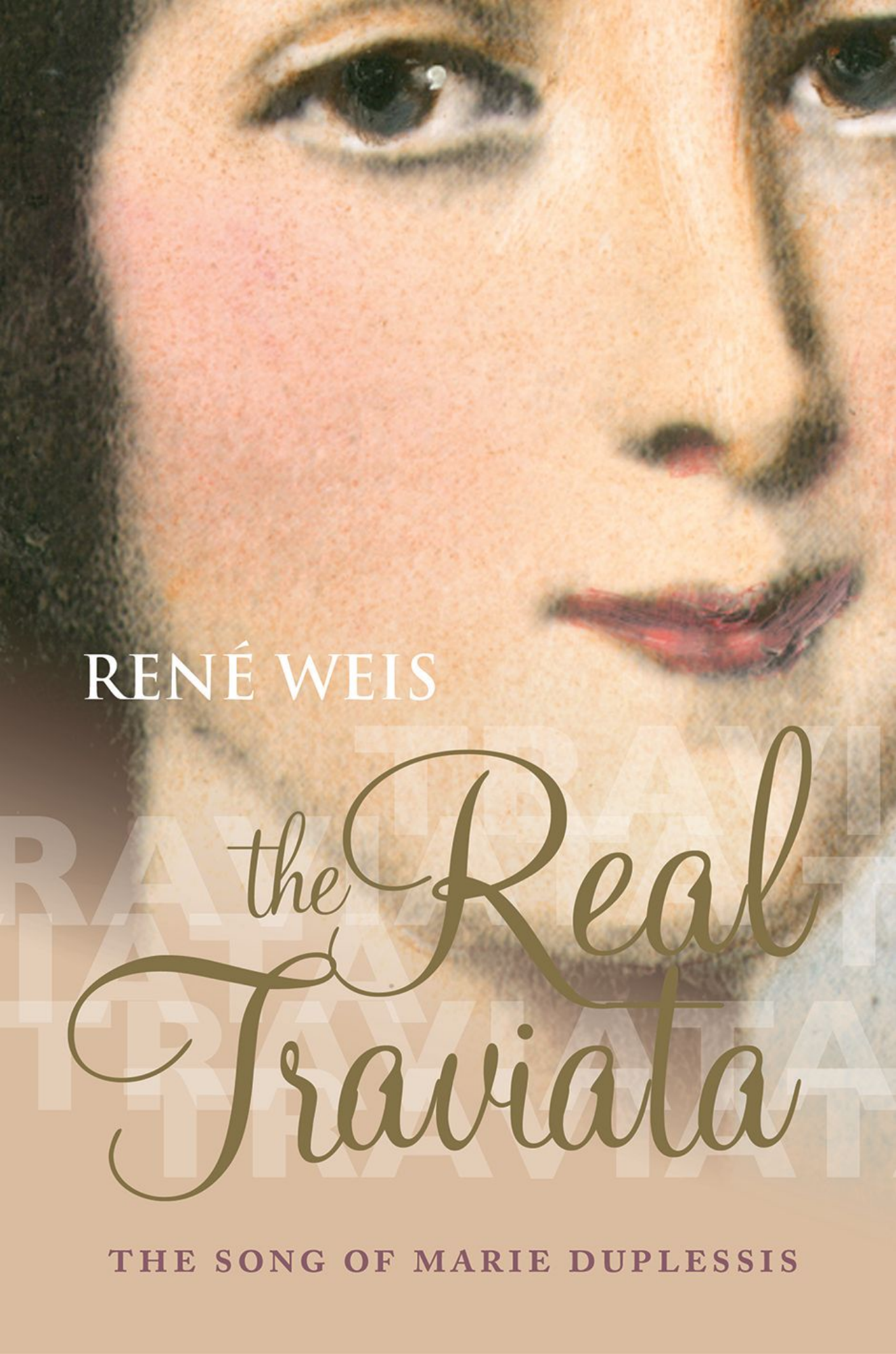

RENÉ WEIS

the Real Traviata

THE SONG OF MARIE DUPLESSIS

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Frontispiece: Unattributed watercolour of Marie Duplessis, perhaps by Charles Chaplin.

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RENÉ WEIS

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For my wife Jean

Preface

The research for this book was carried out in Britain, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and New York City. Much of the story of Marie Duplessis is intimately linked to her home in the Orne, Basse-Normandie, where the horse-pasturing landscapes in which she grew up survive almost untouched. Exploring her native villages of Nonant-le-Pin and Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille and the rolling hills between them and nearby Exmes, along with other villages connected to her family, proved illuminating time and again, and often in unexpected ways. It is still possible to walk in the footsteps of the future lady of the camellias in the solitary country lanes that link these Normandy hamlets. They bring to life what must have been the depth of her loneliness as she drifted through them during prolonged spells as a homeless child. I must thank the people in all the villages, particularly in Nonant and Exmes, who were prepared to listen to a stranger and help him with local lore.

I missed Jean-Marie Choulet during my visit to his museum dedicated to Marie Duplessis in Gacé but his subsequent correspondence and sharing of his collection's artefacts has been most gracious. The mairie of Nonant allowed me to consult their original ancient plans of the village on site as did the departmental archives in Alençon, where I searched extensively for the identity of the villainous Plantier of Exmes. To this day the tourist interested in the story of the girl who became 'traviata' can follow a well signposted track, the 'Circuit de la Dame aux Camélias', dedicated to various places associated with her.

Inevitably much of the real story now lies hidden in places that are far-flung. Thus poor Marie's mother's calvary ended in Clarens near Montreux on Lake Geneva. The Archives Vaudoises of Lausanne and the minuscule local history archive of Montreux were delightfully professional and attractive places in which to work, the latter not much more than a stone's throw from the place where the mother of Marie Duplessis has rested since 1830.

Cemeteries inevitably played an important role in my researches given the significance of the tomb of the lady of the camellias in Montmartre and the curious fact that in Paris major cemeteries are still guardians of their own records. I am grateful to the staff at the Cimetière de Montmartre for their forbearance and for letting me photograph their documents, which include extensive materials on the lady of the camellias.

Much of the Paris that Marie Duplessis knew, the city of Balzac, Hugo, and Lamartine, survives, including a number of its theatres, buildings, squares, streets, and locations such as Palais-Royal behind the Comédie-Française. It was here that Marie Duplessis used to walk and where she first became the plaything of a wealthy man; it was here too that she attended her last show ever. It seems fitting that the small but brilliant archive of the Comédie-Française, inside Palais-Royal, should have an important collection bearing on this story, and I am grateful to have been granted access to it and to reproduce two of its images in this book. Two theatres, the Variétés and the Gymnase, remain to all intents and purposes the way they were in the 1840s when she was a regular visitor; the Variétés in particular is almost untouched as we know from contemporary drawings of it. It is possible today to be seated its orchestra stalls and glance up at the very box where she used to sit. Doing so may not add directly to intellectual knowledge of her but it does feel like touching the face of history.

I am grateful to the Dumas Society for their help with trying to trace extant portraits of Marie Duplessis, to the library of Saint-Germain-en-Laye where Dumas *père et fils* spent much time and where *La Dame aux Camélias* was written, and to the archivists at Versailles, who accommodated my extended visits there. Following her round Europe to, among others, Baden-Baden, Spa, and Bad Ems, meant eavesdropping on seismic changes in European history. Some of the grand buildings of the old German spa resorts still stand, though almost none do now in Spa, one of the last two resorts visited by Marie Duplessis and where I must thank Mr Guy Peeters for his help with the Spa police records. I was well looked after in the tiny local history archive in Baden-Baden and similar courtesies were extended to me in Bad Ems. The *Fremdenlisten* ('lists of foreign visitors') in both, and particularly the *Badeblatt*, are almost complete and constitute invaluable records for researchers. In 1840s Europe these places rocked to the pulse of polkas, waltzes and power, a far cry from the Sleepy Hollows that they are today, although Baden-Baden can still seduce the modern visitor with its hidden charms.

