than substantial. But let's leave that. Did you say you taught accompaniment and composition?

**HIM:** Yes.

**ME:** And you didn't understand them at all?

**HIM:** No, my goodness, not at all. And that's the reason there were worse teachers than me—those who believed they understood something. At least I didn't ruin the judgment or the hands of the children. When they left me for a good teacher, they'd learned nothing, and so at least they didn't have to unlearn anything. And that was always so much money and time saved.

**ME:** How did you manage that?

**HIM:** How they all do. I arrived. I threw myself into a chair. "What dreadful weather! How tiring the pavement is!" I chattered about some news: "Miss Lemierre was to have taken on the role of a vestal virgin in the new opera. But she is pregnant for the second time. They don't know who will take her place. Miss Arnould has just left her count. People say she is negotiating with Bertin. The little count, however, has just found out about Mr. de Montamy's porcelain. At the last concert for the lovers of music there was an Italian woman who sang like an angel. That Preville is an exceptional fellow. You must see him in the *Mercure galant*. The part about the riddle is priceless. And poor Dumesnil no longer knows what she's saying or doing. Come, Mademoiselle, take your book." While the young lady, who's in no hurry, looks for her book, which she has mislaid, and while the

## Rameau's Nephew

maid is being summoned and chastised, I keep going, “That Clairon is truly incomprehensible. People are talking about a really crazy marriage—one with Miss What’s–Her–Name, a little creature he’s been supporting, with whom he’s had two or three children and who’s been kept by so many others.” “Come now, Rameau, that’s not possible. You’re rambling on.” “No, I’m not rambling. They even say that the marriage has taken place. There’s a rumour going around that Voltaire is dead. So much the better.” “Why’s that good?” “Well, that means he’s going to give us some fine foolishness. He has a habit of dying two weeks before he does so.” What else shall I tell you? I told her a few naughty remarks which I’d brought back from some homes where I’d been, for we are all great gossips. I played the fool, and they listened to me. They laughed. They cried out, “He’s always charming.” However, the young lady’s book was finally recovered from under an armchair, where it had been dragged, chewed, and ripped by a young pug dog or by a kitten. She sat at the keyboard. At first she made some noise there, all by herself. Then I came up, after having given her mother a sign of approval. The mother said, “That isn’t bad. One need only to want to do it, but one doesn’t want to. One prefers to waste one’s time with chit–chat, clothes, running around, and I don’t know what. As soon as you’re gone, the book is closed and it’s not opened again until you return. And then you never reprimand her . . .” However, since I had to do something, I took her hands and placed them in a different position. I got upset. I cried out, “G, G, G, mademoiselle. It’s a G.” The mother, “Young lady, don’t you have an ear? I’m not even at the keyboard, and I’m not looking at your book, but I feel that that must be a G. You’re giving this gentleman a great deal of trouble. I don’t understand his patience. You don’t retain anything he tells you. You’re not progressing at all . . .” Then I eased the blows a little, by shaking my head and saying, “Excuse me, madam, excuse me. Yes, that could go better, if the young lady wanted to, if she studied a little. But it’s not going badly.” The mother: “In your place, I’d keep her on the same piece for a year.” “That’s all right—she won’t leave it until she has surmounted all the difficulties, and that won’t take as long as madam thinks.” The mother: “Mr. Rameau, you’re flattering her. You’re too kind. That’s the only thing she’ll remember from her lesson, and she’ll know the right time to repeat it in front of me.” The hour went by. My pupil gave me the small fee, with a graceful movement of her arm and the curtsy she had learned from her dancing master. I put it in my pocket, while the mother said, “Very good, mademoiselle. If Javillier were here, he’d applaud you.” I kept chatting for a moment longer out of courtesy, then disappeared. There you have it—that’s what people used to call a lesson in accompaniment in those days.

**ME:** And nowadays, it’s something different.

**HIM:** My God, I should think so. I arrive. I’m serious. I’m in a rush to take off my coat. I open the keyboard. I test the keys. I’m always in a hurry. If anyone makes me wait for a moment, I cry out as if they’ve stolen an écu from me. In an hour from now I have to be over there, in two hours at madam’s house, the duchess of something or other. I’m expected to dine at the home of a beautiful marquise, and once I leave there, to go to a concert in the house of Baron de Bacq, in Rue Neuve des Petits Champs.

**ME:** Of course, you’re not expected anywhere?

**HIM:** That’s the truth.

**ME:** So why do you use all these vile little schemes?

**HIM:** Vile? Why vile, if you please? They’re what’s customary in my profession. I don’t demean myself in acting just like everyone else. I’m not the one who invented them. And I’d be really odd and tactless if I didn’t conform. Of course, I know very well that if you’re going to apply certain universal principles from I don’t know what morality which all of them mouth but none of them practices, it will end up that what’s white will really be black and what’s black will really be white. But, Mister Philosopher, there’s a universal conscience, just as there’s a universal grammar, and then there are exception in every language. You call them, I think, you scholarly types, some . . . give me some help here . . . some . . .

**ME:** Idioms.

**HIM:** That’s it. Well, every profession has its exceptions to the general conscience. I’m happy to call these trade idioms.

**ME:** I understand. Fontenelle speaks well and writes well, although his style is crawling with French idioms.

**HIM:** And the sovereign, the minister, the financier, the magistrate, the soldier, the man of letters, the lawyer, the prosecutor, the merchant, the banker, the artisan, the singing master, the dancing master—these are all really honest people, although their conduct goes against the general conscience in several points and is full of moral idioms. The older the business institution, the more idioms there are. The worse times get, the more idioms



## Rameau's Nephew

multiply. Whatever the man is worth, that's what the job is worth, and conversely, in the end, whatever the job is worth, that's what the man is worth. So we value the job as much as we can.

**ME:** What I can see clearly from all this nonsense is that there are few professions honestly practised or few honest people in their professions.

**HIM:** Right, there aren't any. But, on the other hand, few of them are rascals outside their own shops, and everything would go well enough if there weren't a certain number of people whom we call diligent and accurate, who carry out their duties rigorously and strictly, or, what amounts to the same thing, who are always in their shops busy with their trade from morning to evening, doing nothing else. In addition, they're the only ones who get rich and respected.

**ME:** Because of idioms.

**HIM:** That's it. I see you've understood what I've been saying. All right, one idiom in almost every profession—for there are idioms common to all countries and all times, just as there are common ways of being foolish—a common idiom is to acquire for oneself the largest number of customers as possible. A common stupidity is to believe that the person who has the most customers is the most expert. There you have two exceptions to the general conscience which we have to bow down to. It's a sort of credit system. In itself it's nothing, but it is worth something in public opinion. It's been said that a good reputation is more valuable than a golden belt. However, the man with a good reputation doesn't have a golden belt, but I see that nowadays the man with the golden belt rarely lacks a good reputation. It's necessary, as much as possible to have the good reputation and the belt. And that's my goal, when I make myself valuable by what you characterize as vile tricks and unworthy little schemes. I give my lesson, and I give it well—there's the general rule. I let people believe that I've more lessons to give than there are hours in the day—that's the idiom.

**ME:** And the lesson—you give a good one?

**HIM:** Yes, not bad, quite good. My dear uncle's fundamental bass has made it all a lot simpler. Before that I used to rob my pupil of money, yes, I did, that's for sure. But today I earn it, at least as much as the others.

**ME:** And did you steal the money without any guilt?

**HIM:** Oh, none whatsoever. People say that if one robber steals from another, the devil laughs. The parents are overflowing with a fortune they've acquired—God knows how—they're from the court or financiers or great merchants or bankers or business people. I was helping them pay some of it back, me and a crowd of others just like me whom they employed. In nature all species devour each other, and in society all the classes feed on one another. We bring justice to each other without the law getting involved. Earlier that woman Deschamps and nowadays Guimard are the prince's vengeance on the financier, and then the fashion merchant, the jeweler, the upholsterer, the laundry woman, the swindler, the chambermaid, the cook, the saddle maker get their revenge on Deschamps on behalf of the financier. In the middle of all this, it's only the idiot or the lay—about who gets hurt, without having upset anyone—and that's just fine. So from all this you see that these exceptions to the general conscience or these moral idioms about which people make such a fuss, calling them tricks of the trade, are nothing and that, in the last analysis, the only thing one needs is to keep one's eyes open.

**ME:** Your eyes are admirable.

**HIM:** And then there's poverty. The voice of conscience and honour are really feeble when one's guts are crying out. If I ever get rich, I'll certainly have to give the money back, and I'm firmly resolved to do so in all possible ways—dining, gambling, wine, women.

**ME:** But I'm afraid you'll never get rich.

**HIM:** I suspect the same thing myself.

**ME:** But if things turn out differently, what will you do?

**HIM:** I'd act like all beggars whose life has turned around. I'd be the most insolent rogue anyone has ever seen. Then I'd remember everything they made me suffer, and I'd pay them back full measure for the humiliations they put me through. I like to give orders, and that's what I'd do. I like it when people praise me, and praise me they will. I'll have in my service all Villemorien's hangers-on, and I'll speak to them the way they spoke to me, “Come on, you scoundrels, amuse me,” and they'll amuse me, “Rip some honest people to shreds,” and they'll tear them apart, if there are any still to be found. And then we'll have girls, and all address each other as friends when we're drunk, and we'll get drunk. We'll make up stories. We'll have all sorts of quirks and vices. It will be delicious. We'll prove that Voltaire has no genius, that Buffon is always strutting formally on stilts and is nothing

## Rameau's Nephew

but a bombastic windbag, that Montesquieu is nothing more than a witty fellow. We'll consign d'Alembert to his mathematics, and we'll throw down onto their bellies and backs all those little Catos, like you, who despise us from envy, whose modesty is a coat covering their pride, and whose sobriety is a law arising from their own needs. And music? That's when we'll make music.

**ME:** Given the dignified way you'd use your wealth I see what a great pity it is that you're a pauper. You'd live in a way that would confer great honour on the human species and would be really useful to your fellow citizens and truly glorious for yourself.

**HIM:** I think you're making fun of me, Mister Philosopher. You don't know who you're playing with. You don't suspect that at this moment I represent the most important party in the town and at court. The wealthy people in all professions either have told themselves the same things I've confided to you or they have not, but the fact is that the life I'd live in their place is exactly the life they lead. That's just where you are, too, you others. You believe that happiness is the same thing for everyone. What a strange vision! Your version assumes a certain romantic frame of mind which we don't have, a peculiar soul, a strange taste. You dress this weirdness up with the name virtue. You call it philosophy. But are virtue and philosophy made for everyone? Some are able to get them, and some can keep them. Imagine a wise and philosophical universe. You'll concede it would be devilishly sad. So long live philosophy, long live the wisdom of Solomon. Drink good wine, gorge oneself on choice delicacies, roll around on beautiful women, lie on lovely soft beds. Other than that, the rest is nothing but vanity.

**ME:** What about defending one's country?

**HIM:** That's vanity. There's no country any more. From one pole to the other all I see is tyrants and slaves.

**ME:** Helping one's friends?

**HIM:** Vanity. Does one really have friends? And if we had, would we have to make them ungrateful? Look closely, and you'll notice that that's almost always what you get back for services rendered. Gratitude is a burden, and every burden is put there to be shaken off.

**ME:** Occupy a position in society and carry out its duties?

**HIM:** Vanity. What does it matter whether one has a position or not, provided that one is rich, since no one assumes a position except to get rich? Carry out its duties—where does that lead? To jealousy, trouble, persecution. Is that the way one gets ahead? Pay court to people, by God, pay court to them. Observe great people, study their tastes, take part in their fantasies, serve their vices, applaud their injustices. That's the secret.

**ME:** Taking care of the education of one's children?

**HIM:** Vanity. That's the business of a tutor.

**ME:** But if this tutor has fully absorbed your principles and neglects his duties, who's going to be punished for it?

**HIM:** My goodness, it won't be me. Maybe someday my daughter's husband or my son's wife.

**ME:** But what if both your son and daughter hurl themselves into debauchery and vice?

**HIM:** That's their look out.

**ME:** What if they dishonour themselves?

**HIM:** Whatever one does, one cannot dishonour oneself if one is rich.

**ME:** What if they ruin themselves.

**HIM:** Too bad for them.

**ME:** I see that if you can dispense with taking care of the conduct of your wife, your children, and your servants, you could easily neglect your own affairs.

**HIM:** Excuse me, but no. It's sometimes difficult to find money, and it's prudent to get it well in advance.

**ME:** You'll pay little attention to your wife?

**HIM:** None whatsoever, if you please. The best arrangement which one can have with one's dear better half, I think, is to do whatever one wants. In your view, wouldn't society be really amusing if everyone did what was agreeable to them?

