

The man of letters.

*L'HOMME DE lettres*, in an ivory suit spattered with alphabet letters, climbed the steps of the Detroit Public Library shortly before it was to close for the day. Calm as Dostoevsky's idiot Prince Myshkin, he seemed apart from time and the universe, neither reflecting them or absorbing them, unconscious of them. He tipped his mortar board to a departing damsel, entered the library, and engaged the first person he met. "If it behooves you, *madame*," said the man of letters in an alluring French accent, "could you direct me to the master of this academy?"

The librarian lowered her chin to peer over her reading glasses. "What may I help you with?"

The man of letters looked askance. "You, *une belle femme*, help me? I would like some books."

"Of course. Are you a student?"

"A student!" The man of letters' face lit up. "Yes! A student of the world, a student of life, a student of ideas. Ideas reposed in books, books composed of words, words which I collect." His eyebrows tilted inward and he fixed on her eyes. "What books do you suggest, *mademoiselle*? My preferences are the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to which I am *nouveau*."

"Quite the challenging patron, aren't you. Very good. Let's see. You collect words. Some writers with notable vocabularies would be just the thing." She pushed up her reading glasses to peruse the card catalogue. The man of letters clasped his

hands behind his back and considered her architecture. After several minutes she presented him with a list of authors.

“Here we go,” she said. “Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*; Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*; they wrote all things marine. Thomas Hardy’s vocabulary was unique, but don’t read him if you’re depressed. To read Ambrose Bierce, you’ll need a dictionary. Gerard Manley Hopkins’ vocabulary is deceptive. He doesn’t use ‘big’ words; he uses short, dense words. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, if you can get through it. He coined a lot of words. Samuel Becket. Try the story “Yellow.” T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*; that antiquated diction is astounding.”

The librarian caught her breath. It was a *tour de force*.

“One more. Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Ws sounds like Vs. He wrote about language. *Philosophical Investigations*. He was a genius.

“And there are women of letters,” she continued. “Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Ayn Rand, Simone de Beauvoir.”

“Women of letters. Like Hypatia?”

“Something like Hypatia,” concurred the librarian. “But not flayed to death like she was.”

“*Très bien, très bien. Merci beaucoup.* Where may I find these books?”

“Do you have a library card?”

“Library card?”

“Library card. For the books. Are you a Detroit resident?”

“Non.”

“Then I’m afraid you can’t check out the books.” They both looked glum.

“Regrettable,” said the man of letters. “Just when we were finding common ground. Could you refer me, then, to a *salon*? Surely a *salon* is nearby.”

“You’ll be quite handsome with a haircut, but I don’t know of any salons around here. Do you mean a saloon? We do have plenty of those but they go by different names.”

“*Mon chéri*, you are so direct! It would be my honor and delight to partake of a glass of wine with you.”

“And mine as well,” assented the librarian. She put her hair up in a quick French bun and got her *petite* purse, and the two made haste for the door. “By the way, where in the world did you get that suit?”

“Is it not appropriate? Perhaps I should’ve worn the Greek or the Latin.”

“*Monsieur*, clothes do not always make the man. It is enough that you collect words.”

“You humble me, *mon amour*,” said the man of letters. “Might this saloon have parlor games?”

The librarian hooked her arm through his and giggled coquettishly. “Have you ever heard of Scrabble?”

#