If Marie Duplessis had wished, she could have allowed herself to be adopted and become the châtelaine of a grand manor house near Doncaster. The extensive papers of Sprotbrough Hall are preserved in the Doncaster Archives and await further exploration, perhaps even with regard to the story of Marie Duplessis.

In Italy I worked in Venice where *La traviata* first premiered in 1853, particularly in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana and in Casa Goldoni, and in Busseto where the Casa Barezzi, once belonging to Verdi's father-in-law, is today fully restored to its nineteenth-century glory. The whole town is redolent with Verdi memories as are his homes in nearby Roncole, where he grew up, and in Sant'Agata, where he was lord of all he surveyed at the time of *La traviata*. The guided tours in both places are instructive and revealing, and their atmospheric value, particularly in Roncole and in the church where he played the organ as a child, is hard to overestimate. While much of Verdi's *oeuvre* and correspondence is in the public domain, much of it similarly remains hidden from view. I was privileged to be granted access to the Verdi materials at New York University under the supervision of Francesco Izzo, scholar, pianist, and now friend. Francesco proved to be the most genial of hosts and an inexhaustible fount of information on Verdi and romantic nineteenth-century opera.

Inevitably most of the work for this book was conducted in major research libraries, particularly the British Library in London and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, both at Richelieu and in Tolbiac. I am grateful to my own library at UCL, for its rich collections in the nineteenth century and its efficient Interlibrary-Loan system that allowed me access to almost anything from anywhere in the world on UCL premises. Not far from my office at UCL sits the University of London Library at Senate House, which houses one of the richest music collections in the capital. Other libraries and archives such as the Beinecke in Yale, the Wallace Collection in London, the Rare Books collection of the University of Virginia, the Wagner Museum in Bayreuth, all helped and dealt with my enquiries with courtesy and kindness.

I owe a huge debt to The Leverhulme Trust for freeing me from all major academic commitments for three years to research and write this book. It is a pleasure to thank Leverhulme for their generosity and their light touch monitoring; to be trusted may be the greatest spur of all. It is a privilege to thank my Leverhulme referees, R. I. Moore of the University of Newcastle, Denis Noble of the University of Oxford, and James Shapiro of Columbia

University. John Snelson of the Royal Opera House advised on Verdi's keys in *La traviata* and on much else; he was, as ever, the most generous of friends with his time, expertise, and his contacts in the world of music, putting me in touch with Mary Jane Phillips-Matz and Francesco Izzo among others. Bill Hamilton of A. M. Heath again gave me more of his valuable time than I had a right to expect, repeatedly pressing me to get ever more deeply inside the soul of Marie Duplessis, to understand why she never ceased to forgive all the harm done to her by men, whether it was this that ultimately made her Violetta.

I wish to thank my readers at Oxford University Press for taking much time over my manuscript and for all their advice. I learnt a great deal from them and have followed their suggestions to the letter wherever possible; and in spirit in the few other instances. Tom Chandler copyedited my book with impeccable professionalism and Matthew Cotton was the most genial of editors.

I must record my gratitude to my colleagues in the UCL English Department whose support and friendship mean a great deal to me. Neil Rennie stiffened my resolve at a crucial point and Greg Dart was ever ready with references to Stendhal, music, or French novels. Susan Irvine and John Mullan, both Heads of Department during the making of this book, have served their colleagues with selfless commitment for which I am grateful. Stephen Cadywold and the staff in the English Office at UCL add immeasurably to my sense of the Department. My debts to Rosemary Ashton, Dan Jacobson, Karl Miller, John Sutherland, Ross Woodman, Michael Worton, and Henry Woudhuysen stretch back over many years and are imprinted in everything I write.

In January 1980 I sat in the Amphitheatre of the Royal Opera House in London at a performance of *La traviata*. The role of Violetta was sung by Kiri Te Kanawa, conducted by John Pritchard, with Stuart Burrows as Alfredo and Renato Bruson as Germont. The production was by Luchino Visconti. It was one of those nights at the opera house when everything fell into place and the music and singers were allowed to work their magic. No recording survives of this but on that occasion Kiri Te Kanawa and the genius of Visconti joined forces to deliver to a London audience a near perfect version of Verdi's masterpiece. This book is among others a tribute to the memory of that night.

R.W.

Department of English
University College London, 2015

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I

Prologue

A weekend in the country

La traviata is probably the best loved opera in the world. In three recent seasons the Royal Opera House in London staged no fewer than thirty performances of the opera, their Violettas including legendary sopranos like Renée Fleming and Angela Gheorghiu. All sold out almost instantly, proving that over 160 years on from its premiere in Venice, *La traviata*'s ethereal melodies continue to move modern audiences like no other. And yet this transcendent musical melodrama, so much part of modern high culture, originated in a collision of real life prostitution, love, and artistic creativity.

La traviata may be as timeless as Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*, but unlike them it is rooted in a true story that happened in Paris in the 1840s. Verdi's masterpiece would not exist if it had it not been for the life of a courtesan who died at the age of 23 in a Paris apartment in the Madeleine. The young woman was called Marie Duplessis. In a silver-tongued obituary, published a few weeks after her death, the poet and novelist Théophile Gautier reminded his readers of who she had been and why she had captured the imagination of the capital:

> More than once, on the boulevard des Italiens, at the opera, at all the shows where it is almost impossible to secure a seat, Parisians will undoubtedly have spotted, in the most desirable box in the theatre, a young woman of exquisite demeanour. They will have admired those chaste, oval features, her gorgeous dark eyes shadowed by long lashes, the purest arching eyebrows, a nose of the most exquisite and delicate curve, her aristocratic shape that marked her out as a duchess for those who did not know her. Her fresh bunches of flowers, the elegant taste of her clothes, the splash of diamonds, all underpinned this impression. She was a duchess but her duchy consisted of Bohemia . . . by a twist of fate she was born a peasant girl in Normandy.[1]

Conceding that Marie Duplessis was of the humblest birth, Gautier returned to the charge by claiming that her beautifully turned feet were never meant to be shod in anything other than the finest satin. Her soft skin was the texture of camellias, he rhapsodized, before she was ever called 'lady of the camellias', and it cried out for the finest lace and fabrics that could be had.[2] Such was her magnetism, he claimed, that whole diamond necklaces freely wound themselves around her neck, longing to rest on her soft bosom, while the best carriages and finest horses in town volunteered to carry her just as the most exclusive designers of Venetian mirrors in Paris relished the thought that she would admire herself in their furniture. Gautier's paean to Marie Duplessis stops short of turning her into a goddess. He wonders why none of the maverick young men who had haunted her apartment when she was alive had thought of

> spreading a handful of gold in front of a sculptor, and commissioning him to eternalize, in marble of Carrara or Paros, the beauty that was the glory and undoing of Marie Duplessis. That way at least her life would have served a purpose. Phryne [a legendary courtesan who modelled for Praxiteles] left a statue, and history has pardoned her. Who among us, thanks to Phidias and Praxiteles, has not unwittingly doted on some Greek courtesan.

If the great Attic sculptors Phidias and Praxiteles could not serve, Verdi's *La traviata* did. It is in the lyrics and music of Verdi's grand opera that Marie Duplessis achieved lasting and universal fame as Violetta Valéry.

The opera centres on a sweet-natured and glamorous courtesan, who is consumptive and therefore doomed. Her name is Violetta Valéry and she briefly finds happiness in the arms of an idealistic young man, Alfredo Germont, who loves her for her generous heart as much as her beauty. He knows what she does and he knows too that she is gravely ill, which is why he wants to save her by taking her out of the moral morass that is Paris, with its all-night balls, orgies of drinking, and promiscuity. She trusts him and allows him to transport her into a country idyll. In this pastoral bubble, Violetta and Alfredo enjoy days of bliss, the only shadow on the horizon being Alfredo's debts that Violetta is trying to settle by secretly selling off her most precious possessions. Alfredo has only just left for Paris to assume charge of his debts himself, when his father Germont appears. In the longest scene of the opera Germont *père* confronts Violetta with her past. He informs her of the fact that Alfredo has a virginal younger sister whose marriage will be jeopardized if her brother continues his liaison with a prostitute: surely she must appreciate that sooner or later he will tire of her and

that therefore she might as well agree to leave him now before his sister's marriage prospects are ruined?