**ME:** Why not? The evening is never more beautiful for me than when I'm happy about my morning.

**HIM:** The same goes for me.

**ME:** What makes fashionable people so delicate about their amusements is that they are profoundly idle.

**HIM:** Don't you believe it. They run around a lot.

**ME:** Since they never get tired, they never relax.

## Rameau's Nephew

**HIM:** Don't believe that. They are constantly exhausted from excess.

**ME:** Pleasure is always a business for them, never a need.

**HIM:** So much the better. Need is always painful.

**ME:** They wear everything out. Their souls become stupefied. Boredom grabs hold of them. Whoever took away their lives in the midst of their overwhelming abundance would be doing them a service. The fact is they don't know anything about happiness except the part which becomes jaded most quickly. I don't disparage the pleasures of the senses. I have a palate as well, and it really likes a tasty delicacy or a delicious wine. I have a heart and eyes, and I like to see a beautiful woman. I like to have my hands feel the firmness and the roundness of her breasts, to press her lips against mine, to soak up rapture from her looks, and to die in her arms. I'm not against a party with my friends sometimes, a debauch, even one that gets a little out of hand. But I won't conceal from you that it is infinitely more pleasurable to me to have helped someone in distress, brought some difficult business to a conclusion, given some beneficial advice, read something agreeable, taken a walk with a man or woman close to my heart, passed some instructive hours with my children, written a good page, fulfilled the duties of my position, or told the woman I love something tender and soft, so that she put her arms around my neck. I know the sorts of actions I would give up all I own to have done. *Mahomet* is a sublime work of literature, but I would prefer to have rehabilitated the memory of Calas. An acquaintance of mine once took refuge in Cartagena. He was the youngster of the family in a country where custom gives all property to the eldest. There he learned that his older brother, a spoiled child, after stripping his mother and father very easily of everything they possessed, had kicked them out of their chateau and that the good old people were languishing in poverty in a small town in the provinces. So what then did this youngster do, a boy who had been treated harshly by his parents and had gone to see if he could win his fortune far away? He sent them assistance. He quickly wound up his own affairs and returned wealthy. He brought his father and mother back into their home. He arranged for his sisters to be married. Ah, my dear Rameau, the man considered this period the happiest of his life. When he told me of it, he had tears in his eyes. And as I tell you the story, I feel my heart beating for joy, and my delight makes talking difficult.

**HIM:** You people are so very odd!

**ME:** And you are creatures who well deserve to be pitied if you can't see how we've raised ourselves above our fate and that it's impossible to be unhappy under the shelter of two fine actions like the ones I've just mentioned.

**HIM:** Well, that's a type of happiness which I'll find it difficult to get familiar with, because we meet it rarely. But, according to you, should we then be decent people?

**ME:** To be happy? Yes, certainly.

**HIM:** But I see countless decent people who are not happy, and countless people who are happy without being decent.

**ME:** So it seems to you.

**HIM:** But isn't it because I had some common sense and candour for a moment that I have no idea where to get a meal this evening?

**ME:** Not at all. The reason is you've not had those qualities all along. It's because you didn't realize early on that it's first necessary to create options for yourself which will make you independent, free from serving others.

**HIM:** Independent or not, what I've made for myself is at least the most comfortable.

**ME:** And the least secure and the least honest.

**HIM:** But it's the one best suited to my character as a lazy man, fool, and scoundrel.

**ME:** I agree with that.

**HIM:** And since I can find happiness through vices natural to me, which I've acquired without working, which I maintain without effort, which are compatible with the customs of my country, which suit the taste of those who protect me and are closer to their small particular needs than virtues which would embarrass them, by criticizing them morning and night, it would be really odd if I were to go on tormenting myself like some soul in hell in order to cut myself up and make myself something other than I am, to give myself a character foreign to my own, very worthy qualities—I'll concede that, to avoid an argument—but which would cost me a great deal to acquire and to practise, and which would lead to nothing, perhaps worse than nothing, because all the time I'd have to satirize the rich people among whom beggars like me have to find a living. People praise virtue, but they hate it.

## Rameau's Nephew

They run away from it, because it makes them freezing cold, and in this world one has to have warm feet. Besides, it would inevitably make me moody. Why else do we so often see devout people so hard, so angry, so unsociable? It's because they've imposed on themselves a task which isn't natural to them. They suffer, and when one suffers, one makes others suffer. That's not what I want, nor my patrons. I have to be happy, flexible, pleasant, funny, amusing. Virtue makes itself respected, and respect is uncomfortable. Virtue makes itself admired, and admiration is not amusing. My business is with people who are bored, and I have to make them laugh. So I have to be ridiculous and funny. And if nature had not made me that way, the simplest thing would be to appear like that. Fortunately, I don't need to be a hypocrite. There are already so many of them of every stripe, without counting those who are hypocritical even with themselves. Take that Chevalier de la Morlière, who turns up his hat above his ears, who holds his head in the air, who looks at you over his shoulder as you go by, who has a long sword banging against his thigh, who has an insult ready for anyone who doesn't carry one, and who seems to be issuing a challenge to everyone coming along. What's he doing? Everything he can to persuade himself that he's a stout-hearted man. But he's a coward. Just tweak the end of his nose—he's take it quietly. If you want to make him lower his voice, raise you own. Show him your cane or give him a kick in the ass. He'll be astonished to find out he's a coward and will ask you how you found out, who told you. The moment before he was ignorant of the fact, for his long and habitual aping of bravery had impressed on him that he was. He'd gone through the pretence so many times he believed that's what he was. And that woman who mortifies herself, who visits prisons, who helps at all the charitable meetings, who walks along with her eyes lowered, who would never dare to look a man in the face, always on guard against being seduced by her senses, does all that keep her heart from burning, sighs escaping from her, her temperament catching fire, her desires obsessing her, and her imagination going over and over night and day scenes from the *Portier des Chartreux* or the *Postures de l'Arétin*. So then what happens to her? What does her maid think of her when she gets up in her nightdress and rushes to help her mistress as she's dying? Justine, go back to bed. It's not you your mistress is calling for in her delirium. And what about friend Rameau, what if one day he began to show signs of contempt for wealth, women, good food, and laziness and started to act like Cato, what would he be? A hypocrite. Rameau has to be what he is—a happy thief among wealthy thieves, and not a virtuous swaggerer or even a virtuous man, gnawing his crust of bread by himself or among beggars. To sum up—I won't put up with your idea of happiness or the well being of a few visionaries like you.

**ME:** I see, my dear fellow, that you have no idea what that is and that you're not even capable of learning what it is.

**HIM:** So much the better, by God, so much the better. It would probably make me die of hunger, boredom, and remorse.

**ME:** Given that, the only advice I have for you is to go back quickly to the house where you so imprudently got yourself thrown out.

**HIM:** And do what you don't object to literally but find offensive metaphorically?

**ME:** That's my advice.

**HIM:** Regardless of that metaphor which I object to for the moment but which won't bother me at some other time.

**ME:** How odd you are!

**HIM:** There's nothing odd about it. I'm happy enough to be abject, but I want that to happen without any compulsion. It's all right with me to abandon my dignity . . . What's so funny?

**ME:** Your dignity makes me laugh.

**HIM:** Everyone has his own. I'm happy to forget mine, but at my own discretion, and not on someone else's orders. Does it have to be the case that when someone can say to me “Crawl!” I have to crawl? That's how a worm operates—and it's my way, too. We both follow it, when people leave us alone. But we raise ourselves up when someone steps on our tails. People have stepped on my tail, and I straightened up. But then you have no idea of the madhouse we're talking about. Imagine a melancholy and sullen personality, consumed with vapours, wrapped up in two or three layers of dressing gown, who loves himself but who's unhappy about everything, a person from whom it's difficult to get a smile, even if you distort your body and mind in a hundred different ways. He examines coldly the pleasant grimaces of my face and of my judgment, which are even more pleasant, for, between us, that father Christmas, that nasty Benedictine so famous for his grimaces, for all his success at court, is

## Rameau's Nephew

nothing but a wooden Punch in comparison to me—and I say that without praising myself or him. I went to great lengths tormenting myself to reach the highest arts of the idiot house. But it's no use. Will he laugh? Won't he? That's what I'm forced to say to myself in the middle of my contortions, and you can judge how much this uncertainty damages one's talent. My hypochondriac, with a nightcap pulled down over his head covering his eyes, has the expression of an immobile idol with a string attached around his chin, which goes from there right down under his armchair. One waits for the string to be pulled, but it's not pulled. If it so happens that the jaws open, it's to utter a distressing word, a word which informs you that you've not even been noticed and that all your monkey tricks have been wasted. This word is a response to a question you asked him four days ago. Once the word has been uttered, the mastoid spring is released, and the jaws snap shut.

Then he began to imitate the man he was talking about. He was seated in a chair with his head fixed, his cap right down to his eyelids, his eyes half shut, his arms hanging down, moving his jaws like a robot. He said: “Yes, you are right, mademoiselle. One has to be perceptive in these matters.' That's the person who decides, who always decides, and there's no appeal—in the evening, in the morning, at his morning toilet, at dinner, in the café, at the gaming table, in the theatre, at supper, in bed and, God forgive me, in the arms of his mistress, too, I think. I'm not in a position to hear these last decisions, but I'm damn weary of the others. Sad, obscure, cut and dried, like fate—that's the kind of patron we have.”

“Right across from him there's a prudish woman who's pretending to be important. One could persuade oneself that she's attractive, because she still is, although her face has some scabs here and there and she's getting as large as Madame Bouvillion. I do like flesh when it's beautiful, but for all that, too much is too much. Movement is so essential to matter! *Item*—she is more malicious, more proud, more stupid than a goose. *Item*—she'd like to have wit. *Item*—one has to persuade her that people think she's more witty than anyone else. *Item*—she knows nothing, but she makes decisions, too. *Item*—one has to applaud these decisions with one's feet and hands, to jump for joy, to become paralyzed with admiration: 'Your decision is so beautiful, delicate, well said, perceptive, uniquely felt. Where do you women get all this? Without any studying, purely by the power of instinct, by your own natural light—it's miraculous. And then people come to tell us that experience, study, reflection, and education all play a part in it.' All sorts of other similar stupidities, with tears of joy. To bow down ten times a day, with one knee bent in front and the other leg stuck out behind, one's arms stretched towards the goddess, looking for her desires in her eyes, hanging onto her lip, waiting for her order, and dashing off like a bolt of lightning. Who could subject himself to such a role, except the poor wretch who, two or three times a week, finds something there to calm the tribulation of his intestines? What is one to think of the others, like Palissot, Fréron, the Poinsets, Baculard, who do have some property, and whose baseness thus cannot be excused by the rumbling of a suffering stomach?”

**ME:** I'd never have thought you were so fussy.

**HIM:** I'm not. At first I used to watch the others doing it, and I carried on like them, even a little better, because I'm more candidly impudent, a better actor—and I was hungrier and equipped with better lungs. Apparently I trace my descent in a direct line from the famous Stentor.

And to give me a fair idea of the force of this organ of his, he began to cough violently enough to make the windows in the café rattle and to divert the attention of the chess players from their game.

**ME:** But what good is this talent?

**HIM:** You can't guess?

**ME:** No. I'm a bit limited.

**HIM:** Supposing a dispute has started and victory is uncertain. I stand up and, displaying my thunder, cry out, “It's just as Madame has assured us it is. That's what one calls judgment, a hundred times better than our fine wits. The expression is pure genius.” But one mustn't always approve in the same way. That would make one monotonous. You'd look false and would become insipid. The only way around that is with judgment and creativity. You need to know how to prepare and when to put in those peremptory major tones, how to seize your chance and the moment, for example, when there is a division of opinion, when the argument has moved up to the final stage of violence, when no one is in agreement any more, when everyone is speaking at once—then you must take up a position some distance away, in the corner to the apartment furthest removed from the field of battle. You must prepare for the eruption with a long silence and then blow up suddenly, like an explosion, in the middle of the contenders. No one has my skill in this art. But where I'm really surprising is in the opposite skill—I

## Rameau's Nephew

have some soft notes which I accompany with a smile, an infinite variety of expressions of approval, bringing into play my nose, mouth, forehead, and eyes. I have a supple back, a way of turning my spine, or raising and lowering my shoulders, extending my fingers, inclining my head, closing my eyes, and being amazed, as if I'd heard the voice of a divine angel coming down from heaven. That's what does the flattering. I'm not sure if you really understand the full power of the attitude I've just mentioned. I didn't invent it, but no one has pulled it off better than me. Look. Watch this.

**ME:** It's certainly unique.

**HIM:** Do you think that there's a slightly vain female brain which could hold out against it?

**ME:** No. I have to concede that you have taken the talent for making fools of people and for demeaning oneself as far as it's possible to go.

**HIM:** All those other, however many there are—they'll do well, but they'll never get to that point. The best of them, Palissot, for example, will never be anything but a good pupil. But if this role is amusing at first and if you enjoy the pleasure of laughing to yourself at the stupidity of those you are intoxicating, in the long run it loses its appeal. Besides, after a certain number of discoveries, you have to repeat yourself. Wit and art have their limits. Only God or a few rare geniuses could make a career out of it which grows as they advance. Bouret is such a person, perhaps. That man has certain tricks which impress me (yes, even me) as sublime ideas—the little dog, the book of happiness, the torches on the road to Versailles—those are things which stagger me and put me to shame. It could be enough to make one unhappy with the profession.

**ME:** What about that little dog? What are you talking about?

**HIM:** Where have you come from? What—in all seriousness, you don't know how that extraordinary man set about detaching himself from a little dog and attaching it to the Keeper of the Seals, who'd taken a fancy to it?

**ME:** I confess I have no idea..

**HIM:** So much the better. It's one of the most beautiful things one could imagine. All Europe marveled at it, and there isn't a single courtier who wasn't envious of it. You're a man who doesn't lack a certain shrewdness—let's see what you'd have done in his place. Remember that Bouret was loved by his dog. Remember that the odd costume of the minister used to terrify the little animal. And remember that there were only eight days to overcome the difficulties. One has to understand all the conditions attached to the problem in order to appreciate properly the merit of the solution. Well then?

