

Excerpts from  
Knowing Simone

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'He's an evil fellow,' I said.

'Worse than a house thief?' she said, without tact.

'Madame. I only robbed from the rich.'

'You mean, like me?'

'Simone! I was only a student.'

I could see her calculating and reflecting on my statement.

'Then you will join our board?'

'Not that again.'

'I trust you won't be tempted to rob yourself.'

'Well I would join, but not until you congratulate me on my ruse. Perhaps then.'

'D'accord. Merci. So there. You have it. Now will you join?'

'And what about sharing your plans with all of us? We have lost time and strength with your secrets.'

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As I revolted from all forms of compulsion, I found time to set sail for the excitements of Marseilles' port and harbour. There sailors and strong-armed dockworkers infused the air with a confidence and bonhomie that excited a student of surveying, as my surveying took a rakish intent.

Yet my modest efforts in Simone's home gave me blithe pleasure, bemused by the irony of cleaning a largish house that once I would have robbed. Whilst singing like a drunken sailor in a crow's nest, I dined on memories of our night's lovemaking with its intimacies and humour, reimagining Simone's face close to mine, divining her being and concocting new means of glimpsing her past.

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In the Chamber de Deputies, Adolphe Cremieu rose from his plush seat, sweeping imaginary lint from his coat lapel, planting his feet to the Chamber deputies before him.

'Gentlemen of the Chamber. Gentlemen of good birth and better education.'

Many of the representatives laughed at that jibe.

'What can we say about our Minister for Railways? By the evidence of our rigorous newspapers, quite an amount. The Minister has ensured that our rail passengers enjoy chocolates at every station. Splendid! A good thing for a man who owns a chocolate factory, so ready and able to help.'

'Shut him up,' called his opponents.

'You are a disgrace,' shouted another.

'Deputy Cremieu,' said the Chair, 'if you have the question of legislative importance, would you put your it?'

Adophe Cremeiu smiled to the Chairman, a man who had enjoyed his hospitality at dinner parties and nights at the Opera for many years.

‘Thank you, Honourable Chair. I am coming to that.’

Cremieu patted his moustache like a cat preening its whiskers before pouncing.

‘I ask the Minister: how goes his divorce? I ask the Minister whether the recent accusations in our newspapers are correct? I ask the Minister whether it is right and proper to hold office when such outrages have been committed against womanhood? I ask the minister: do we all assume that he will vigorously defend his honour, and whether he has time to pursue his proper duties at such a time? I ask the Minister: has the Emperor, who has frequently defended women from a husband’s excesses, spoken to him about these proceedings? Has our majestic Emperor suggested that the Minister’s questionable position is damaging government? Indeed: is there not disquiet, shock and dismay that the Emperor has not yet acted in accordance with his stated high principles?’

There were outraged interruptions of Cremeiu’s questions, shouts and angry dissent continuing over the Chair’s beating gavel, and the stamping of feet.

‘Enough,’ said the Chair. ‘The Minister can only address the question of the performance of his Minister’s duties. The other questions are out of order.’

Cremieu stood there, statuesque.

‘Sit down,’ said the chair.

Cremieu sat just as Minister Jessai rose, fury on his face.

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In those first weeks, her passion outshone my own. Her desires formed a wave that might knock another over and drown the boldest sailor. If I were without bearings in the swelling seas and tides of her lust, I would not throw overboard my firm resolve.

For all that, we fell into a routine. Whether passion bound or in fraternal embrace, each morning in the dark of six, Simone’s clock sounded its alarm. As it assaulted my ears, I kept my head beneath a pillow, cursing that piece of machinery for taking her from me. I heard her make her way to the hand basin, prepared for work, and left. Even if she were tired by an active night or a dalliance before dawn, nothing stopped her. She quietly attended her dresser, readied in half an hour, gave me a light kiss before walking to the workshop with a conserve in her hand.

My mornings began well after, woken by those on the street, by its crowing roosters or pigeons scuffling over roofs and ledges. Retreating to my cottage, I would emerge later from the back lane, buy bread and pastry for the day, and eat whatever was available during the day. I had never had such a regular schedule, and were it not for Simone’s example, I might never have broken the anarchist’s creed of wilful indifference.