Violetta at first fights Alfredo's father but in the end she realizes that he is right, that there can be no respectable future for women like her and that she must leave Alfredo before his sister's life is wrecked in turn. Her self-sacrifice is unconditional and, to save Alfredo from despair, she pretends that she freely reverted to her former dissolute life in Paris by accepting an invitation to another Parisian hostess's party, her friend Flora Bervoix. That way he will despise her, she hopes, and suffer less from his loss, although one day, after she is dead, his father Germont will reveal the true reason behind her departure. That promise she extracts from Alfredo's father.

Alfredo, however, follows Violetta to the party at Flora's and confronts her after winning at the gambling tables. She refuses to explain why she left him. Incredulous, he asks whether she loves her previous keeper, the Baron. Realizing that such a profession of love, however far from the truth, may be the only way to keep her promise to Alfredo's father, Violetta replies 'Yes, I love him!' Outraged Alfredo flings his winnings at her, appealing to the assembled crowd to witness that he has settled his debts, paid his dues to a courtesan in cash, as befits women of her kind. Violetta collapses as Alfredo's father enters. He expresses shock at his son's insulting Violetta in this fashion, because he knows the truth about her noble heart. The last scene of the opera plays in Violetta's apartment during the Paris Carnival in February, the same month in which Marie Duplessis died. Alfredo is on his way to join her, as is his father, to ask her forgiveness and to be together in a happier future away from Paris. By now Alfredo knows all about Violetta's selfless love and greatness of heart. But it is too late and Violetta dies in his arms, after urging him to find happiness with a pure young woman while she will be praying for them both in heaven.

Many details of *La traviata* originate in the real life story of Marie Duplessis, because the opera was inspired by a biographical novel about her, *La Dame aux Camélias*. It was written by one of her lovers, Alexandre Dumas *fils*, and is far more memoir than novel. It is, at times, a barely disguised account of the life of Marie Duplessis and was written within months of her death. Verdi's opera premiered a mere six years later. It is hard to imagine that a work as intensely moving and idealistic as *La traviata* could grow out of the sordid world of nineteenth-century prostitution. Surely, one wonders, real life *traviatas* like Violetta do not exist. Or do they? One of the moral and imaginative challenges historically of Verdi's great opera was

precisely that, and predictably the work was at first castigated for its recklessness, for daring to turn a demi-mondaine into a virtual saint.

It was a bold thing to do this in the middle of an era we call Victorian. During that period *La traviata* was never performed in the nineteenth-century contemporary costume that Verdi had intended. He had wanted his 1853 opera to be staged in the fashions of the 1840s and 1850s. This proved a bridge too far throughout his lifetime. But by the end of the twentieth century the story had become domesticated, while its power to move remained undiminished. Thus the 1990 film *Pretty Woman* not only artfully reimagines *La traviata* but inserts the opera itself into the plot when Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) takes Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts), a big-hearted Los Angeles prostitute, to see *La traviata*, aware of course of the fact that Vivian is a Violetta by another and rather similar name. In the great scene at the opera, Roberts's facial expressions guide our emotional responses to Verdi's music drama with consummate artistry. At first the joy and laughter of the party in the opera's opening scene, with the flourishes of the famous brindisi ('Libiamo'), thrill her by their exuberance. She looks increasingly troubled by the crescendo of pathos during Violetta's anguished exhortation 'Amami, Alfredo', when she prepares to part from her lover to save his family's honour. As the opera ebbs away with Violetta's death, tears well up in Roberts's eyes.

By inviting a romantic prostitute to a performance of *La traviata*, the producers of the film indulged the fantasy of treating Marie Duplessis herself to an opera that is in essence all about her. What would she have made of the fact that she, who loved opera, who attended premieres in Paris, including probably that of Verdi's *Nabucco*, would one day be renowned throughout the world as the real life inspiration for the heroine of one of the most illustrious of all operas, Verdi's *La traviata*? Violetta's suffering and sorrows, the 'corsi affanni' of the famous Act 3 'Parigi o cara' duet, resonate as a percussive leitmotif in the opera. The composer never blames Violetta for her way of life. Rather, the opera is a celebration of Violetta and, by extension, of the young woman who rests under a sarcophagus in Montmartre. Neither Verdi nor his Venetian librettist Piave ever met her, although they were both her contemporaries. Her name as recorded on her tomb was Alphonsine Plessis which she later changed to Marie Duplessis.

What follows is the true story of the young woman whom the world knows as Violetta in *La traviata*. Marie Duplessis may have been a courtesan but she was as much in touch with grace, beauty, and illness as the heroine

of the opera. Her unconventional and tragic existence inspired Alexandre Dumas *fils* to write his scandalous novelistic memoir. He christened her 'la dame aux camélias'. The suggestive name stuck: it conjures up a mysterious life, turning a mundane, and at times tawdry, existence into the magical world of a mythical flower girl. She did, it is true, love camellias in real life as one of her surviving shopping lists proves. An invoice of 9 November 1843 from her supplier of flowers, Ragonot of 14 rue de la Paix, overwhelmingly features different arrangements of camellia, in this particular case white ones, it seems.[3] Camellias were her calling card: a red camellia meant that she was sexually unavailable, while a white one signalled the contrary. Dumas reports that she wore a red one during four days every month and a white one during the other twenty-four: no-one, he remarks with goading disingenuousness, ever grasped what this meant.

A good place to begin the tale of Marie Duplessis is on a balmy weekend in provincial France during the summer of 1841. It occurs at an important turning point in her life and was recorded in minute detail by someone who was actually there and who, in the course of this visit, became her friend and confidant. He will play a significant role in the unfolding of her story precisely because of the trust she placed in him and the care with which he recorded their conversations. It is largely through this friend that we get to know what Marie Duplessis said and thought. Other people in the story are mere eyewitnesses who recorded what they saw of her and what she did rather than telling us what she herself thought and felt.

It was around noon, on Saturday 10 July 1841, when the stagecoach from Paris pulled into the courtyard of the coaching inn of the village of Nonant in Lower Normandy. Two young women, a lady and her maid, alighted. They were both around 16 or 17 years old. The mistress, of medium height, svelte, and with abundant chestnut hair, exuded an aura of elegance, her features moulded into a gently oval curve and dark eyes that seemed pools of melancholy tenderness. She had flawless skin and perfect white teeth, and she wore stylish, artfully understated clothes. On her head sat a coquettish lace bonnet with fluted frills.

The two women, followed by their luggage, made straight for the Hôtel de la Poste where they would lodge. This aroused some interest because not many people stayed in Nonant, which was a transit post where travellers enjoyed refreshment breaks before pushing on north to Rouen or south to Alençon, the departmental capital of the Orne. The grand stud of Haras-du-Pin lay five miles to the west. If the great Bordeaux to Rouen road had

thrust Nonant into a strategic position, the stud was the economic powerhouse of this horse-pasturing region. Here some of the richest families of France and Britain met regularly to foster the burgeoning equestrian culture that the English had transplanted to France in the wake of their victory at Waterloo. The Haras-du-Pin was linked umbilically to the riding hubs of Paris, notably the exclusive Jockey-Club, which will play an important part in this story. For a small place like Nonant, with 878 inhabitants in 1841 (it has a fraction of that today), the coaching inn was an impressive affair, stabling as many as a hundred horses. The staging post also doubled as the mail office of the region. The entire range of the 'Hôtel de la Poste', stables, and post office were owned and serviced by a prosperous local family called Vienne. Monsieur Vienne, a deputy mayor of the town at the time, looked after the stables, horses, and coaches while Madame ran the inn (Figure 1.1).