**ME:** Well, I have to confess to you that in this sort of thing the simplest things baffle me.

**HIM:** Listen (he says to me, giving me a slight blow on the shoulder—he's very informal), listen and admire. He has someone make him a mask which looks like the Keeper of the Seals, and he borrows the latter's voluminous robe from a footman. He covers his face with the mask and puts on the robe. He calls his dog and caresses it. He give it a biscuit. Then all of a sudden, with a change of clothes, he is no longer the Keeper of the Seals, but Bouret. He calls his dog and beats it. In less than two or three days of doing this exercise from morning to night, the dog learns to run away from Bouret the Farmer General and run to Bouret the Keeper of the Seals. But I'm being too kind. You're a layman who doesn't deserve to be instructed in the miracles which go on right beside you.

**ME:** In spite of that, if you don't mind, the book and the torches?

**HIM:** No, no. Ask the cobble stones. They'll tell you about those things. You must profit from the circumstances which have brought us together to learn those things which no one knows except me.

**ME:** You're right.

**HIM:** To borrow the robe and the wig of the Keeper of the Seals—I'd forgotten about the wig! To make a mask which looks like him! It's the mask above all that turns my head. Also this man is of the highest respectability, and he owns millions. There are men with the Saint Louis cross who don't have any bread, so why run after the cross at the risk of working oneself to death and not turn to an activity with no danger which never fails to pay? That's what we call acting in the grand manner. Role models like that are disheartening. One pities oneself and loses interest. That mask! The mask! I'd give one of my fingers to have come up with that mask.

**ME:** But with this enthusiasm of yours for fine things and the creative genius you possess, have you invented anything?

**HIM:** Let's see—well, one example is the attitude of admiration I make with my back which I spoke you about. I look upon that as mine, although some envious people could perhaps argue with me about it. I think that

## Rameau's Nephew

people used it before, but who realized just how handy it was for having a secret laugh at the fool one was admiring? I have more than a hundred ways to start the seduction of a young girl right under her mother's nose, without her perceiving a thing, and even making her an accomplice. I'd hardly started on my career when I turned my back on all the common ways to slip someone a love letter. I have ten ways of getting people to snatch it away from me. Among these methods, I dare flatter myself that there are some original ones. Above all, I possess the talent for encouraging a timid young man. I've enabled some to succeed who had neither wit nor looks. If that were all written out, I think that people would attribute some genius to me.

**ME:** Would you get remarkable honours?

**HIM:** I don't doubt it.

**ME:** If I were you, I'd put those things down on paper. It would be a pity if they were lost.

**HIM:** That's true, but you have no idea how unimportant method and precepts are to me. Someone who needs written instructions will never get far. Geniuses read little, act a great deal, and create themselves. Look at Caesar, Turenne, Vauban, the Marquise de Tencin, his brother the cardinal, and the cardinal's secretary, Abbé Trublet. And Bouret? Who gave Bouret lessons? No one. It's nature that makes exceptional men like that. Do you think that the story of the dog and the mask is written down somewhere?

**ME:** But in the hours when you have nothing to do—when the agony of your empty stomach or the weariness in your crammed stomach stop you from sleeping . . .

**HIM:** I'll think about it. It's better to write about great things than to carry out trivial ones. Then the soul is raised, the imagination heats up, catches fire, and grows, instead of shrinking up beside the little Hus girl, in her amazement at the applause which the idiotic public insists on lavishing on that simpering Dangeville, who acts with so little imagination, who moves through the scene almost doubled over and affects to stare continuously into the eyes of whoever she is talking to, underplays her role, and who confuses her own grimaces with subtlety, her tiny trotting around with graceful movement—or on that bombastic Clairon woman who's scrawnier, more affected, more mannered and starchy than anyone could imagine. Those idiots in the pit bring the house down applauding them. They don't see that we are a pack full of charm. It's true that the pack is getting somewhat larger, but so what? We have the most beautiful skin, the finest eyes, the best-looking mouths—not much heart inside, to be sure—a walk which is not light, but not as awkward as people maintain. As for feelings, on the other hand, there isn't one which we couldn't overtrump.

**ME:** Why are you saying all this? Are you being truthful or ironical?

**HIM:** The problem is that this devil of a feeling is all inside and no glimmer of it reaches the outside. But as for me—the one talking to you—I know, and know well, that she has some. Well, if it's not that exactly, it's something like it. You need to see how we treat servants, when we're in the mood, how we slap the chambermaids, how we kick old casual parts Boutin around if he fails to deliver the respect due to us. She's a little devil, I tell you, full of feeling and dignity. . . . Hey, you're not sure what all this is about, are you?

**ME:** I confess I have no idea how to sort out whether you're speaking in good faith or maliciously. I'm a decent man, so be good enough to deal with me directly and put away your art.

**HIM:** That's just what we say to the little Hus girl about Dangeville and Clairon, mixing in a few words here and there to rouse your suspicions. I don't mind your taking me for a rascal, but not for an idiot. And only an idiot or a man hopelessly in love could say so many outrageous things seriously.

**ME:** But how does one bring oneself to say such things?

**HIM:** That doesn't happen all at once—one gets there gradually. *Ingenii largitor venter [The belly incites genius]*

**ME:** You have to be forced into it by a savage hunger.

**HIM:** That could do it. However, no matter how extreme these things seem to you, you should know that those to whom they are addressed are much more accustomed to hearing them than we are to trying them out.

**ME:** Is there anyone out there who has the courage to share your opinion?

**HIM:** What do mean anyone? It's the opinion and the language of all society.

**ME:** Those among you who are not great rascals have to be great fools.

**HIM:** Fools among us? I swear there is only one fool—and that's the one who gives us a good time in exchange for our imposing this language on him.

**ME:** But how can anyone let himself be so crudely imposed upon? For in the end the superior talent of

## Rameau's Nephew

Dangeville and Clairon is well established.

**HIM:** We swallow whole the lie which flatters us and sip drop by drop a truth set down before us. Besides, we have such an earnest and truthful demeanour.

**ME:** Nonetheless, you must have sinned at least once against the principles of your art and let slip inadvertently some of those bitter truths which hurt. For despite the wretched, abject, vile and abominable role you play, I think that basically you have a refined soul.

**HIM:** In my case, not at all. The Devil take me if I have any idea what I am deep down. In general, my mind is as round as a ball and my character as open as a wicker chair—I'm never false if I have any interest in being truthful and never truthful if I have any interest in being dishonest. I say things as they come to me. If they're sensible, all well and good, if impertinent, people don't worry about it. I use my candour in speaking to the full. I've never thought about my life before speaking or while I'm talking, or after I've finished talking. In that way I don't hurt anyone.

**ME:** But that's just what happened to you with those respectable people whose house you lived in and who were so kind to you.

**HIM:** What about it? It was unfortunate, a bad moment. These things happen in life. No happiness lasts. I was too well off. It couldn't last. We have, as you know, the most numerous and exclusive company. It's a school for humanity, the renewal of ancient hospitality. All the fallen poets, we gather them up. We had Palissot after his *Zara*, Bret after *Le Faux généreux*, all the discredited musicians, all the authors no one reads any more, all the actresses hissed off the stage, all the booed actors, a pile of poor disgraced people, dull parasites. I have the honour of being at their head, the brave chief of a timid band. I'm the one who urges them to eat the first time they come. I'm the one who demands they get something to drink. They take up so little room! Some ragged young people who don't know where to lay their heads but who are good looking. Others are villains who suck up to the master and send him off to sleep so they can scoop up what he's left with the lady of the house. We appear carefree, but at bottom we're all moody and greedy. Wolves are no hungrier than we are, nor are tigers more cruel. We cram ourselves like wolves when the earth has been covered in snow for a long time, and, like tigers, we rip apart anything which has succeeded. Sometimes the crowds of Bertin, Montsaugé, and Villemorien come together, and then there's a fine old noise in the menagerie. You've never seen so many wretched creatures in one place—cantankerous, harmful, and angry. No one hears anything but the names of Buffon, Duclos, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Votaire, D'Alembert, Diderot, and God only knows what epithets are attached to them. No one can have any wit unless he is as stupid as we are. That's the place where the plan for the comedy *Les Philosophes* was conceived—I'm the one who came up with the scene of the peddler. I based it on *La Théologie en Quenouille*. You don't get off the hook in it, any more than anyone else.

**ME:** So much the better. Perhaps you're giving me more honour than I deserve. I'd be humiliated if those who speak badly about so many expert and decent people decided to say something good about me.

**HIM:** There are many of us, and each one must pay his dues. After the sacrifice of the great animals we immolate the others.

**ME:** Insulting science and virtue in order to make a living—that's really expensive bread.

**HIM:** I've already told you we have no effect. We could injure the entire world, and we wouldn't hurt anyone. Sometimes our company includes the peasant Abbé d'Olivet, the fat Abbé Le Blanc, and the hypocrite Batteux. The fat abbé is malicious only before he's eaten. Once he's had his coffee, he throws himself into an armchair, rests his feet against the shelf by the chimney, and goes to sleep like an old parrot on its perch. If the noise gets violent, he yawns, stretches his arms, rubs his eyes, and says, "All right, what's up What is it?" "We're trying to find out if Piron has more wit than Voltaire." "Let's get this straight—are you talking about wit? It's not a question of taste, for your Piron has no notion of taste." "No idea at all?" "No." And then we set out on a discussion of taste. Then our patron signals with his hand that we should listen to him, because he's keener on taste than on anything, "Taste," he says, "taste is something . . ."—my goodness I've no idea what he said it was, and neither does he. Sometimes our friend Robbé is with us. He amuses us with cynical stories, miracles about people in convulsions where he was a visual witness, and also with a few cantos from his poem on a subject which he knows really well. I hate his verses, but I like to hear him recite. He has the air of someone truly weird. All those around him cry out, "Now that's what we call a poet." Just between us, that poetry is nothing but a din of all sorts of confused noises, the barbarous song of people living in the tower of Babel. Sometimes we also get a visit from



## Rameau's Nephew

a certain simpleton with a dull, stupid expression, who has a mind like a demon and who's smarter than an old monkey. He's one of those figures who invite jokes and tricks, someone God made to correct people who judge on the basis of appearances, those who should have learned at their own mirrors that it is just as easy to be a witty man and look like a fool as it is to hide a fool under an intelligent looking physiognomy. It's a really common form of cowardice to sacrifice a good man for the amusement of others. And they never fail to go after this man. He's a trap we set for the new arrivals, and I've hardly seen a single one of them fail to get caught.

I was sometimes surprised by the justice of this fool's observations on men and on their characters. I told him as much. "Well," he replied, "it's a matter of getting some benefits out of bad company, just like out of being a libertine. You get compensation for the loss of innocence by also losing your prejudices. In a society of bad people, where vice shows itself with its mask removed, you learn to recognize it. And besides, I've read a bit."

**ME:** What have you read?

**HIM:** I've read, I read, and I constantly re-read Theophrastus, La Bruyère and Molière.

**ME:** Those are excellent books.

**HIM:** They are much better than people think, but who knows how to read them?

**ME:** Everyone, according to how intelligent he is.

**HIM:** Hardly anyone. Could you tell me what people are looking for in those books?

**ME:** Amusement and instruction.

**HIM:** What instruction? That's the point.

**ME:** A knowledge of one's duties, a love of virtue, and a hatred of vice.

**HIM:** Well, I gather from them everything one should do and everything which one shouldn't say. So when I read *L'Avare*, I say to myself: be a miser, if you want to, but be careful not to talk like a miser. When I read *Tartuffe* I tell myself: be a hypocrite, if you like, but don't talk like a hypocrite. Keep the vices which are useful, but don't assume a tone or an appearance which will make you ridiculous. In order to be sure about this tone and appearance, you have to know them. Now, these authors have provided excellent portraits of them. I am myself, and I remain what I am. But I act and speak in a way that's suitable. I'm not one of those people who disparage the moralists. One can profit a lot from them, above all from those who have put morals into action. Vice doesn't hurt people, except now and then. But the visible features of vice injure them from morning to night. Perhaps it would be better to be a scoundrel than to look like one—insolence in a character is only insulting from time to time, but an insolent appearance is always insulting. As for the rest, don't go and imagine that I'm the only reader of this sort. I've no particular merit in this, except that I've done systematically, with a keen intelligence and a reasonable and true aim in mind, what most others do by instinct. That's the reason why what they read doesn't make them better than me and why they continue to be ridiculous in spite of themselves—whereas I'm ridiculous only when I choose to be, and then I leave them far behind me. For the same art which at certain times teaches me to save myself from being ridiculous also teaches me at other times to make myself ridiculous in a superior way. Then I recall everything other people have said, everything I've read, and I add to those everything from my own capital funds, which in this type of thing are a surprisingly rich resource.

**ME:** You've done well to reveal these mysteries to me. Without that I would've thought you were contradicting yourself.

**HIM:** No, I don't do that at all. Fortunately, for one occasion when it's necessary to avoid ridicule there are a hundred where one has to be ridiculous. There's no better role to play in the presence of grand people than that of the fool. For a long time there was an official jester to the king, but there has never been an official wise man to the king. Me, I'm a fool for Bertin and many others, perhaps for you at this moment, or perhaps you're my fool. A man who wanted to be wise would not have such a fool. That's why anyone who has a fool is not wise. If he's not wise, he's a fool and perhaps, if he's a king, his fool's fool. Beyond this, you should remember that in a subject as varied as morals, there's no absolute, essential, universal truth or falsity, unless it's the fact that one has to be what one's self-interest wants one to be, good or bad, wise or foolish, decent or ridiculous, honest or vicious. If by chance virtue had led the way to a fortune, either I'd have been virtuous or I'd have pretended to be virtuous, just like anyone else. People wanted me to be ridiculous, and that's what I've made myself. As for viciousness, nature alone paid the cost of that. When I say vicious, it's in order to speak your language, for if we were to come to an understanding of each other, it could turn out that you call vice what I call virtue and virtue what I call vice. We also had among us authors from the Opera Comique, their actors and actresses, and more often their managers

## Rameau's Nephew

Corby, Moette . . . all resourceful people of superior merit. And I was forgetting the great literary critics. *L'Avant-Coureur*, *Les Petites Affiches*, *L'Année littéraire*, *L'Observateur littéraire*, *Le Censeur hebdomadaire*—all that clique of columnists.

**ME:** *L'Année littéraire*; *L'Obervateur littéraire*—that's not possible. They detest each other.

**HIM:** That's true. But all beggars are reconciled at the feeding trough. That damned *Obervateur littéraire*—I wish the devil had taken the man and his columns. It's that little cur of an avaricious priest, that stinking usurer, who's the cause of my disaster. He appeared on our horizon for the first time yesterday. He arrived at the hour which drives us all out of our hide outs—dinner time. When the weather is bad, anyone among us who has a twenty four sou coin in his pocket for cab fare is a happy man. Some people make fun of a fellow beggar who arrives in the morning with mud up to his ribs and soaked to the bone—and then in the evening have to return home in the same condition. There was one of them—I don't know which one—who a few months ago had a violent tangle with the Savoyard peasant who had set up at our door. They were running on credit, and the creditor wanted the debtor to settle up, but the latter didn't have the money. Well, they serve the meal, and honour the abbé, by placing him at the head of the table. I come in. I notice him. So I say to him, “Well, abbé, so you're presiding today? That's fine for today, but tomorrow you move down one setting, if you please, and the day after tomorrow to the next place setting, and thus from place to place, either to the left or right, until you move from that place which I've occupied once before you, Freron once after me, Dorat once after Freron, Palissot once after Dorat, and come to rest beside me, a poor dull bugger like yourself, *qui siedo sempre come un maestoso cazzo fra duoi coglioni*.” The abbé, who's a good little devil and takes everything well, began to laugh. Mademoiselle was struck by the truth of my observation and the justice of my comparison, and she began to laugh. All those who were seated to the right and to the left of the abbé and whom he had moved down one notch began to laugh. So everyone was laughing except Monsieur who was irritated and went at me with things which wouldn't have mattered at all if we'd been alone: “Rameau you're an impudent man.” “I know that—that's why you receive me here.” “A scoundrel.” “Just like the others.” “A beggar.” “Would I be here if I weren't?” “I'll see to it that you're thrown out.” “After dinner, I'll leave on my own.” “I'd advise you to do that.” So we ate, and I didn't miss a bite. After we'd eaten well and drank a good deal, because, after all, it wouldn't have mattered one way or the other—Mr. Guts is someone whom I've never avoided—I made my decision and was preparing to leave. I'd given my word in the presence of so many people that I had to keep it. I was prowling around the apartment for a long time, looking for my walking stick and my hat in places where they wouldn't be, all the time counting on the fact that my patron would let out a new torrent of abuse, that someone would intervene, and that we'd finish up by being reconciled because we'd lost our tempers. I wandered round, I kept wandering around, for I wasn't feeling anything inside, but my patron, well, he was blacker and grimmer than Homer's Apollo when he fired his arrows down on the Greek army. He was walking back and forth, with his hat pulled down more than usual and his fist on his chin. Mademoiselle came up to me. “But Mademoiselle, what's been so extraordinary, then? Have I been any different today from my usual self?” “I wish him to leave.” “I will leave. I haven't done him any wrong.” “Excuse me, but Monsieur l'Abbé was invited, and . . .” “He let himself down by inviting the abbé and then letting me in and with me so many other hangers-on like me.” “Come on, my dear Rameau. You must apologize to Monsieur l'Abbé.” “I don't want his pardon . . .” “Come on, come on—all this will sort itself out.” They took me by the hand and dragged me towards the abbé's armchair. I held out my arms. I looked at the abbé with a sort of admiration, for who had ever made an apology to the abbé? “Abbé,” I said to him, “abbé, all this is really silly, isn't it?” And then I started to laugh, and so did he. So right there I was forgiven in that quarter. But I had to tackle the other one, and what I had to say to him was a different game altogether. I don't know much about how I framed my apology. “Monsieur, look at this fool . . .” “He's been making me suffer for too long. I don't want to hear any more talk about him.” “Monsieur is angry.” “Yes, I am very angry.” “That won't happen any more.” “Well, the first scoundrel . . .” I don't know if he was in one of his moody days when Mademoiselle is afraid to go near him and doesn't dare touch him except with velvet mitts or whether he misheard what I was saying or whether I spoke badly, but things got worse than before. To hell with it—doesn't he know me? Doesn't he know that I'm like a child and there are situations where I just let everything go under me? And then, God forgive me, I thought I'd never have a rest from performing. Even a puppet made of steel gets worn out if the strings are pulled from morning to night and from night until morning. I must relieve them of their boredom—I take that for granted—but I have to amuse myself sometimes. In the middle of this mess, a fatal thought went through my

## Rameau's Nephew

mind, an idea which made me arrogant and inspired me with pride and insolence: it was the notion that they couldn't do without me, that I was someone indispensable.

**ME:** Yes, I think you're very useful to them, but they're even more so to you. You won't find a house as good as that one, when you want to, but those people, if they're missing one fool, can come up with a hundred.

**HIM:** A hundred fools like me! Mister Philosopher, they're not as common as that. Yes, some insipid fools. It's harder to find quality in foolishness than in talent or virtue. I'm a rare member of my species, yes, very rare. Now that they don't have me any more, what are they doing? They're as bored as dogs. I'm an inexhaustible sack of impertinence. At every moment I had a joke which made people laugh until they cried. For them I was an entire house of idiots.

**ME:** So that's why you had table, bed, coat, vest, trousers, shoes, and a small allowance.

**HIM:** Well, that's the good side. That's the profit. But what about the charges—you don't say a word about those. First, if there was a rumour about a new play, no matter what the weather, I had to poke my nose in all the attics in Paris until I found the author. Then I had to find a way to read the work and to insinuate skillfully that there was role in it which would be performed extremely well by someone I knew. “By whom, if you please?” “By whom—a good question! Someone with grace, charm, and delicacy.” “You mean Mademoiselle Dangeville? Do you know her by any chance?” “Yes, a little. But it's not her.” “Then who?” I'd say her name in a low voice. “Her!” “Yes, her,” I'd repeat, somewhat ashamed, for there are times I feel a sense of modesty, and when I repeated the name you should've seen the poet make a long face or at other times blow up in a temper right in front of me. However, for better or worse I had to bring my man to dinner—and he didn't want to get involved. He'd stall and offer his thanks. You should've seen how I was treated if I didn't succeed in my negotiations with him: I was a lout, a fool, an oaf. I was good for nothing. I wasn't worth the glass of water they'd given me to drink. But it was even worse if she got the part—then I had to go fearlessly through the midst of the booing public (and they're good judges, no matter what people say about them) and make my applause heard as a one-man clique. I attracted people's attention and sometimes stole the booing away from the actress. I'd hear people whispering beside me, “It's a valet in disguise, one of those belonging to the man who sleeps with her. Won't the rascal ever shut up?” People have no idea what could make a person do that. They think it's stupidity; whereas it comes from a motive that excuses everything.

**ME:** Up to and including breaking the laws.

**HIM:** Finally, however, I became known, and people said, “Oh, it's Rameau.” My only option was to throw out some ironic expression to salvage the ridicule of my solitary applause so that people would interpret it as its opposite. You have to admit that it takes a powerful interest to brave the assembled public like that and the effort is worth more than one small écu.

**ME:** Why didn't you get some help?

**HIM:** I've done that, too. I earned a bit of money from it. Before going into the torture chamber, we had to memorize some brilliant passages where we had to set the tone. If I happened to forget them or got confused, there was a real earthquake when I returned. You've no idea the kind of fuss they made. And then in the house there was a pack of dogs to look after. It's true that I'd taken on this job—like a fool. And then I had to take care of the cats. And I was only too happy if Micou favoured me with a claw scratch which ripped my cuff or my hand. Criquette is subject to colic, and it's my job to rub her belly. Previously Mademoiselle had vapours. Now it's nerves. I'm not mentioning the other slight indispositions which no one bothered about in front of me. Those were all right. I've never believed in too much formality. I've read, I don't know where, that a prince known as The Great used to rest sometimes leaning against the back of his mistress's toilet commode. People act relaxed around their familiars, and in those days I was more familiar than anyone. I'm the apostle of familiarity and relaxation. I preached them there by example, without anyone objecting to me. They just had to let me be. I've given you a sketch of my patron. Mademoiselle is beginning to put on weight, and you should hear the fine stories people make of that.

**ME:** You're not one of those people, are you?

**HIM:** Why not?

**ME:** At the very least it's indecent to make your benefactors sound ridiculous.

**HIM:** But isn't it even worse to let your good deeds give you an excuse to discredit your protégé?

**ME:** If the protégé wasn't vile on his own, nothing would give his protector such a right.

## Rameau's Nephew

**HIM:** But if these people weren't ridiculous in themselves, one couldn't make up good stories about them. And then is it my fault if they become vulgar? Is it my fault, once they've become vulgar, if people betray and ridicule them? If they decide to live with people like us and have any common sense, they have to expect all sorts of dark stuff. People who take up with us, surely they know us for what we are, for self-interested souls—vile and two-timing? If they understand us, then everything's fine. There is a tacit agreement that they'll provide good things for us and sooner or later we'll pay back the good they've done us with something bad. Isn't this the agreement that exists between a man and his pet monkey or parrot? Brun cries out that Palissot, his guest and friend, has written some couplets attacking him. Palissot had to compose the couplets, and it's Brun who's in the wrong. Poinsinet cries out that Palissot has ascribed to him the couplets he wrote against Brun. But Palissot had to ascribe to Poinsinet the couplets he wrote attacking Brun, and it's Poinsinet who's in the wrong. The little Abbé Rey cries out that his friend Palissot has snatched away his mistress after he introduced her to him. But he shouldn't have introduced someone like Palissot to his mistress if he wasn't prepared to lose her. Palissot did his duty, and it's Abbé Rey who is in the wrong. The bookseller David cries out because his associate Palissot has slept with or wanted to sleep with his wife. The wife of the bookseller David cries out that Palissot has told anyone willing to listen that he has slept with her. Whether Palissot has slept with the bookseller's wife or not is difficult to determine, because the wife's duty was to deny the fact and Palissot could've let people believe what was not true. Whatever the case, Palissot played his role, and it's David and his wife who are in the wrong. Helvetius may cry out that Palissot slanders him by putting him in a scene as a dishonest man, but Palissot still owes him the money he borrowed for the medical treatment for his bad health, as well as for his food and clothing. But should Helvetius have expected any other treatment from a man soiled with all sorts of infamy, a man who for fun makes his friend swear off his religion, who appropriates the assets of his partners, who has no faith, law, or feeling, who runs after fortune *per fas et nefas*, who measures his days by the acts of villainy he commits, and who has even lampooned himself on stage as one of the most dangerous rascals—a piece of impudence I believe we've not seen in the past and won't see in the future? No. So it's not Palissot but Helvetius who's in the wrong. If one takes a young man from the provinces to the zoo at Versailles and his foolishness persuades him to stick his hand through the bars of the tiger's or panther's cage, and if the young man leaves his arm behind in the throat of the ferocious animal, who's in the wrong? All that is written in the tacit agreement. Too bad for the man who doesn't know that or who forgets it. How many of those people accused of viciousness I could justify by appealing to this universal and sacred pact, whereas people should accuse themselves of stupidity. Yes, you fat countess, you're the one in the wrong when you gather around you what people of your sort call “characters,” and when these “characters” play dirty tricks on you and you do the same, thus exposing yourself to the resentment of decent people. Honest people do what they ought to do, so do your “characters.” And it's your fault for having collected them. If Bertinhus lived quietly and peacefully with his mistress, if through the honesty of their characters they'd made the acquaintance of decent people, they'd have summoned round them men of talent, people known in society for their virtue. If they'd reserved for a small enlightened select group hours of entertainment taken from the sweet life they had together loving each other in the quiet of their retreat, do you think people would have made up stories about them, good or bad? So then what happened to them? They got what they deserved. They've been punished for their imprudence. And we're the ones whom Providence has destined from all eternity to bring justice to the Bertins of today. And it's people like us among our descendants who are destined to bring justice to the Montsauges and Bertins of the future. But while we execute the decrees of justice on stupidity, you paint us as we are and carry out these just decrees against us. What would you think of us, if, with our disgraceful habits, we claimed that we enjoyed popular favour? You'd say we were out of our minds. And those who expect decent treatment from people born vicious, from vile and base characters, are they wise? Everything in this world receives its due. There are two public prosecutors. The one by your door punishes the criminal offences against society. Nature is the other. She recognizes all the vices which escape the laws. You devote yourself to debauchery with women. You'll get dropsy. You're a scoundrel. You'll get consumption. You open your door to rascals, and you live with them. You'll be betrayed, mocked, and despised. The simplest thing to do is to resign yourself to the equity of these judgments and tell yourself that it's all right. Then you can shake your ears and change your ways, or else stay as you are, but on the conditions mentioned above.