The two weekend visitors commandeered the best rooms of the house. Then they retired to rest and recover from the rigours of the journey from Paris. At about 5 o'clock that afternoon, the young mistress, now refreshed, descended the stairs. She went straight up to the owner with 'Madame

Figure 1.1 The site and remains of the Viennes' home in Nonant.

Vienne, don't you recognize me? But you know me well; I am the little Plessis girl.' The hostess replied 'Oh, of course! My poor little girl—I certainly wouldn't have recognized you: will you stay the night?' The 'little Plessis girl' was Alphonsine Plessis. As a child she had briefly lived in a modest rented house two minutes' walk away from the Hôtel de la Poste. Madame Vienne addressed the young Miss Plessis with 'poor girl' for good reason, because her father had died a few months earlier in the neighbouring hamlet of Ginai. Alphonsine was an orphan. She had not attended her father's funeral in February, because she had been indisposed in her new home of Paris. It is true that she had been unwell, but only her elder sister, who lived locally, knew the true reason for her fragile state of health which had caused her absence. Now, as a minor and orphan, she had come ostensibly to meet her guardian, her great-uncle, and also to recover her health. She asked to keep the room in the inn for a couple of nights. Madame Vienne agreed. She also acceded to Alphonsine's request to join the Viennes' family table in their dining area.

Throughout the dinner conversation Madame Vienne's 24-year-old son Romain was present. He was pursuing business studies in Paris and had last seen Alphonsine five years earlier. He noticed that she was uncommonly handsome, with polished manners, charm, animated conversation, and a mischievous sense of humour. Alphonsine seemed to have grown up with astonishing speed and had clearly done well for herself, if her clothes and general demeanour were anything to go by. Whether she reverted to her regional dialect out of courtesy to her hosts, or whether she spoke in the perfect Île-de-France accent that she had acquired since leaving the region, is not recorded. Romain Vienne was bewitched by their young guest while she found him congenial. They knew many of the same people in Nonant and the surrounding hamlets, but as they were eight years apart in age, they had not been at school together. Moreover her elementary schooling had been in the neighbouring parish of Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille, while his had been at Nonant.

After dinner she asked to see the extensive gardens of the inn, an expanse of land and orchards that can still be glimpsed behind the ramshackle buildings that remain of the former staging post. Beyond them fertile pastures roll away towards Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille, a place close to Alphonsine's heart as the home village of her mother. Vienne picked a bunch of flowers for his fair guest in his parents' garden and relished steering their conversation in the direction of, as he put it, 'Rabelaisian chat', that is talk laced with

sexual innuendo. It had not taken him long to realize that his beautiful companion worked in the lucrative Paris sex industry; perhaps he already knew because rumour travelled fast and Nonant and Paris were not that far apart even in the sunset years of the stage-coach.

The following day was Sunday. Alphonsine rose early and set off for mass at the parish church of Saint-Blaise. She was barely halfway along when she ran into an old acquaintance, a young farmhand by the name of Marcel. They knew each other well. She warmly greeted him and invited him to join her for lunch in her inn. Then she proceeded on to mass. It was her first time back in Nonant in over six years. We will never know for sure what she thought as, to the sound of high mass bells, she filed into the church with the crowd of worshippers, through the insalubrious water-logged cemetery and past the majestic elm tree that thrived in it. Her only happy times in Nonant had been moments spent with her mother who was trying to scrape a living from the meagre proceeds of their corner shop. But perhaps her mother was never far from Alphonsine's mind and heart, even though she was only 4 years old when, twelve years earlier, her gentle parent had fled in fear of her life. She would never see her again, although her mother was destined to appear in her life one more time, spectacularly so, and in circumstances stranger almost than fiction could fathom.

There was a more pressing reason why the pensive young woman might have been day-dreaming about her mother in church on this Sunday morning: she had herself been delivered of a baby boy only two months earlier. The birth had been protracted and had seriously affected her health. This is how she came to be visiting Normandy now, on doctor's orders, on the assumption that the country air would restore her health. A wealthy man, the father of her baby, was looking after her. During the period of her confinement she had wanted for nothing materially. She may have pondered this as she sat among these industrious, mostly poor, men and women, whose livelihoods depended on unreliable crops and the robber barons who ran the stud at Haras-du-Pin. Some of these wealthy men she had come to know in Paris, a fact that would have astounded most of the flock on this Sunday morning who shared her humble background.

At Sunday lunch, back in the Viennes' inn, Alphonsine and her maid Rose were duly joined by Marcel, who presumably was impressed by the fine wines that the women reportedly ordered. On this occasion the Viennes were taking their Sunday lunch in a room apart from the main dining area. Towards the end of the meal Alphonsine ordered champagne, her favourite

drink along with Burgundy wine from Pommard, and sent for Romain Vienne, suggesting that he join their threesome.[4] He did and noticed, disapprovingly, that Marcel paid rather a lot of attention to the buxom maid, probably because the mistress had evidently outgrown the rustic Marcels of the Orne. In the afternoon Alphonsine set off to visit her sister, family and friends, who all lived within two or three miles of the coaching inn. At seven that evening she was back for dinner and again ate with the Viennes. Romain Vienne later recalled that she sat on his left while her maid faced him across the table. He was keen to stress that this reflected his abstracted state of mind: heaven forbid that his readers should think that he, like the rustic Marcel, should be attracted to either mistress or maid.

By eight o'clock dinner had finished. Picking up two chairs, Vienne invited Alphonsine to accompany him outside. It was a glorious summer's evening. The sky had turned a flaming red and the scents of flowers were wafting across to Vienne and Alphonsine from the gardens and adjacent meadows. So too may have been the acrid smell from smoking by several male travellers who had taken over the main bench outside the restaurant. No sooner had they spotted Alphonsine than two of the young men pounced on her and Vienne, interrupting their conversation. As the innkeeper's son Vienne felt unable to remonstrate with them over their boorishness. So he rose and walked towards the garden where the young woman presently joined him. Hooking her arm into his she asked whether he would join her for a late evening walk on the Paris road? He would, at which point she remarked gratefully that it would provide an excuse to give the slip to the bumptious young men and their clumsy compliments.

They turned left out of the inn's courtyard and made their way up the hill on the main artery linking Nonant to Paris seventy miles to the east. As they were strolling along in the golden light, they encountered a festive party heading towards them from the neighbouring village of Le Merlerault. Some of the group were singing. It consisted of a young couple and of their immediate family and friends. Forty-seven years later Vienne misremembered them as newly-weds. Marriages could not be contracted on a Sunday, so the party was not returning to Nonant from a wedding breakfast. Nevertheless Vienne's memory was essentially right about the link to a wedding, because the party that he and Alphonsine encountered had in fact been celebrating the first reading of their banns at noon that day in the church of Le Merlerault. They were a prospective bride and groom and their families. To be precise, the future 'dame aux camélias' and her friend Vienne

met Hégésippe Gautier and Marie-Louise Alcaume from Le Merlerault, who eventually married on 31 July 1841.[5]

Alphonsine and Vienne chatted briefly to the banns party before proceeding up towards the crest of the hill of Pont-Rouge, as this stretch of the road was known at the time. She was touched by the excitement of the betrothed couple: 'How much they love each other!' she exclaimed, to which he replied, 'They will soon love each other even more.' 'You think so?' she retorted in an unexpectedly barbed voice, as if wondering how anyone could presuppose that marriage underpinned affection, unless they were naïve. To change the topic, and perhaps to mollify her host, she then congratulated Vienne on a recent career success. Encouraged by this, Vienne started asking her about her life in the metropolis and her past in these very hills and pastures. She was remarkably uninhibited about Paris, talking frankly about her life since leaving the Orne, the pleasure trips to the Bois de Boulogne, her friendships with other girls who did not relish lives of hard work and deprivation, her lot as a courtesan—what her interlocutor prudishly set down as 'the story of our grandmother Eve'.