**ME:** You're right.

**HIM:** In fact, about these bad stories—I don't myself make any of them up. I stick to the role of peddler. They

## Rameau's Nephew

say that a few days ago, at five o'clock in the morning, people could hear a really violent noise. All the house bells were in motion. There were stifled and broken cries of a man choking. "Help, help. I'm being suffocated. I'm dying." These cries came from the apartment of my patron. People arrived. They went to help him. That fat creature of ours had lost her mind and was no longer aware of what she was doing—which sometimes happens at such moments. She kept speeding up her movements—raising herself on her two hands so that from higher up she could let fall on his casual parts her weight of two or three hundred pounds, energized with all the speed provided by furious desire. They had a lot of difficulty getting him out from under. What a devilish fantasy for a little hammer to place himself under a heavy anvil!

**ME:** You're too naughty. Speak about something else. Since we've been talking, I've had a question on the tip of my tongue.

**HIM:** Why has it stayed there so long?

**ME:** I was afraid it might be indiscreet.

**HIM:** After the things I've just shown you, I don't know what secret I could conceal from you.

**ME:** You have no doubts about how I judge your character.

**HIM:** None whatsoever. In your eyes I'm a very abject person, very contemptible, and I'm also sometimes just the same in my own eyes, but rarely. I congratulate myself on my vices more often than I criticize myself for them.

**ME:** That's true, but why show me all your nastiness?

**HIM:** Well, first because you know a good deal about it already, and I saw that there's more to win than to lose by confessing the rest to you.

**ME:** Please tell me how that works.

**HIM:** If it's important to be sublimely good at anything, it's above all necessary with being bad. People spit on a petty cheat, but they can't hold back a certain respect for a grand criminal. His courage astonishes you. His atrocity makes you tremble. In everything, people value integrity of character.

**ME:** But this worthy integrity of character, you don't yet have it. From time to time I find you vacillating in your principles. It's uncertain whether you hold to your nastiness from nature or from study, or if study has taken you as far as it's possible to go.

**HIM:** I agree with that. But I've done my best. Haven't I had the modesty to recognize beings more perfect than myself? Haven't I spoken to you about Bouret with the most profound admiration? Bouret, in my view, is the greatest man in the world.

**ME:** But immediately after Bouret, there's you.

**HIM:** No.

**ME:** Then it's Palissot?

**HIM:** It's Palissot, but it's not only Palissot.

**ME:** And who could be worthy of sharing second place with him?

**HIM:** The renegade from Avignon.

**ME:** I've never heard mention of this renegade of Avignon, but he must be a really astonishing man.

**HIM:** That he is.

**ME:** The history of great people has always interested me.

**HIM:** That I can believe. This one used to live with a good and honest descendant of Abraham—the one who was promised he'd be father of the faithful and they'd be as numerous as the stars.

**ME:** He lived with a Jew?

**HIM:** With a Jew. He began by winning the Jew's sympathy and then his good will, and finally his total confidence. That's how it always goes. We count so much on the effects of our kindnesses that we rarely hide a secret from someone we've buried in our good deeds. It's impossible to have no ungrateful people when we expose men to the temptation of being ungrateful with impunity. This perceptive idea is one our Jew did not think about. So he confided to the renegade that he could not in good conscience eat pork. Now you're going to see the advantages a creative mind can derive from this confession. A few months went by, during which our renegade strengthened the bond between them. When he thought that the Jew was totally won over and truly caught, that his attentions had completely convinced him that he didn't have a better friend in all the tribes of Israel . . . You have to admire the man's circumspection. He didn't hurry. He lets the pear grow ripe before he shakes the branch.

## Rameau's Nephew

Too much eagerness could've ruined his project. Usually greatness of character comes from a natural balance of several contrasting qualities.

**ME:** Leave your reflections and go on with your story.

**HIM:** That's not possible. There are days when I have to reflect. It's a sickness which has to be left to run its course. Where was I?

**ME:** At the well established intimacy between the Jew and the renegade.

**HIM:** So the pear was ripe . . . But you're not listening to me. What are you dreaming about?

**ME:** I'm dreaming about the unevenness of your style—sometimes lofty, sometimes low.

**HIM:** Can the style of a vicious man be unified? He comes one night to the home of his good friend, with an agitated air, his voice broken, his face pale as death, trembling in all his limbs. “What's the matter with you?” “We're lost.” “Lost? How?” “Lost, I'm telling you, lost without hope.” “Explain yourself.” “Wait a minute until I get over my fear.” “Come on, pull yourself together,” the Jew said to him, instead of saying, “You're an incorrigible scoundrel. I don't know what you have to tell me, but you're an incorrigible scoundrel. You're pretending to be terrified.”

**ME:** And why should he have spoken to him like that?

**HIM:** Because the man was a liar and had gone too far. That's clear to me, so don't interrupt me any more. “We're lost, lost without hope.” Don't you sense the affectation in the repetition of the word *lost*? “A traitor has denounced us to the Holy Inquisition—you as a Jew and me as a renegade, as a disgusting renegade.” Observe how the traitor was not embarrassed to use the most odious expressions. It requires more courage than people think to call yourself by your proper name. You have no idea what it costs to get to that point.

**ME:** Of course not. But what about this disgusting renegade . . . ?

**HIM:** He's a liar, but it's a really adroit lie. The Jew gets scared. He pulls his beard. He rolls on the ground. He sees the guard at his door. He sees himself dressed in the San Benito and his own *auto-da-fe* being prepared. “My friend, my dear friend, my only friend, what do we do?” “What do we do? You show yourself, you affect the greatest self-confidence, go on with your business as usual. The procedures of this tribunal are secret, but slow. You must use the delay to sell everything. I'll charter a ship or I'll get a third party to do it—yes, a third party, that'll be better. We'll put your fortune in it, because it's mainly your fortune they want, and we'll go, you and I, to seek under another sky the liberty to serve our God and to follow in safety the law of Abraham and our conscience. The important point in these perilous circumstances we find ourselves in is not to do anything imprudent.” No sooner said that done. The ship is chartered, loaded with provisions and sailors. The Jew's fortune is on board. The next day, at dawn, they're going to set sail. They can dine happily and sleep soundly. The next day, they'll escape their persecutors. During the night the renegade gets up, steals the Jew's wallet, his purse, and his jewels, goes on board, and sails away. And you think that's all there is to it? If so, you haven't got the point. When I was told this story, I guessed what I haven't yet told you, to test your intelligence. You've done well to be a respectable man—you wouldn't have been anything but a petty rogue. And up to this point, the renegade has been only that—a miserable wretch whom no one would want to be like. But the supreme part of his wickedness is that he had himself denounced his good friend the Israelite. The Holy Inquisition seized him when he got up and, some days later, turned him into a fine bonfire. That's how the renegade became the peaceful possessor of the fortune of this cursed descendant of those who crucified Our Saviour.

**ME:** I don't know which gives me greater horror—the evil of your renegade or your style of speaking about him.

**HIM:** That's the very thing I was telling you. The atrocity of the action takes you beyond contempt, and that's the reason why I'm so sincere. I wanted you to understand how I excelled in my art and to pull out of you the admission that I was at least original in my degradation. I wanted to give you the idea that I belonged in the line of great scoundrels and then to shout to myself, “*Vivat Mascarillus, fourbum imperator!*” [*Long live Mascarillus, emperor of the rogues*] Come, Mr. Philosopher, sing along, “*Vivat Mascarillus, fourbum imperator!*”

At that point he began to sing a really extraordinary fugue. Sometimes the melody was serious and full of majesty; sometimes light and playful. At one moment he imitated the bass, at another one of the upper parts. He indicated to me with his outstretched arms and neck the places with held notes and performed and made up on his own a song of triumph. It showed that he knew more about good music than about good habits.

As for me, I didn't know if I ought to remain or run away, to laugh or grow indignant. I stayed, intending to

## Rameau's Nephew

steer the conversation onto some subject which would rid my soul of the horror filling it. I was starting to find it difficult to endure the presence of a man who talked about a horrible action, a hideous crime, like a connoisseur of painting or poetry examining the beauties of a tasteful work or like a moralist or historian selecting and emphasizing the circumstances of a heroic action. I became gloomy, in spite of myself. He noticed that and spoke to me.

**HIM:** What's the matter? Are you feeling ill?

**ME:** A little. But it will pass.

**HIM:** You have the worried look of a man upset about some distressing idea.

**ME:** That's it.

After a moment of silence on his part and mine, during which he walked around whistling and singing, to get him back to his talent

I said to him: "What are you doing at present?"

**HIM:** Nothing.

**ME:** That very tiring.

**HIM:** I was already stupid enough. Then I went to hear the music of Duni and other young composers, and that finished me off.

**ME:** So you approve of this style of music?

**HIM:** No doubt.

**ME:** You find beauty in these new melodies?

**HIM:** My God, do I find beauty in them? I'll say I do. What declamation! What truth! What expressiveness!

**ME:** Every art of imitation has its model in nature. What's the musician's model when he writes a tune?

**HIM:** Why not tackle the issue at a higher level? What's a melody?

**ME:** I confess to you that this question is beyond my capabilities. In that we're all alike. In our memory we have only words which we think we understand from our frequent use of them and even the correct way we apply them. But in our minds they are only vague notions. When I say the word "melody," I don't have ideas any clearer than yours or those of the majority of people like you when they say "reputation," "blame," "honour," "vice," "virtue," "modesty," "decency," "shame," "ridicule."

**HIM:** A melody is an imitation using the sounds of a scale invented by art or inspired by nature, whichever you like, either with the voice or with an instrument, an imitation of the physical sounds or accents of passion. You see that, by changing some things in this definition, it would fit exactly a definition of painting, oratory, sculpture, and poetry. Now, to get to your question. What's the musician's model or the model of a melody? It's declamation, if the model is alive and thinking; it's noise, if the model is inanimate. You must think of declamation as a line, and the melody as another line which winds along the first. The more this declamation, the basis of the melody, is strong and true, the more the melody which matches it will intersect it in a greater number of points. And the truer the melody, the more beautiful it will be. That's something our young musicians have understood really well. When one hears *Je suis un pauvre diable*, one thinks one can recognize the sad cry of a miser. If he wasn't singing, he would speak to the earth in the same tones when he entrusts his gold to it, saying, *O terre, reçois mon trésor*. And that little girl who feels her heart beating, who blushes, who's confused, and who begs the gentleman to let her go—would she express herself any differently? In these works there are all sorts of characters, an infinite variety of declamations. That's sublime—I'm the one telling you this. Go on, go on and listen to the piece where the young man who feels himself dying, cries out, *Mon coeur s'en va*. Listen to the song. Listen to the instrumental accompaniment, and then tell me what difference there is between the real actions of a man who's dying and the form of the melody. You'll see whether the line of the melody coincides completely with the line of the declamation or not. I'm not going to talk to you about measure, which is another condition of melody. I'm confining myself to the expression, and there is nothing more obvious than the following passage which I read somewhere—*musices seminarium accentus*. Accent is the breeding ground of melody. Judge from that just how difficult and how important it is to know how to deal with recitative well. There is no fine tune from which one cannot make a fine recitative, and no fine recitative from which an expert cannot derive a fine tune. I wouldn't want to guarantee that someone who recites well will also sing well, but I would be surprised if a person who sings well didn't know how to recite well. And you should believe everything I've said about this, because it's the truth.

## Rameau's Nephew

**ME:** I'd like nothing better than to believe you, if I were not held back by one small difficulty.

**HIM:** And this difficulty?

**ME:** Well, it's this—if this music is sublime, then the music of Lully, Campra, Destouches, Mouret, and even, just between us, your dear uncle must be a little dull.

**HIM:** [*coming close and whispering in my ear*] I don't wish to be overheard, for there are plenty of people who know me around here. But their music is dull. It's not that I concern myself much about my dear uncle, if he's "dear" at all. He's a stone. He could look at me with my tongue hanging out a foot and he wouldn't give me a glass of water. But he's done well with the octave, with the seventh—tra la la, rum ti tum, too de loo—with a devilish noise. Still, those who are beginning to understand these things and who'll no longer accept this fussing about for music will never put up with that. There should be a police order forbidding anyone, no matter what their quality or condition, from having Pergolesi's *Stabat* sung. This *Stabat* should have been burned by the public hangman. My God, these damned *Buffons* [*Italian writers of light opera*], with their *Servante Maîtresse* and their *Tracollo* have given us a real kick in the ass. Previously a *Tancredi*, an *Issé*, a *Europe galante*, *les Indes*, *Castor*, and the *Talents lyriques* ran for four, five or six months. Performances of *Armide* went on for ever. Nowadays they fall down around each other, like a house of cards. And Rebel and Francoeur throw fuel on the flames, saying everything is lost, they're ruined, if people tolerate any longer this singing rabble from the circus our national music will go to the devil, and the Royal Academy in the cul-de-sac will have to close up shop. There's some truth in that. The old wigs who have been coming there for thirty or forty years every Friday, instead of enjoying themselves the way they used to in the past, are getting bored and yawning, without knowing why. They ask themselves the question but have no idea how to answer. Why don't they ask me? Duni's prediction will come true, and the way things are going, I'll eat my hat if, in four or five years after *Le Peintre amoureux de son Modèle*, there's a cat left to kick in the celebrated Impasse. Those good people, they've turned their backs on their own symphonies to play Italian symphonies. They thought they could train their ears for these without having any effect on their own vocal music, as if, except for the greater freedom afforded by the reach of the instrument and the mobility of the fingers, the symphony was not related to singing as singing is to real declamation. As if the violin were not the mimic of the singer, who one day will become the imitator of the violin, when what's difficult takes the place of what's beautiful. The first musician who played Locatelli was the apostle of the new music. That's so typical! We'll get accustomed to the imitation of the accents of passion or of natural phenomena by melody and voice, by instruments, because that's the whole extent and purpose of music. And will we retain our taste for robbery, lances, glories, triumphs, and victories? "*Go and see if they come, Jean.*" They imagined that they would laugh or cry at scenes from tragedy or comedy set to music, that the accents of fury, hate, jealousy, the true sorrows of love, the ironies, the jokes of the Italian or French theatre could be presented to their ears and they'd remain admirers of *Ragonde* and *Platée*. I tell you in reply taradiddle, boom boom. Even if they sensed, without interruption, with what ease, what flexibility, what tenderness the harmony, prosody, ellipses, and inversions of the Italian language lend themselves to art, movement, expression, turns of melody, and the measured value of sounds, they'd still remain ignorant of how their music is stiff, dead, heavy, ungainly, pedantic, and monotonous. Yes, yes. They've persuaded themselves that after having mixed their tears in with the crying of a mother who is desolated over the death of her son, after having trembled at the orders of a tyrant commanding a murder, they wouldn't be bored with their fairy land, their insipid mythology, their sugary little madrigals which display the bad taste of the poet as much as the poverty of the art which puts up with them. Such good people! It's not so and can't be. The true, the good, and the beautiful have their rights. One may argue with them, but in the end one admires them. What doesn't bear their stamp people admire for a while, but they end up by yawning. So yawn away, gentlemen, yawn to your heart's content. Don't be embarrassed. The gates of hell will never prevail against the imperial power of nature and my trinity. The true establishes itself gently—it's the father and gives birth to the good, who is the son, and from him comes the beautiful, which is the Holy Ghost. The strange god sets himself up humbly on the altar beside the idol of the country. Gradually, it gets stronger. One fine day it nudges its comrade with an elbow, and, bang crash, the idol is on the floor. They say that's how the Jesuits planted Christianity in China and India. And these Jansenists can say whatever they please, but the political method which marches towards its goal quietly, without bloodshed, without martyrs, without a single tuft of hair being cut off, seems to me the best.

**ME:** There's some reason in everything you've just said.



## Rameau's Nephew

**HIM:** Reason! So much the better. The devil take me if I've been trying to be reasonable. It just comes out somehow or other. I'm like the musicians at the Impasse when my uncle appeared. If I speak well it's because a boy from a coal mine will always speak better of his trade than an entire academy and all the Duhamels of this world.

And then there he goes walking around, humming some tunes from *l'Ile des Fous*, *Peintre amoureux de son Modèle*, *Maréchal-ferrant*, and *Plaideuse*. From time to time he lifted his hand and eyes to the sky and cried out. "Isn't that beautiful, by God? Isn't it beautiful? How could anyone have a pair of ears on his head and even raise such a question?" He began to get worked up and to sing very softly. As he grew even more impassioned, he raised his voice, and then there followed gestures, facial grimaces, and bodily contortions. I say, "All right, there he is off his head, getting some new scene ready." Then, in fact, he set off with a loud shout, "*I am a poor wretch . . . Monseigneur, Monseigneur, let me go . . . O earth, take my gold. Keep my treasure safe . . . My soul, my soul, my life, O earth! . . . There it is, my little friend. There's my little friend! Aspettare e non venire . . . A Zerbina penserete . . . Sempre in contrasti con te si sta . . .*" He crammed together and jumbled up together thirty songs—Italian, French, tragic, comic—in all sorts of different styles. Sometimes in a bass voice he went down all the way to hell, and sometimes he'd feign a falsetto and sing at the top of his voice, tearing into the high points of some songs, imitating the walk, deportment, gestures of the different singing characters, by turns furious, soft, imperious, sniggering. At one point, he's a young girl crying—portraying all her mannerisms—at another point he's a priest, he's a king, he's a tyrant—he threatens, commands, loses his temper. He's a slave. He obeys. He calms down, he laments, he complains, he laughs—never straying from the tone, rhythm, or sense of the words or the character of the song.

All the men pushing wood had left their chess boards and gathered around him. The windows of the café were filled up on the outside by passers-by who'd been stopped by the sound. People gave out bursts of laughter strong enough to break open the ceiling. But he didn't notice a thing. He continued, in the grip of some mental fit, of an enthusiasm so closely related to madness that it's uncertain whether he'll come out of it. It might be necessary to throw him into a cab and take him straight to the lunatic asylum. As he was singing snatches from *Lamentations* by Jomelli, he brought out the most beautiful parts of each piece with precision, truth, and an incredible warmth. That beautiful recitative in which the prophet describes the desolation of Jerusalem he bathed in a flood of tears which brought tears to everyone's eyes. Everything was there—the delicacy of the song, the force of expression, the sorrow. He stressed those places where the composer had particularly demonstrated his great mastery. If he stopped the singing part, it was to take up the part of the instruments, which he left suddenly to return to the vocals, moving from one to the other in such a way as to maintain the connections and the overall unity, taking hold of our souls and keeping them suspended in the most unusual situation which I've ever experienced. Did I admire him? Oh yes, I admired him! Was I touched with pity? I was touched with pity. But a tinge of ridicule was mixed in with these feelings and spoiled them.

But you would've burst out laughing at the way in which he imitated the different instruments. With his cheeks swollen, all puffed out, and with harsh, dark sounds he delivered the horns and bassoons. For the oboes he produced a shrill nasal tone, and then accelerated his voice with an amazing speed for the stringed instruments, trying to find the best approximations for their sounds. He whistled for the piccolos, warbled for the flutes, shouting, singing, carrying on like a maniac, acting out, by himself, the male and female dancers and singers, an entire orchestra, the whole musical company, dividing himself into twenty different roles, running, stopping, looking like a man possessed, frothing at the mouth. It was stifflingly hot, and the sweat running down the wrinkles in his forehead and down the length of his cheeks mixed in with the powder in his hair came down in streaks and lined the top of his coat. What didn't I see him do? He cried, he laughed, he sighed, he looked tender or calm or angry—a woman who was swooning in grief, an unhappy man left in total despair, a temple being built, birds calming down at sunset, waters either murmuring in a cool lonely place or descending in a torrent from the high mountains, a storm, a tempest, the cries of those who are going to die intermingled with the whistling winds, the bursts of thunder, the night, with its shadows—silent and dark—for sounds do depict even silence.

His mind was completely gone. Worn out with fatigue and looking like a man coming out of a deep sleep or a long trance, he stayed motionless, dazed, astonished. He directed his gaze around him, like someone disturbed who's trying to recognize where is. He was waiting for his energy and his spirit to return. Mechanically he wiped

## Rameau's Nephew

his face. Like someone who wakes up to see a large number of people surrounding his bed, totally forgetful of or profoundly ignorant about what's happened. He first cried out, "Well then, gentlemen, what's going on? Why are you laughing? What's so surprising? What's happening?" Then he added, "Now that's what people should call music and a musician. However, gentlemen, we should not deprecate certain pieces of Lully. I defy anyone to improve on the scene '*Ah! j'attendrai*' without changing the words. We should not criticize some places in Campra, the violin pieces of my uncle, his gavottes, his entries for soldiers, priests, those carrying out the sacrifice. . . . "*Pale torches, a night more frightening than shadows . . . God of Tartarus, God of Oblivion.*" At that point, his voice grew loud, he sustained the sounds. The neighbours came to their windows, and we stuffed our fingers in our ears. He added, "Here's where we need lungs, a great organ, plenty of air. But before long it will be time to say yours sincerely good bye to Assumption, Lent, and Epiphany. They still don't know what needs to be set to music and thus what's appropriate for a composer. Lyric poetry has yet to be born. But they'll get there, by hearing Pergolisi, the Saxon, Terradoglias, Trasetta and the rest—by reading Metastasio they'll have to get there."

**ME:** So Quinault, La Motte, and Fontenelle didn't understand any of that?

**HIM:** Not for the new style. There aren't six consecutive lines in all their charming poems which can be set to music. There are ingenious sentences, light madrigals, tender and delicate, but if you want to see how that's a barren resource for our art, which is the most demanding of all—and I don't except the art of Demosthenes—get someone to recite these pieces. You'll find them so cold, listless, and monotonous. There's nothing there which could serve as the basis for a melody. I'd sooner have La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* or Pascal's *Pensées* set to music. The cry of animal passion should dictate the line which suits us. The expressive passages must follow each other closely. The phrasing must be brief, the sense cut off, suspended, so the musician can use the whole piece and each of its parts, leaving out a word or repeating it, adding a missing word, turning and re-turning it, like a polyp, without destroying it—all that makes French lyric poetry much harder than is the case with languages with inversions which in themselves offer all these advantages. "*Cruel barbarian, plunge your dagger in my breast. Here I am ready to receive the fatal blow! Strike. Dare. . . . Oh, I faint, I die. . . . A secret fire lights up my senses. . . . Cruel love, what do you want with me . . . Leave me to the sweet peace I enjoyed . . . Give me my reason. . . .*" The passions must be strong. The tenderness of the composer and the poet should be extreme. The aria is almost always the peroration for the scene. We have to have exclamations, interjections, suspensions, interruptions, affirmations, negations—we call, we invoke, we cry out, we groan, we cry, we laugh openly. No wit, no epigrams, none of these neatly crafted thoughts. That's too far from simple nature. And don't go on thinking that the role playing of theatrical actors and their declamation can serve us as models. Bah! We need something more energetic, less mannered, more true. The straightforward language and common voice of passion are all the more necessary for us because our language is more monotonous and less stressed. The cry of an animal or a man in passion will provide them.

While he was saying these things to me, the crowd which had surrounded us had moved away, either because they couldn't hear anything or were taking less interest in what he was saying. For in general human beings, like children, prefer to be amused than to be instructed. They'd gone back, each to his game, and we remained alone in our corner. Seated on a bench with his head leaning against the wall, his arms hanging down, and his eyes half-closed, he said to me, "I don't know what's the matter with me. When I came here, I was fresh and in good form. And now, here I am beaten up and shattered, as if I'd hiked thirty miles. Something came over me all of a sudden."

**ME:** Would you like some refreshment?

**HIM:** Yes, I'd like that. I feel hoarse. I haven't got any energy, and my chest hurts a bit. It happens to me almost every day, just like that—I've no idea why.

**ME:** What would you like?

**HIM:** Whatever you like. I'm not hard to please. Poverty has taught me to adjust to everything.

They served us some beer and lemonade. He fills a large glass and drains it two or three times, one after the other. Then, like a man with renewed energy he coughs, moves around, and starts again.

"But in your view, my Master Philosopher, isn't it something really odd that a foreigner, an Italian, a Duni, should come to teach us how to use accents in our music, to adapt our melodies to all the movements, measures, intervals, all the forms of speech, without hurting our prosody? And yet it wasn't all that difficult to do, not like

## Rameau's Nephew

drinking the sea. Anyone who'd ever heard a beggar asking for a hand out in the street, a man carried away by anger, a jealous and furious woman, a despairing lover, a flatterer, yes, a flatterer, softening his voice, drawing out his syllables in a voice like honey—in short, anyone who'd ever heard passion of some sort or other, provided that its energy made it worthy of serving as a model for a composer, should have recognized two things: first, that the syllables, long or short, have no fixed length, nor even a set relationship between their lengths and, second, that passion uses prosody almost as it likes—it can work across the greatest intervals. A man who cries out in the depths of his grief, 'Ah, what an unhappy creature I am,' lifts the opening syllable of exclamation to the highest and shrillest note and brings the others down to the most solemn and low notes, going through the octave or an even greater interval, giving to each sound the quantity which suits the turn of the melody, without offending the ear, and without either the long or the short syllables maintaining the length or brevity of normal speech. How far we've come since the time when we used to point to the parenthetical comments in *Armide*—"The conqueror of Renaud, if anyone can be"—or "Obey, don't hesitate" from *Indes galantes*—as amazing moments of musical expression! Right now these amazing moments make me shrug my shoulders with pity. The way art is improving, I don't know where it'll end up. So while we're waiting, let's have another drink."

He had two or three more drinks, without knowing what he was doing. He was going to drown himself without realizing it, as if he was totally exhausted, if I hadn't moved the bottle, which he kept looking for absent mindedly. Then I spoke to him.

**ME:** How is it that with such fine discrimination and such a strong sensibility for the beauties of musical art, you are also blind to the beautiful things in morality and equally insensible to the charms of virtue?

**HIM:** I suppose it's because there's a sense for some things which I lack, a fibre which I wasn't given, a loose fibre which one can pluck firmly but which will not vibrate, or perhaps it's because I've always lived among good musicians and bad people, so that it's made my ear become very refined and my heart deaf. And then there was something about heredity. My father's blood and my uncle's blood are the same. My blood is the same as my father's. My paternal molecule was hard and stubborn, and this damned first molecule has swallowed up the rest.

**ME:** Do you love your child?

**HIM:** Do I love the little savage? I'm crazy about him.

**ME:** Are you seriously concerned about stopping the effects in him of this damned paternal molecule?

**HIM:** I've been working on it—but without much effect, I think. If he's destined to become a good man, I won't do him any injury. But if the molecule wants him to become a scoundrel like his father, the troubles I've taken to make him a decent man could be very harmful. Education would work against the tendency of the molecule, and he'd be pulled apart, as if by two opposing forces, and would stagger all over the place along the road of life, as I seen in countless people, equally awkward in doing good or bad. Those are the ones we call "types"—which is the most frightening of all labels, because it indicates mediocrity and the final degree of contempt. A great scoundrel is a great scoundrel, but he's not a type. It would require an enormous length of time before the paternal molecule could reassert its mastery and take him to the state of perfect debasement where I am. He'd lose his best years. So I'm doing nothing about it at the moment. I'll let him come along. I'll keep my eye on him. He is already greedy, glib—a lazy thief and a liar. I'm afraid he's true to his heredity.