Now that she had started talking Vienne felt emboldened to enquire after her recently deceased father. Much to his surprise she burst into tears at the mention of him. After all, he thought (although he probably did not share this with her), she could not conceivably mourn the passing of a monster, who had been feared and loathed locally for what he had done to his wife and two daughters? The village was rife with rumours and true stories about him, and the two most scabrous of all concerned the young woman who walked beside Vienne. And yet she not only seemed to defend his memory but imperiously ordered Vienne to drop the subject, as it upset her too much.[6] She then revealed to him what she had already told his mother earlier in the day, that she had given birth to 'a beautiful baby boy' in May. Then she expanded on the topic of the baby's father,

> her liaison with the Vicomte de Méril. 'But', I said to her, 'it seems to me that a Monsieur de Méril was appointed, a few weeks ago, sub-prefect of a city in the East: is this same Monsieur de Méril your lover? He possesses an illustrious name.' 'Himself, and I will provide you with proof of it one of these days by showing you the letters that I will receive from him.'[7]

As it is, Vienne had just recently, on 13 June 1841, seen that very name in the influential paper *Journal des Débats*, which reported that the alleged father of her baby had, by ministerial decree, been appointed to the 'conseil général

d'agriculture' as of 2 June 1841. Could it really be him? Vienne asked after the baby. She told him that her lover had decided to take the infant away with him to his new posting in 'Burgundy' to have him brought up there. Whatever maternal feelings she may have harboured were, it seems, set aside of necessity. How much did Alphonsine really know about the fate of her child as she walked with Vienne? She seemed too relaxed to be aware of the truth, and although she used to joke about lying as a most effective whitener of teeth, it is doubtful that she was lying now or knew what had really happened to her child. At this point in the conversation Vienne backed away from further questions. He was no fool. He knew well that she could not cope with a baby in her chosen 'profession', and he may have assumed that she was telling him euphemistically that the baby was given up for adoption by his rich father. The rest of their walk passed in amiable banter about Paris and people they both knew. Alphonsine playfully threatened to introduce the somewhat stiff Vienne to some of her girlfriends when they were both back in Paris, presumably in response to his keen, if not salacious, interest in the company she kept. It was dusk when they reached the top of the slope. Vienne stepped into a field and picked a bunch of cornflowers for his companion. By the time they returned to Nonant the moon was out, suffusing, in Vienne's words, 'the pale crepuscular glimmers with gentle clarities'. It had been an idyllic weekend and Alphonsine had rested well.

The following Monday her maid Rose returned to Paris while the mistress rejoined her guardian, her great-uncle Louis Mesnil, and her aunt Julie in the hamlet of La Trouillière, two miles up the hill to the north of Nonant. The Mesnils and their home occupied a very special place in Alphonsine's heart. She was barely 4 years old when her traumatized mother sought shelter here with her two daughters. The Mesnils warmly welcomed her now. They had prepared a comfortable bed and even set aside a small room off their kitchen range for her. It is not impossible that theirs was the ancient, timber-framed crooked house that still stands here; this was certainly a building that Aphonsine's relatives would have known well even if it was not necessarily theirs.[8] Thirteen years earlier she and her sister had been a drain on the Mesnils' scant resources but now she was the prodigal daughter returned home, had money, and paid handsomely for staying with the Mesnils. Much had happened since that bleak January of 1828 when the girls' mother was nearly murdered. With their father gone, it looked as if the family, all of them on the girls' mother's side, could start again. Alphonsine's affluence was compounded by an astonishing, brand-new, education; not just in the ways of the

world, but in all the more traditional senses of the word 'education'. How far she had travelled constituted a tribute to her sheer intelligence and native wit. She spotted an opportunity and she grabbed it. Her lot before leaving Normandy had been desperate enough for her life in Paris to be not just tolerable, but clearly also enjoyable.

2

A mother and daughter

1824–1837

The baby girl who would one day become 'la traviata' was born Alphonsine Plessis in Nonant at 8 p.m. on Thursday 15 January 1824. Her mother was Marie-Louise Michelle Deshayes, also known variously as Marie Anne, or Marianne. On Alphonsine's birth certificate issued on this day, her mother is called 'Marie Deshaies' from Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille, born to Louis Deshayes and Madeleine Louise Marre. In what follows she will be called 'Marie' because her daughter Alphonsine would eventually adopt her mother's first name from her birth certificate: if she thought of her mother as Marie, so should we. On the day Alphonsine was born, her mother was 29 years old and her father 34; by coincidence he shared a birthday with his new daughter. The following Tuesday Alphonsine was christened 'Rose Alphonsine' in Saint-Blaise, at a baptismal font that still graces the entrance of the church, proudly proclaiming its association with the future lady of the camellias. Her aunt Françoise-Julie and her uncle Pierre Saulnier stood as godparents. Alphonsine was the second Plessis child; a sister, Delphine Adèle, had been born two years earlier, in February 1822.

By the time of Alphonsine's birth her family had moved from the mother's home village of Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille to a small corner shop in neighbouring Nonant (Figure 2.1). It is clearly visible as plot 146 on the 1811 survey map ('cadastre') of Nonant, to the north of the toll gate that straddled the junction. It was the last house at the eastern end of the Grande Rue that traverses Nonant. It was obliterated during the widening of the Alençon–Sées–Gacé road, which sliced off the bottom tip of the little escarpment that to this day forms an attractive courtyard on an otherwise soulless junction with two desolate rival petrol stations.

Figure 2.1 Nonant in the Orne, the home village of Marie Duplessis as it is today.

The Plessis family had moved here because their shop at the junction was strategically positioned for trade. Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille, though less than a mile away, was a mere hamlet compared to Nonant, which not only boasted several public houses but also the vast coaching inn of the Viennes, its own gendarmerie, opposite the Plessis family home (the police station can still be seen in nineteenth-century postcards of Nonant), and fairs and an important market on Fridays. By the time the family set up home in Nonant in 1823, they were, however, struggling financially and their marriage was falling apart. Life was hard at the best of times in rural France in the 1820s, in a country that had gone through the cataclysms of social revolution and wars in the three decades preceding it. While his genteel wife did her utmost to keep a home, Plessis became an increasingly violent drunk. He had not learnt any trade even though he could write. Instead he earned his crust as a pedlar, selling whatever his wife managed to produce in her shop.

They seem to have met while Plessis was hawking his wares in the village of Courménil where the mother of the future lady of the camellias resided

at the time. She and her widowed father had moved there from his native Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille and now inhabited a spot called 'Plessis'. When Marie Deshayes and her father were asked to give their address, they would declare that they hailed 'from Plessis in Courménil'. The importance of this to the story will become clear later. Marie was 26 years old and Marin Plessis 31 when they married. She was beautiful, with long black hair, blue eyes, and a daintily sculpted nose that her daughter Alphonsine inherited. She was intelligent and sweet-natured: in the words of Romain Vienne, 'she was blessed with all the gifts'. The Deshayes may have been distantly related to one of the grand families of the region, an assertion frequently made in the past without basis in fact, though often adduced to account for her refinement and, above all, for the way in which she was rescued in extremis from her husband. By all accounts the Deshayes family was respectable. Even if Marie was not necessarily her husband's superior socially, she certainly was in every other way. Although she, like both her parents, was born in Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille, she and the pedlar were married in her father's adopted village of Courménil on 1 March 1821.

Unlike his wife, Marin Plessis was illegitimate. His mother was a drifter by the name of Louise-Renée Plessis. His father had been a lazy and unprincipled priest called Louis Marin Descours, vicar eventually of the village of Lougé-sur-Maire just at the time when his unacknowledged son was growing up there. From inauspicious beginnings Marin Plessis went from bad to worse. What he had been gifted by way of looks and charm quickly evaporated while Marie Deshayes needed to devote ever more time to the rearing of her two baby daughters, Delphine and Alphonsine. Keeping her shop going as a small business at the same time was almost impossible. Her father Louis Deshayes and also, it seems, her sister, were helping out as much as they could.