**ME:** Why not make a musician of him, so he'll be just like you?

**HIM:** A musician! A musician! Sometimes I look at him and grind my teeth, telling him, "If you ever learn a single note, I believe I'll wring your neck."

**ME:** And why on earth would you do that?

**HIM:** It doesn't lead to anything.

**ME:** It leads to everything.

**HIM:** Yes, when one excels, but who can promise himself that his child will excel? The odds are ten thousand to one that he'll be nothing but an unhappy scraper of strings, like me. You know, it would probably be easier to find a child suited to govern a kingdom, to make a great king, than one to make a great violin player.

**ME:** It seems to me that agreeable talents, even mediocre ones, among a people without morals, lost in debauchery and luxury, would enable a man to advance rapidly along the road to fortune. I myself once heard the following conversation between some sort of patron and a kind of protégé. The latter had been recommended to the former as a pleasant man who could be of service to him. "Sir, what do you know?" "I know mathematics passably well." "All right, but after you've taught mathematics ten or twelve years you'll be covered with mud

## Rameau's Nephew

from the streets of Paris and you'll be entitled to an income of between three and four hundred pounds." "I've studied our laws, and I'm well versed in our legal system." "If Puffendorf and Grotius were to return to earth, they'd die of hunger beside some road marker." "I know a lot about history and geography." "If there were parents who'd set their hearts on a good education for their children, your fortune would be made, but there are none." "I am a competent musician." "Well, why didn't you say so right away. Just to show you what you can gain from such a talent, I have a daughter. Come around every day between seven and seven-thirty in the evening until nine. You'll give her lessons, and I'll give you twenty-five louis per year. You'll have breakfast, lunch, and dinner with us. The rest of the day will belong to you. You can do with it whatever works to your benefit."

**HIM:** And what became of this man?

**ME:** If he'd been wise, he'd have made a fortune, which is the only thing you seem to think about.

**HIM:** No doubt. Gold, some gold. Gold is everything, and the rest, without gold, is nothing. So instead of cramming his head with fine maxims which he'd have to forget or else be nothing but a beggar, whenever I have a louis, which isn't often, I stand in front of him. I pull the louis out of my pocket. I show it to him with admiration. I raise my eyes to the ceiling. I kiss the louis right in front of him. And to make him understand even better the importance of this sacred coin, I stammer out the words, I point out to him with my finger everything one can acquire with this coin—a fine frock, a pretty hat, a tasty biscuit. Then I put the louis in my pocket. I walk around with pride. I lift up my coattails and strike my hand against my fob pocket, to make him understand that it's the coin in there that gives rise to the self-assurance he sees in me.

**ME:** One could do no better. What if it happens one day that, deeply impressed with the value of the louis . . .

**HIM:** I see where you're going. One has to close one's eyes to that. There is no principle of morality which doesn't have some inconvenience. At the worst, one has a bad fifteen minutes, and then it's all over.

**ME:** Even after such courageous and such wise opinions, I continue to think that it would be good to make him a musician. I'd don't know any way one can get close to important people more quickly, pander to their vices, and make a profit from one's own.

**HIM:** It's true, but I have plans for a faster and more assured success. Oh, if the child were only a daughter! But since we can't do what we want, we have to take what comes and get the best we can from that. And for that, one shouldn't be stupid, like most fathers who give a Spartan education to a child destined to live in Paris. They couldn't do any worse if they were intending to make their children unhappy. If education is poor, it's the fault of my country's customs, not mine. Whoever's responsible, I want my son to be happy or, what amounts to the same thing, honoured, rich, and powerful. I know a few of the easiest ways to arrive at this goal, and I'll teach him those early on. If you criticize me, you wise men, the mob and my child's success will absolve me. He'll have gold—I assure you—and if he has a lot of that, he won't lack anything, not even your estimation and respect.

**ME:** You could be wrong.

**HIM:** Well then, he'll go without, like plenty of other people.

In everything he said there were so many things one thinks about and acts upon but which one does not say. And, to tell you the truth, that's the most remarkable difference between my man and most of those around us. He admitted the vices he had, which are those other men possess, but he wasn't a hypocrite. He was neither more nor less abominable than they were. He was only more candid, more consistent, and sometimes more profound in his depravity. I trembled to think what his child could become with a teacher like him. It's certain that after educational ideas so strictly tailored to our morality, he would go far, unless he was prematurely stopped along the way.

**HIM:** Come now, you needn't be afraid. The important point, the difficult point which a father has to attend to above all is not so much to give his child vices that will make him wealthy or foolish behaviour that will make him valuable to great people—everyone does that, if not systematically, as I do, at least by example and in lessons—but to give him a sense of proportion, the art of dodging shame, dishonour, and the law. Those are dissonances in the social harmony which he must know how to set up, prepare, and resolve. Nothing is so insipid as a sequence of perfect chords. There has to be something which acts as a spur, which breaks up the light and scatters its rays.

**ME:** That's very good. With this comparison you bring me back from morality to music, which I'd strayed from in spite of myself. I thank you for that, for, to be perfectly frank with you, I like you better as a musician than as a moralist.

## Rameau's Nephew

**HIM:** But I'm very second-rate in music and much better as a moralist.

**ME:** I doubt it, but even if that were true, I'm a good man, and your principles are not the same as mine.

**HIM:** So much the worse for you. Ah, if I only had your talents.

**ME:** Leave my talents out of it. Let's get back to yours.

**HIM:** If only I knew how to express myself like you. But my way of speaking is such a devilish mixture—half from the people of the literary world, half from the street market.

**ME:** I speak badly. I only know how to speak the truth, and that's not always welcome, as you know.

**HIM:** But I envy your talent not because I want to speak the truth but in order to tell lies well. If I could write, do up a book, turn out a dedicatory epistle, intoxicate a fool with his own merit, insinuate myself close to women.

**ME:** In all that you're a thousand times more capable than I am. I wouldn't even be worthy to be your pupil.

**HIM:** How many great qualities wasted. And you aren't even aware of their value.

**ME:** I collect back everything I put into them.

**HIM:** If that were the case, you wouldn't have this coarse coat, this muslin vest, these wool socks, these thick shoes, and this ancient wig.

**ME:** I agree. One must be very inept if one is not rich after stopping at nothing to become wealthy. But the fact is there are people like me who do not consider riches the most precious thing in the world—strange people.

**HIM:** Very odd. We aren't born with this frame of mind. One has to acquire it, because it's not natural.

**ME:** Not natural to men?

**HIM:** No, not to men. Everything living, including human beings, seeks benefits for itself at the expense of whoever they belong to. And I'm sure that if I left the little savage to go his own way, without speaking to him about anything, he'd want to be richly clothed, splendidly fed, liked by men, and adored by women, and would like to gather round him all the fine things of life.

**ME:** If the little savage were left to himself so that he retained all his imbecility, uniting the little reason possessed by a child in the cradle with the passionate violence in a man thirty years old, he'd wring his father's neck and sleep with his mother.

**HIM:** That proves the need for a good education. Who'll argue about that? And what's a fine education if not one which leads to all sorts of pleasures, without danger and without inconvenience?

**ME:** I almost share your opinion, but let's not explore that.

**HIM:** Why not?

**ME:** Well, I'm afraid we may only appear to agree and, if we once enter into a discussion of the dangers and the difficulties which need to be avoided, we won't agree any more.

**HIM:** And what's the problem with that?

**ME:** Let's leave it, I'm telling you. For I know I could never teach you about these things and it's much easier for you to teach me about music—things I don't understand and you do. Dear Rameau, let's talk music. Tell me how it comes about that with your ability to feel, to remember and deliver the finest passages of the grand masters with the enthusiasm which inspires you and which you transmit to others, you've done nothing worth anything.

Instead of answering me, he began to shake his head. Then, raising his finger to the sky he added, "The star! My star! When nature made Leo, Vinci, Pergolese, and Duni, she smiled. She assumed an imposing and serious expression when she formed my dear uncle Rameau, whom people will call the Great Rameau for ten years and then, in a little while, won't mention any more. When nature did up his nephew, she made grimace after grimace, and then grimaced again." While he uttered these words, he made all sorts of faces—disgust, disdain, irony—and he seemed to be kneading in his fingers a piece of dough and smiling at the ridiculous shapes he made with it. This done, he threw the misshapen idol far away from him and said, "That's how nature made me and threw me away, alongside other idols, some with shriveled stomachs, short necks, huge eyes outside their heads, apoplectic, others with wry necks, wizened, with a vibrant eye and a hooked nose. All of them started to laugh when they saw me. And I put my two fists against my sides and exploded with laughter when I saw them, for fools and madmen amuse each other. They seek each other out. They attract each other. If, on my arrival here, I hadn't found ready made the proverb which says "A fool's money is the inheritance of a man with brains" I'd have invented it. I felt that nature had put what was legitimately mine into the safe keeping of these idols, so I devised thousands of ways of getting it back for myself.

**ME:** I know these methods. You've told me about them, and I admired them a lot. But with such resources,

## Rameau's Nephew

why haven't you attempted creating a fine work of art?

**HIM:** That's what a man of the world said to Abbé Le Blanc. . . . The abbé replied, "The Marquise of Pompadour takes me by the hand, leads me right to the threshold of the Academy, and there she removes her hand. I fall down and break both my legs." The man of the world answered him, "All right, abbé, you must get up and bash in the door with your head." The abbé replied, "That what I tried to do, and do you know what happened to me? I got a bump on my forehead."

After this little story, my man began to move around with his head held down and a pensive and demoralized expression. He sighed and wept. He was upset. Raising his hands and his eyes, he banged his head with his fist, hard enough to break his forehead or his fingers, and he added, "It seems to me that there could be something in there, but no matter how hard I knock or shake it, nothing emerges." Then he began shaking his head and hitting his forehead again even more firmly, saying, "Either no one is in there or they won't answer."

A moment later, he took on a proud attitude. He raised his head, laid his right hand over his heart, walked along and said, "I feel. Yes, I do feel.." He imitated for me a man who was getting annoyed, who was indignant, who was feeling moved, who was issuing orders, who was begging. He improvised speeches of anger, sympathy, hatred, love. He sketched out passionate characters with a surprising delicacy and fidelity. Then he added, "That's it, I think. It's coming along. That's what it is to find a midwife who knows how to stimulate and bring on the labour pains and make the child emerge. When I'm alone, I take up my pen, intending to write. I bite my nails. I wear out my forehead. No good. Good night. The god is absent. I'd persuaded myself that I had some genius, but at the end of a line I read that I am a fool, a fool, a fool. But how does one feel, raise oneself, think, or describe anything with energy when one hangs out with people like those it's necessary to see in order to live, in the midst of the comments one makes and hears and gossip like this, 'Today the boulevard was charming. Did you hear the little Marmotte? She played enchantingly. Mr. Someone-or-Other has the most beautiful dappled grays in harness you could ever imagine. As for lovely Madame So-and-So, she's beginning to get past it. At the age of forty-five, does one have one's hair done like that? That young What's-her-name is covered with diamonds which didn't cost her much.' 'You mean to say which cost her a lot?' 'Not at all.' 'Where did you see her?' 'At *L'Enfant d'Arlequin perdu et retrouvé*. The scene of despair was acted out as never before. The Punch at the fair can really shout but has no finesse, no soul. Madame Such-and-Such has given birth to two children at once. Each father will have his own.' Do you think stuff like that spoken, repeated, and heard every day inspires and leads to great things?"

**ME:** No. It would be more worthwhile to shut yourself up in your attic, drink water, eat dry bread, and find your real self.

**HIM:** Perhaps. But I don't have the courage for that. And then to sacrifice one's happiness for an uncertain success. And what about the name I carry? Rameau! To be called Rameau—that's embarrassing. Talent is not like nobility which can be passed on and whose lustre increases as it goes from grandfather to father, from father to son, from son to grandson, without the grandparent requiring his descendant to have any merit. The old stock branches out into an enormous line of fools, but who cares? It's not like that with talent. In order to acquire nothing more than the reputation of one's father, it's necessary to be more skilled than he is. You have to have inherited his fibre. I lack the fibre. But my wrist is flexible, the bow moves, and the pot boils. If it's not glory, well, it's food.

**ME:** In your place, I wouldn't assume it's all said and done with. I'd make an attempt.

**HIM:** And you think I haven't tried. I wasn't fifteen years old when I first said to myself, "What are you up to, Rameau? You're dreaming. And what are you dreaming about? That you'd like to have done or do something which excites the admiration of the universe. Well, then, you just have to blow on your fingers and wiggle them. Just get started, and you'll be there." At a more advanced age, I repeated what I'd said to myself in my childhood. Today, I'm still repeating it, and I'm standing by the statue of Memnon.

**ME:** What do you mean talking about the statue of Memnon?

**HIM:** That's obvious enough, it seems to me. Around the statue of Memnon there were numberless other statues which the sun's rays struck just as much, but Memnon's statue was the only one which produced a sound. Who's a poet? Well, there's Voltaire. And who else? Voltaire. And a third? Voltaire. And a fourth? Voltaire. And musicians? There's Rinaldo da Capoua, Hasse, Pergolese, Alberti, Tartinin, Locatelli, Terradoglias; there's my uncle, and little Duni who's nothing to look at, no figure, but who feels, my God, who has melody and expression.

## Rameau's Nephew

The others around this small number of Memnons are just so many pairs of ears stuck on the end of sticks. And we're beggars, so poor it's a miracle. Oh, Mister Philosopher, poverty is a terrible thing. I see her crouching there, with her mouth gaping open to receive a few drops of icy cold water dripping from the barrel of the Danaids. I don't know if she sharpens the mind of the philosopher, but she has a devilish way of cooling off the head of a poet. People don't sing well under this barrel. The man who can get himself under it is only too lucky. I was there, and I didn't know how to keep my place. I'd already done that stupid thing once before. I'd been traveling in Bohemia, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Flanders, all over the damned country.

**ME:** Under the leaky barrel.

**HIM:** Under the leaky barrel. The man was a rich Jew who was happy to splash his money around. He liked music and my silly jokes. I played music—just the way that made God happy—and I played the fool. I didn't lack anything. My Jew was a man who understood his law and who observed it strictly in every detail, sometimes with a friend, always with strangers. He got himself in bad trouble which I must tell you about, because it's amusing. In Utrecht there was a charming prostitute. He was attracted to this Christian and sent her a messenger with quite a large letter of credit. The strange creature rejected his offer. The Jew grew desperate. The messenger told him, “Why are you so upset by this? You want to sleep with a good-looking woman. Nothing is easier, even to sleep with one more beautiful than the one you're chasing. That's my wife. I'll let you have her for the same price.” No sooner said than done. The messenger keeps the letter of credit, and my Jew sleeps with the messenger's wife. The due date for the letter of credit arrives. The Jew allows the letter to be challenged and disputes its validity. A trial. The Jew tells himself, “The man will never dare to reveal what right he has to possess my letter, and I'll not have to pay him.” At the hearing, he interrogates the messenger, “This letter of credit, who did you get it from?” “From you.” “Is it for a loan?” “No.” “Is it for the sale of merchandise?” “No.” “Is it for services rendered?” “No, but that's not the point. I'm in possession of the letter. You signed it, and you can discharge it.” “I didn't sign it.” “So then I'm a forger?” “You or someone else who you're acting for.” “I'm a coward, but you're a scoundrel. Believe me, don't push me to the limit. I'll tell everything. I'll dishonour myself, but I'll sink you.” The Jew paid no attention to the threat, and at the next hearing the messenger revealed the entire affair. They were both reprimanded, and the Jew was condemned to pay off the letter of credit, and the money was applied to the relief of the poor. At that point I left him, and came back here. What was I to do? I had to do something or die of poverty. All sorts of plans went through my head. One day, I was going to leave tomorrow to join up with a troupe traveling through the provinces—I'd be equally good or bad in the theatre or in the orchestra. The next day, I was dreaming of getting someone to paint for me one of those pictures attached to a pole which people set up in a public crossroad, where I'd have shouted my head off, “There's the town where he was born. Here he is leaving his father the apothecary. Here he is arriving in the capital, looking for his uncle's residence. Here he is on his knees before his uncle, who is chasing him away. Here he is with a Jew,” and so on and so on. The next day, I'd get up firmly resolved to join up with the street singers. That's not the worst thing I could've done. We could've gone to give a concert under my dear uncle's windows. He'd have collapsed with rage. But I chose something else.

At that point he stopped and assumed, in succession, the pose of a man who's holding a violin, turning his arms to tighten the strings, and then the pose of a poor devil worn out with exhaustion, with no energy, whose limbs wobbled, ready to die if someone didn't throw him a piece of bread. He showed his extreme need with the gesture of a finger pointing towards his half open mouth. Then he added, “You see what I mean. They'd toss me the loaf, and three or four of us, all famished, would fight over it. So go on, then—think grand thoughts, create beautiful things in an environment of such distress.”

**ME:** That's difficult.

**HIM:** From one tumble to the next—I fell into that job. I was in clover. Now I've left it. Now I have to scrape the gut once again, and come back to that gesture with my finger pointing towards my gaping mouth. Nothing's very stable in this world. Today at the top of the wheel, tomorrow at the bottom. Damned circumstances lead us along, and lead us really badly.

Then, drinking up what remained at the bottom of the bottle, he spoke to the man next to him: “Sir, would you be so good as to give me a pinch of snuff. That's a lovely box you have there. Are you a musician?” “No.” “All the better for you, for they're poor buggers, a pitiful bunch. Destiny wanted me to be a musician, while in a mill in Montmartre there's perhaps a miller or a miller's helper who never listens to anything but the sound of the ratchet but who'd have made up some fine songs. Rameau, go to the mill—the mill that's where you belong.”

## Rameau's Nephew

**ME:** Whatever a man devotes himself to, nature has destined him for that.

**HIM:** She makes some strange blunders. In my case, I'm not looking down from that height where everything merges into one—where the man who prunes a tree with cutters and the caterpillar who eats the leaves seem nothing but two different insects, each doing his own work. Go and perch on the epicycle of Mercury and from there, like Reamur who classifies flies into seamstresses, surveyors, and harvesters, you can divide up the human species into woodworkers, carpenters, roofers, dancers, singers—whatever you like. I won't get involved in it. I'm in the world, and I'm staying here. But if it's part of nature to have an appetite—for it's always appetite I come back to, to the feeling which is always present in me—I find that it's not part of a good order if one doesn't always have something to eat. It's a damnable economy with men who cram themselves with everything while others whose stomachs are just as demanding as theirs and have a recurring hunger like theirs have nothing to chew on. The worst thing is the way our need compels us to a certain posture. The man in need doesn't walk like another man—he jumps, he grovels, he wriggles, he crawls. He spends his life taking up and carrying out various positions.

**ME:** What are these positions?

**HIM:** Go and ask Noverre. The world offers many more positions than his art can imitate.

**ME:** So there you are, too, if I can use your expression or rather Montaigne's, perched on the epicycle of Mercury, contemplating the different pantomimes of the human species.

**HIM:** No, no I'm telling you. I'm too heavy to raise myself so high. Those misty regions I leave to the cranes. I move around from one piece of earth to another. I look around me, and I take up my positions, or I amuse myself with positions which I have derived from others. I'm an excellent mimic, as you're going to see.

The he begins to smile, to imitate a man admiring, begging, obliging. He sets his right foot forward, his left behind, with his back bent over, his head raised, with his gaze looking directly into another person's eyes, his mouth half open, his arms stretched out towards some object. He waits for his orders. He receives them. He dashes off, comes back. He's done the job and is giving an account of it. He attends to everything. He picks up what falls down. He puts a pillow or a footstool under someone's feet. He holds a saucer. He goes up to a chair. He opens a door. He closes a window. He pulls the curtains. He observes the master and mistress. He is immobile, his arms hanging down, his legs lined up straight. He listens. He seeks to read what's on their faces. And he continues, “That's my pantomime, almost the same as what flatterers, prostitutes, valets, and beggars do.”

The antics of this man, the stories of Abbé Galiani, and the extravagances of Rabelais sometimes force me to me profound reflections. They are three stores where I have acquired for myself some ridiculous masks which I put over the faces of the most serious people. I see Pantalón in prelate, a satyr in a judge, a pig in a monk, an ostrich in a minister, and a goose in his first deputy.

**ME:** But by your count there are lots of beggars in this world, and I don't know anyone who doesn't do some steps in that dance of yours.

**HIM:** You're right. In the entire kingdom, there's only one man who walks. That's the king. All the rest take up positions.

**ME:** The king? Isn't there more to it than that? Don't you think that, from time to time, he finds beside him a little foot, a little curl, a little nose which makes him go through a small pantomime? Whoever needs someone else is a beggar and takes up a position. The king takes up a position before his mistress and before God. He goes through the paces of his pantomime. The minister goes through the paces of prostitute, flatterer, valet, or beggar in front of his king. The crowds of ambitious people dance your positions in hundreds of ways, each more vile than the others, in front of the minister. The noble abbé in his bands of office and his long cloak goes at least once a week in front of the agent in charge of the list of benefices. My goodness, what you call the pantomime of beggars is what makes the earth go round. Everyone has his little Hus and his Bertin.

**HIM:** That's a great consolation.

But while I was speaking, he was imitating in a killingly funny way the positions of the persons I was naming. For example, for the little abbé, he held his hat under his arm and his breviary in his left hand; in his right hand he lifted up the train of his cloak. He came forward, with his head a little inclined towards his shoulders, his eyes lowered, imitating the hypocrite so perfectly that I believed I was looking at the author of the *Refutations* appearing before the Bishop of Orleans. For the flatterers and for the ambitious he crawled along on his belly—just like Bouret at the Ministry of Finance.



## Rameau's Nephew

**ME:** That's done extremely well. But there's one creature who can do without pantomime. That's the philosopher who has nothing and who demands nothing.

**HIM:** Where's there an animal like that? If he has nothing, he suffers. If he's not asking for anything, he'll get nothing, and he'll be suffering for ever.

**ME:** No. Diogenes mocked his needs.

**HIM:** But we have to have clothing.

**ME:** No. He went about totally naked.

**HIM:** Sometimes the weather was cold in Athens.

**ME:** Less so than here.

**HIM:** People eat there.

**ME:** No doubt.

**HIM:** At whose expense?

**ME:** At nature's. Where does the savage turn? To the earth, to animals, to fish, to trees, to grasses, to roots, to streams.

**HIM:** A bad menu.

**ME:** It's a big one.

**HIM:** But badly served.

**ME:** Still, it's nature's table that serves to cover our own.

**HIM:** But you'll admit that the work of our cooks, pastry cooks, sellers of roast meats, caterers, and confectioners adds something of their own to it. With the austere diet of your Diogenes, it wouldn't do to have organs that were easily upset.

**ME:** But you're wrong. The habits of the cynic were the habits of our monks, with the same virtue. The cynics were the Carmelites and Cordeliers of Athens.

**HIM:** I'll take you up on that. Diogenes also danced his pantomime, if not in front of Pericles, at least in front of Lais or Phryne.

**ME:** You're wrong again. Other people used to pay a prostitute well who gave herself to him for pleasure.

**HIM:** But what happened if the prostitute was busy and the cynic was in a hurry?

**ME:** He'd go back to his barrel and manage without her.

**HIM:** And you're advising me to imitate Diogenes?

**ME:** I'll bet my life it's better than crawling, demeaning and prostituting oneself.

**HIM:** But I need a good bed, a fine table, warm clothing in winter, cool clothing in summer, spare time, money, and lots of other things which I prefer to owe to charity than to acquire by work.

**ME:** That's because you're a good-for-nothing, greedy coward—with a soul of mud.

**HIM:** I think I've told you that.

**ME:** Things in life no doubt have a price, but you've no idea of the sacrifice you're making to obtain them. You dance, you have danced, and you'll continue to dance the vile pantomime.

**HIM:** It's true. But it hasn't cost me much and isn't costing me any more for all that. And that's the reason I'd be making a mistake to take up some other way of getting along which would bring me grief and which I wouldn't keep up. But I see from what you've told me that my poor little wife was a sort of philosopher. She was as brave as a lion. Sometimes we didn't have any bread or any money. We'd sold just about all our old clothes. I'd throw myself at the foot of our bed and rack my brains to find someone who could lend me an écu which I wouldn't repay. She was as happy as a lark. She'd sit down at her keyboard and accompany herself while singing. She had a voice like a nightingale. I'm sorry you never heard her. When I had some concert to go to, I'd take her with me. On the way I'd say to her, "Come on then, Madame, make them look up to you. Display your talent and your charm. Up with you. Knock them out." We'd arrive. She'd sing. She'd rise to the occasion and knock them out. Alas, I lost her, the poor little thing. Apart from her talent, she had a small mouth, big enough to put your finger in, her teeth were a row of pears, her eyes, feet, skin, cheeks, breasts, limbs like a deer, thighs and buttocks all fit for a sculptor's model. Sooner or later, she'd have had the Farmer General. What a walk she had, what a rump! Oh God, what a rump!

And there he was starting to imitate his wife's walk. He took little paces. He held his head high. He played with a fan. He wiggled his backside. It was the most agreeable and ridiculous caricature of our little prostitutes.

## Rameau's Nephew

Then, picking up the thread of his remarks, he added, "I used to walk with her everywhere—to the Tuileries, to the Palais Royal, on the Boulevards. It was impossible that she'd go on living with me. When she crossed the road in the morning without a hat in a really short skirt you'd have stopped to look at her. And you could've encircled her waist in your fingers without pinching her. The men who followed her, who watched her mincing along on her small feet and measured that large rump whose shape was outlined by her thin petticoats, walked more quickly. She'd let them come up. Then she'd turn around suddenly confronting them with her two large, black, shining eyes. That stopped them in their tracks. For the front part of the medal was as good as the back. But, alas, I lost her. And my hopes for a fortune have all vanished with her. That's the only reason I married her. I confided all my schemes to her, and she had too much intelligence not to see how right they were and too much judgment not to approve of them."

Then there he was sobbing and crying, as he said, "No, no, I'll never get over it. Ever since, I've taken to wearing bands and a skull cap."

**ME:** From grief?

**HIM:** If you like. But the real reason is to have my bowl on my head. . . . But look at the time. I have to go to the opera.

**ME:** What's playing?

**HIM:** Something by Dauvergne. There are quite a few fine things in his music. It's a pity that he wasn't the first to write them. There are always a few dead people who upset the living. That's just the way it is. *Quisque suos patimur manes* [Each of us has ancestors we must endure]. It's half past five. I hear the bell sounding for vespers for the Abbé de Canaye and for me. Farewell, Mister Philosopher. Isn't it true that I'm always the same?

**ME:** Alas, yes—unfortunately.

**HIM:** Well, I hope this misfortune keeps going for only another forty years. The man who'll laugh last, will laugh best.

[Back to johnstonia Home Page]