If the arrival of little Alphonsine drew the couple together in a truce, it was inevitably short-lived. Soon they were unable to run the business in Nonant and became insolvent. So Marie and Marin moved to a cottage or barn in a hillside hamlet known as 'Les Orgeries', halfway between Nonant and Exmes (pronounced 'èmes' and meaning 'elevated place'). Marie must have dreaded this move. At least in Nonant the gendarmerie were her neighbours, and they might just have intervened if her husband's temper got the better of him. Now they were cut off and the poor wife reeled between bouts of terror and beatings. How the doomed couple managed to feed their children in the three years leading up to January 1828 is hard to

imagine. Not only did Marin batter his wife, he also once hurled little Alphonsine across the room. By a miracle she landed on a straw mattress and survived. Her mother's only comfort may have been the thought that her sister lived in neighbouring La Trouillière, ten minutes on foot, along with her great-uncle Louis Mesnil, her mother's uncle. As long as family were somewhere nearby she might be safe, however precariously.

No-one tolerated the Plessis as tenants for long. Eventually they fetched up in a house two miles above Nonant close to the Rouen road, in a place called la Castelle. The 1811 survey plan shows just three habitations here, one on the Ménil-Froger side down towards Le Merlerault and two on the Croisilles side. A little further down the track, some hundred yards or so away from the main road, sits a tiny isolated hovel. This is probably where they lived when, shortly before Christmas 1827, Romain Vienne spotted Marie Deshayes in Nonant. It was the last time she appeared in the village. It was market day and she had come to sell threads, ribbons, and other haberdashery in the covered 'Halles' in the Place du Marché, on the site of today's municipal car park opposite the church.[1] In Vienne's own words,

> Her features have stayed engraved in my memory. She had lost none of her remarkable beauty or her virginal freshness. I was nevertheless struck, without knowing why, by an indefinable alteration of her traits, her resigned expression, her pallor and the gentle melancholy in her large blue eyes. Across her glorious forehead floated a few locks of her magnificent hair, jet-black. She repeatedly hugged me tenderly while talking to my mother. I was struck by how pained and pensive she looked. I have never been able to forget it.[2]

Not long after this, things came to a head in the miserable cottage at la Castelle. It was the night of Epiphany, 6 January 1828, nine days before Alphonsine's fourth birthday. It was bitterly cold. Marin arrived home, blind drunk and frozen. When he flung excessive wood on the fire, his wife remonstrated with him over such reckless profligacy, as they were nearly destitute and every little bit counted, including the wood. In response he grabbed her: if they could not afford fuel he would burn her as substitute, he screamed! A terrible struggle ensued. She fought him, desperately clinging to the table and bed, to stop him from dragging her into the flaming hearth. Her two little girls must have been terror-stricken during the ten minutes the vicious drunk was trying to murder their mother. The other houses at la Castelle were too far away for her screams

to reach there, the more so since everyone had buckled up their homes against the deep frost.

She would have died that night if her screams had not been heard by Henry Aubert, a 25-year-old postman and innkeeper from Nonant, who on this cold night was returning from Rouen. He stopped his carriage, charged into the house, and flung himself on Plessis. Plessis was no match for the gentle giant Aubert. Almost sober now, he cowered while Aubert instructed Marie to take her children down the hill into Nonant and wait there for him: 'as for you, miserable wretch, if you so much as move towards the door I'll break your bones.' Henry Aubert has no role in either *La Dame aux Camélias* or in *La traviata*, but on this terrible Twelfth Night in a hamlet in the Orne he saved not just one life but probably three, as Plessis might well have murdered his children too if he had succeeded in mortally wounding their mother. By not looking the other way, Aubert played a significant part in the complex hybrid trajectory of life and art that eventually resulted in *La traviata*.

That night Marie and her children were entrusted by Aubert to a reliable friend in Nonant. The following day the battered mother, after learning that Marin Plessis had left their abode for the time being, returned to her home; or what was left of it, because the villain had trashed it out of sheer frustration. She wept. She had tried everything to make a home even in these dreadful circumstances, but the night before she had come close to being killed; and now the few remnants of her home were destroyed. She collected what she could of her own and her children's clothes. Then she fell to her knees and prayed for forgiveness for what she knew she needed to do now.

With her children in tow she proceeded to the hamlet of La Trouillière, some 300 yards down the hill where her uncle and aunt lived. What happened next must have been the hardest moment in her life. She knelt and, holding her two little girls in her arms, showered them with kisses. Then she entrusted them to the safekeeping of her family. She realized that Plessis would search for her everywhere, intent on beating her to death. Her family knew where she would hide but her little girls could not be told. They remained unaware that for the whole of the next month their mother was sheltering in a loft fewer than five miles away. How they must have missed her in those early days, particularly after witnessing how she had been hurt time and again, and almost fatally on that Epiphany night.

They never saw her again. From now on the girls' lives were defined by their mother's absence. Hers would similarly revolve around missing them, although she probably heard how they fared through the very family who would protect her over the next two years. Quite how deep and tragic her yearning for them was would be brought home to the two sisters many years later. Initially Marie Deshayes sheltered in a place called 'la ferme des Loges', an outhouse barn attached to the 'Manoir des Loges' at Avernes-sous-Exmes which borders on Courménil. It would appear therefore that she sought refuge at her father's at first, because that is where he lived, and that he and family friends by the name of Dupont hid her. The 'Ancien Manoir des Loges' dates from the seventeenth century and is still there.[3] She was safe here for a month but then was spotted by a notorious gossip. She had to move and so, under the cloak of night, her friends and family spirited her away, first to the Duhays manor at 'Le Mesnil' in the woods behind Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille, and from there, with the help of the Duhays, to a house, still there today, next to the church of Saint-Germain (Figure 2.3). Here she sheltered for a week before being smuggled onto a coach bound for Paris by Romain Vienne's father.

In the end Marie Deshayes escaped through powerful local connections who rallied to her help. All this time the pedlar Plessis was roaming the region looking for her. But the children did not know where she was and he did not dare lay a finger on the aunt and uncle who fostered the two girls, perhaps because of the uncle's official rank in the village (he is referred to as 'capitaine') and because he may have heard that his wife now enjoyed aristocratic allies. She did indeed, and why and who they were will become clear shortly. For little Alphonsine these first few months of 1828 must have been among the hardest of her life, but at least she and her sister now enjoyed a respite from violence and screaming. Perhaps the Mesnils managed to reassure the little girls about their mother, explaining that it was better this way, that their mother would come back to collect them once she was safe, that she never stopped loving them.

The years 1828 and 1829 came and went. The two little girls at La Trouillière were a burden, undoubtedly, on the brave Mesnils, but they somehow managed to feed these two additional mouths, with some support probably from the Marre families of Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille, cousins of Alphonsine's mother whose own mother was née Marre. What happened next, in a place far from Normandy, would plunge the families

of Nonant and Saint-Germain-de-Clairefeuille into turmoil. In the evening of 30 September 1830, at 8.30 p.m., the register of the dead at Montreux in Switzerland records:

> On 1 October 1830 Doctor Buenzod, visitor of the dead of the parish of Montreux, noted that 'Marianne Deshayes', aged 33, chambermaid from Courménil in the Department of the Orne, daughter of Deshayes, wife Duplessis, died in the parish of Châtelard on 30 September 1830, at 8.30 in the evening.
>
> Pastor Bridel[4]

Four days earlier Marie had in fact turned 36, not 33 as the register mistakenly states. In Montreux on Lake Geneva she languished a very long way from where her heart must have been with her little girls in the Orne. An aristocratic woman sat with her as she lay dying in a property owned or rented by that family on Lake Geneva. In Vienne's words, 'as death approached, she took the hand of the baroness, wet it with her tears and movingly appealed to the lady's compassion on behalf of her two orphaned girls in Normandy. Lady Anderson promised that she would look after them.'[5]

That at least is what Vienne claimed and there is no good reason to doubt his word. Châtelard, the place where Marie Deshayes's death was recorded, is in Clarens, a village that stretches from the edge of the lake up the slopes towards the vineyards that huddle around the château de Châtelard (Figure 2.2). In the late 1820s when Alphonsine's mother briefly lived in this grandiose cadre, Clarens was the most celebrated spot on the whole lake. Two great writers had rendered it so: Rousseau and Byron. It was in this very village that, in 1761, Rousseau set his novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, thereby propelling a humble hamlet in the gulf of Montreux into the eye of the first European tourist storm. The original title of the novel, *Lettres de deux amans habitans d'une petite ville au pied des Alpes* ('Letters between two lovers living in a small village at the foot of the Alps'), melded the lovers' fictional story and the place in which it was set. Such was the success of Rousseau's novel that the publishers could not keep up with the printing, as hordes of readers made for Clarens in search of the 'bosquet de Julie', the very place where Julie and her teacher Saint-Preux first kissed.

A copy of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was found among the possessions of the lady of the camellias after her death, along with *Manon Lescaut*. That the illicit *Manon* should be high among the favourite books of a literate

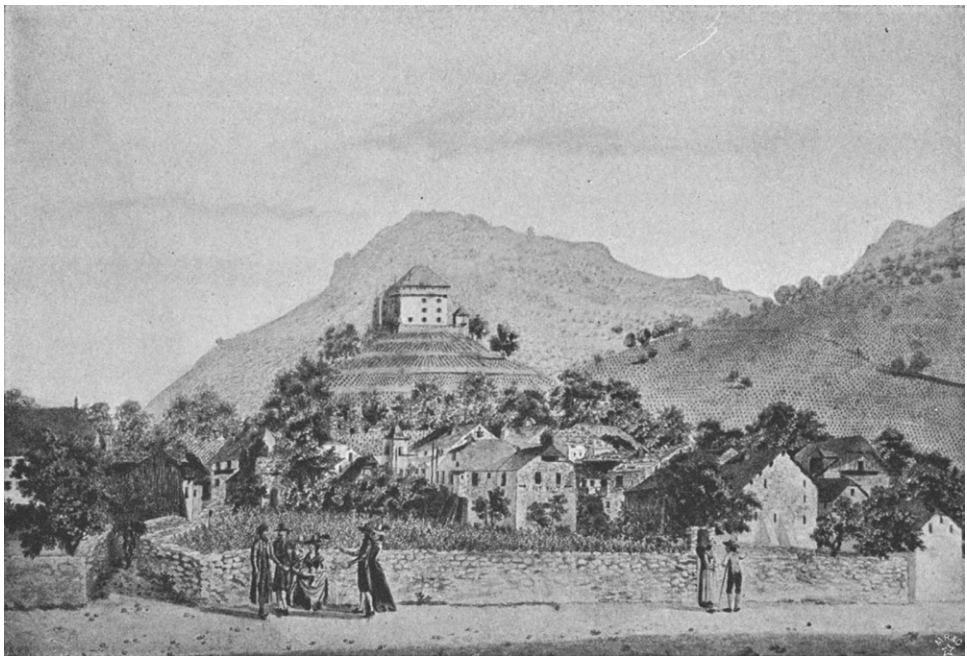

Figure 2.2 The hamlet of Clarens near Montreux, famous through Rousseau and Byron, where Marie Duplessis's mother died.

courtesan need not come as a surprise, but her reading of the long and demanding *La Nouvelle Héloïse* may have been attributable to her mother's time at Clarens. One wonders whether during one of her visits to Chamonix and other mountain resorts—we know from a stamp in her passport that she visited Bagnères-de-Luchon in the Pyrenees and so, probably, did Alpine resorts too—she did not descend on Clarens to visit her mother's tomb? Certainly by late 1845 she knew all about her mother's final resting place; in fact she may have learnt about it long before then from another source much closer to home.

While the presence in Châtelard and Clarens of the mother of the future lady of the camellias is firmly established by her death certificate, neither she nor, more surprisingly, her aristocratic English patrons—Vienne calls them 'Anderson'—appear to have left any other trace in the recorded history of the area. Byron's visit to Clarens a few years before the arrival of Marie Deshayes may help throw some tangential light on this, because his stay there is not only well documented but has been extensively researched. He loved *La Nouvelle Héloïse* so much that fifty-five years after its publica-

tion he visited Clarens 'with Rousseau in hand', as he put in a letter of 23 June 1816 to his friend Hobhouse.[6] He spent two nights there, one with Shelley in June 1816 and another, a few months later, with Hobhouse. He glowingly apostrophized the village in *Childe Harold*, with particular reference to Rousseau's love story. The Clarens stanzas of Canto III (99–104) rhapsodically evoke the grandeur of the village's setting at the foot of glaciers, including the vineyards that to this day surround Châtelard, 'vines / Which slope his green path downward to the shore'.

As one of the most fashionable poets of the age, Byron too featured in Marie Duplessis's library. He preceded her mother in Clarens by twelve years and had stayed in two inns, owned by the Dufour (25 June 1816, with Shelley) and Pauly (18 September 1816, with Hobhouse) families.[7] Since Marie Duplessis's mother was called 'femme de chambre' on her death certificate, is it not inconceivable that she worked, at least some of the time, for one of these two inns, both of which enjoyed a long history in Clarens until the late 1840s.[8] In 1845 one of Clarens's most renowned sons, the poet and scholar Alexandre Vinet, died in the Dufour house, in the same room once apparently occupied by Byron, at 8 Rue des Artisans. Did Byron's links to Clarens account partly for Marie Duplessis's interest in the English poet?

Questions about her mother's employment in Clarens only arise because her rich patrons left no mark in the records of the village, at least none that can be recovered. The registers of the regional police granting visas to foreign visitors are silent on this matter and the Liste des Étrangers, such a boon to researchers of mid-nineteenth-century European spa towns, only starts in 1892. There is no mention of the Andersons in the local tax records, nor is there any reference to property owned by them in various related surveys. It all seems a bit of a mystery unless, contrary to Vienne's assertion, they did not after all own a property there but instead rented, for extended periods, the château perching on top of the tor of Clarens. Were the Andersons the brand-new *lessees* of the château of Châtelard to whom Byron refers in his letter of 18 September 1816 when he stayed again in Clarens, this time with Hobhouse:

> arrived the second time (1st time was by water) at Clarens beautiful Clarens!—went to Chillon through scenery worthy of I know not whom—went over the Castle of Chillon again—on our return met an English party in a carriage—a lady in it fast asleep!—fast asleep in the most anti-narcotic spot in the world . . . After a slight & short dinner—we visited the Chateau de Clarens—an English woman has rented it recently—(it was not let when I saw it first

> [June 1816]) the roses are gone with their summer—the family out—but the servants desired us to walk over the interior—saw the table of the saloon—Blair's sermons—and somebody else's (I forgot who's—) sermons—and a set of noisy children—saw all worth seeing and then descended to the 'Bosquet de Julie'...[9]

Perhaps Romain Vienne's 'Andersons', the benefactors of Alphonsine's mother, were the very English people Byron and Hobhouse passed on their return from Chillon (which may be why they were 'out'), the place that inspired Byron's 'The Prisoner of Chillon', a poem about François Bonivard's six-year ordeal chained to a pillar in the dungeon of the Montreux–Chillon castle.[10] Byron's ode to Clarens in *Childe Harold* and his subsequent prestige inevitably meant that, in time, everyone locally wanted to have known the great poet. A measure of healthy scepticism about some of the more inflated claims made about the poet's stay in Clarens is advisable.[11] Nevertheless, accounts by serious local historians such as Eugène Rambert, born near Clarens in 1830, fourteen years after Byron's stay in Clarens, cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Rambert was appointed to a chair at the University of Lausanne at the age of twenty-four, after studying in Paris. His perceptive pages on the 'Doyen Bridel', the very pastor who buried Marie Duplessis's mother, immediately precede those on Byron and show a cultured intelligence, as one would expect from a scholar of his background and a friend of the great Swiss novelist Gottfried Keller. He would not have been taken in by locals boasting about their eminent visitors. That they were embellishing he would have suspected, but not to the point of inventing entire stories. Here is what Rambert records about the poet's two visits in a book published in 1877:

> One still points out at Mr Dufour's in Clarens a room where he [Byron] lived... He also lodged in another house, where lived a lady by the name of Pauly, who thought highly of him, because of his good manners, his guineas, and his fame. Perhaps she imagined that some of it would rub off on her. In any case, she thought he was a great original, a kind of madman, who 'paced up and down all night in his room.' I had that from her own mouth. One day she was squatting in her garden, in very ordinary clothes, in the process of scraping her cabbages... when she heard someone call her name with a great burst of laughter. It was Byron who had arrived unannounced and was watching her over the hedge. She wanted to flee but was restrained. They insisted that she squat again in front of her cabbages until one of Byron's companions, Hobhouse I believe, could sketch her in his album. 'Never', she told me, 'did I feel more embarrassed.'[12]

Would this respectable historian and professor really make up a conversation with Madame Pauly? By the time she spoke to Rambert, she must have been well into her sixties if not seventies, while Rambert was almost, though not quite, a contemporary of Byron's.[13] He knew the Dufours and the Paulys of Clarens and he knew the pastor who had tended the dying mother of the future lady of the camellias. The detail of the cabbage patch, the hedge, and perhaps above all Hobhouse's sketch book—in 1818 Hobhouse published *Historical Illustrations of the Fourth Canto of Childe Harold*—all ring essentially true. Rambert grew up within a mere fifteen minutes' walk from the two Clarens inns and must have known them well. He does not mention famous foreigners other than Byron, largely because he is interested above all in the Vaudois region's history and its topography.

It is a pity that he does not say more about the Dufour inn because Byron mentions it and it was a favourite haunt of the redoubtable Lady Frances Compton, of whom Sir Walter Scott wrote that she was 'a spirited old lady, fond of dogs and horses, and had a pair of loaded pistols to defend her house in person when it was threatened in the corn bill riots'. She was also, it seems, a great traveller abroad. A later important historian of Montreux notes that 'One of our first foreign guests was Lady Compton, sister of the Duke of Northampton, who stayed at the minister Dufour's, formerly a tutor to the family of the Duke; and so the small lounge of the minister became, in some measure thanks to the presence of Lady Compton, a centre of social gathering for the first visitors to Montreux . . . the first two hotels opened around 1835.'[14]

Gabriel Dufour of Châtelard died at the age of 93 in June 1828. His death notice, certified by the same doctor (Buenzod) and priest (Bridel) who also attended to Marie Deshayes two years later, states that he had been a minister at Mulsoe Manor which belonged to the Earls of Northampton until 1801. At the time of the nonagenarian Dufour's death, which coincided with the arrival at Clarens in the summer of 1828 of Marie Duplessis's mother, Lady Compton was herself 70 years old. She and Dufour went back a long way and were close enough for Dufour to name his son Charles Gabriel Spencer, after Lady Compton's father, Spencer being one of the Northamptons' preferred first names.[15] Links between members of the English aristocracy and local families and innkeepers of Clarens reach back, it seems, into the late eighteenth century, and may inadvertently, through her mother, connect the lady of the camellias—if distantly—to Byron. It stands to reason that, as a friend of Walter Scott's, Lady Compton probably knew Byron and

she may have met Byron at the Dufours' in 1816, although he does not say so specifically in his letters. She probably spent most of her last years here because, when she died on 20 February 1832, the *Registre des Décès* duly records that, while she was born at Castle Ashby, she lived 'aux Planches', close to the centre of modern Montreux. It is inconceivable that Lady Compton and the Andersons, both horse-mad British aristocrats, would not have known one another in Châtelard–Clarens, which boasted a very small expatriate community among its 2,055 inhabitants in the 1831 census. If they did, they must have spoken about Byron, who was then the best-known Englishman alive and who had stayed in their tiny and remote expatriate corner only fairly recently.

The full name of the good English Samaritan who sat with Marie Deshayes in her final hours was Lady Charlotte Anderson Pelham Worsley Yarborough, born on 20 October 1810, the youngest child of Sir Charles Anderson Pelham, Baron Yarborough, and of his wife Lady Henrietta. Lady Henrietta died in June 1813 so that Lady Charlotte Anderson lost her mother before she was even 3 years old. Many years later this shared tragedy, the fact that they both lost their mothers when they had been 3 and 4 years old respectively, would consolidate the bond between her and the lady of the camellias. Charlotte Anderson was 17 when Marie Deshayes joined her family in Paris, to become their chambermaid first and then a confidant. The battered wife of Plessis and the female scion of the Yarboroughs met through the intermediary of the Duhays family and their connections to the stud at Haras-du-Pin. The link was an English jockey by the name of Augustin. He had ridden for the legendary house of Médavy, true-blue equestrian aristocracy, and had retired to Paris where his wife, then widow, tutored a grand English lady, who can only have been the then teenage Charlotte Anderson.[16] The Duhays had kept in touch with Augustin's widow and told her about the plight of Marie Deshayes; she in turn passed this news on to Lady Anderson, who offered to take in Marie.

Why would she be so charitable to a complete stranger and did the underage and unmarried Charlotte Anderson have the authority to employ a stranger on her own? According to the more authoritative source of two on this, one written many years after the event by Charles Duhays, a direct descendant of the Madame Duhays who arranged Marie's safe passage in 1828, 'Lady B. [*sic*], recognizing in the fate of this unhappy woman a strong similarity to her own, was keen to take her in'. The 'similarity' can hardly

refer to a violent husband as Charlotte Anderson was not married and had no children at that stage. It may have been the early loss of her mother that made her feel so spontaneously charitable towards Marie who had been forced to forsake her children.

Among the Andersons, Marie's life changed in every sense. Her sweet nature and well-bred manners instantly, it seems, won over her employers who became her friends and, indeed, seemed to adore her. Her relationship was primarily with Charlotte Anderson. Although Charlotte was sixteen years younger than Marie, the two women grew very close. They must have been temperamentally similar. Certainly Charlotte's testament many years later, and indeed that of her future husband too, suggests that she was an exceptionally warm and generous person who, like her husband, cared deeply about her servants' welfare after her own death and rewarded them accordingly.

Her employers took Marie Deshayes, the mother of the future lady of the camellias, with them everywhere, perhaps because Charlotte could not bear to be parted from her chaperone. In Paris the Andersons lived, or rented, in the exclusive Faubourg Saint-Honoré, close to the British Embassy. One Sunday they took Marie along to mass in the Sainte-Chapelle when the King, Louis-Philippe I, was present. He spotted the pretty, melancholy Deshayes woman and, according to Charles Duhays, whose family had arranged for Marie to flee the Orne, only had eyes for her. The magnetism of the future lady of the camellias evidently stemmed in large part from her mother.

The Andersons divided their time between Paris, Lake Geneva, and Britain, while also patronizing the spas of Europe. One of these was Chamonix in the Alps, not far from Clarens. The leading Parisian fashion magazine *L'Illustration* described it as 'the meeting-point of the entire *beau monde* of London and Paris; the English above all visit here in droves'.[17] It was during a visit to Chamonix that Lady Charlotte Anderson had her friend Marie Deshayes painted by a local artist, not once but twice. One of these miniatures survives in the Musée de la Dame aux Camélias in Gacé and is reproduced in this book; the other, probably identical, may still be in the possession of the Anderson Yarborough families, unless it was sent by them to Alphonsine's sister Delphine after the death of the lady of the camellias. That Charlotte Anderson was devoted to Marie Deshayes is not in doubt, but to have a favourite servant drawn by a painter seems an almost excessive act of affection. The most plausible explanation is that Marie longed to have two pictures of herself to send home to her girls back in Normandy, to let