

FALLING *in* LOVE
WHILE STUFFING
a ZEBRA

FALLING *in* LOVE
WHILE STUFFING
a ZEBRA

A Philosophical Tale

ROLAND KUPERS



GREENLEAF
BOOK GROUP PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Although most of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in the novel are based on actual historical counterparts, the dialogue and thoughts of these characters are products of the author's imagination.

Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press
Austin, Texas
www.gbgroup.com

Copyright © 2025 by Roland Kupers

All rights reserved.

Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright law. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the copyright holder.

Distributed by Greenleaf Book Group

For ordering information or special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Greenleaf Book Group at PO Box 91869, Austin, TX 78709, 512.891.6100.

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group and Mimi Bark
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group and Mimi Bark
Cover images used under license from © Marvin Nast

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 979-8-88645-356-0

eBook ISBN: 979-8-88645-357-7

To offset the number of trees consumed in the printing of our books, Greenleaf donates a portion of the proceeds from each printing to the Arbor Day Foundation. Greenleaf Book Group has replaced over 50,000 trees since 2007.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

To my father's love of the bon mot,
Hester's limitless enthusiasm,
Rebecca's whimsical determination,
and Madame de Staël, the Marquis de Condorcet,
and Benjamin Franklin—
bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble.¹
They all helped brew this tale of complexity.

1 The French expression “bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble” is used to denote a situation in which unlikely companions, much to their own surprise, find themselves having the same intentions, goals, or interests.

CONTENTS

1 — A Wild Ass	1
2 — George du Paon	23
3 — The Rights of Humans	39
4 — Unveiling the Queen's Zebra	67
5 — The Académie	79
6 — Chloë d'Avigny	101
7 — The Robbery	117
8 — The Americans in Paris	127
9 — The Recovery	153
10 — A Platypus	175
11 — Saint-Georges	187
12 — The Part and the Whole	197
13 — Adrift	211
Postscript	217
Bibliography	221
Additional Literature	225
About the Author	229

A WILD ASS

Paris, Saturday, November 11, 1786

Startled by the sound of the small cannon firing its blank charge, George du Paon awoke. He realised that noon had passed, as that is when the miniature cannon announced mid-day in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. A few uncomfortable and interrupted hours of sleep slumped on a wooden bench had made his back sore. His limbs had stiffened in the cool air; after a night of debate and debauchery, an indulgent slumber had slipped into a late Saturday-morning nap. The gardens were now pleasantly quiet after the bustling rowdiness of the evening and night. George briefly basked in the silence—only interrupted by the sound of brooms sweeping the gravel avenues under the trees.

It was past time to get to work.

The autumn colours were all around, offsetting the pale rows of columns along each side of the vast rectangular courtyard of the Palais-Royal gardens.

Closely hugging the buildings protruding from the palace itself, each of the round grooved columns was coifed with

a sober Doric capital. Above them, exuberant columns with Corinthian capitals embraced the gardens, bushels of acanthus leaves topping the arcades and rows of vases lining their summit.

The lime trees in the garden grasped their remaining leaves, straight-jacketed into neat lines by an invisible army of ladder-climbing gardeners. Their rigorous geometry formed a quiet reproach to the baroque ornamentation above the bay windows along the façades.

When he had first visited the gardens after their reopening in '84, George had been struck by the determined effort to encapsulate nature in neat lines and ornaments. He now relished the irony that it had become the place where both ideas and desires most freely flowed. The little cannon had been a great addition. A lens amplifying the sun's rays lighted the gunpowder, albeit with the unfortunate side effect that it had to be fired manually on overcast days.

Subsequently, another one of the habitués, Jacques Delille, famous for his *bon mots*, had written a short poem on the ardours and arbours of the Palais-Royal: "In this garden one encounters neither fields nor meadows, nor woods, nor flowers. And, even if habits are upended there, at least one's watch may be set."¹ George recalled a wine-imbibed evening when he had unusually wandered beyond his habitual cafés in the Palais-Royal and had met Delille, as they found themselves at the same table. They had explored at length the importance of

1 "Dans ce jardin on ne rencontre. Ni champs, ni prés, ni bois, ni fleurs. Et si l'on y dérègle ses mœurs, Au moins on y règle sa montre." Source: Delille, "Dans ce jardin on ne rencontre."

knowing time precisely, albeit with a granularity only sensible with mild intoxication.

A keen sailor, Delille had recalled the great invention of the Yorkshire working-class master-clockmaker John Harrison, who had solved the mighty longitude problem for ship navigation only seventeen years prior. However, the grand allocated prize and the recognition promised by the Royal Society had been withheld from him, largely because Harrison did not fit the mould of the British scientist. Somewhat randomly, George and Delille had rejoiced that at least in France, precise time was available to all through a daily cannon shot.

Now, with an uneasy gait, George headed towards the northern exit of the garden, past the theatre where the actors were filing in to practice for the evening's performance. He observed that most were clad in the well-worn rough linen clothing that identified those with high hopes but limited means. One man stood out in an ill-fitting bright blue silk coat with white ribbons, hinting at an affair with a wealthy admirer who had left the frock as a reward. The two women behind him had likely found the same route to better clothes, but at least they had had the coquetry to make their gifted dresses fit tightly. Actresses and actors were in great demand in the Palais-Royal, both for their good looks and for their ability to shift between identities to the whim of their admirers after the evening applause had dimmed.

Crossing into the gardens of the Tuileries Palace, he felt his head clearing and his senses sharpening.² Their wide expanses

2 In 1667, at the request of the famous author of *Sleeping Beauty* and other fairy tales, Charles Perrault, the Tuileries Garden was opened to the public, with the exception of beggars,

onto the Seine on the south side contrasted with the restricted space of the Palais-Royal. The relative anonymity of those who strolled the gardens was a relief from the social, intellectual, and sensual intensity of his evening's redoubt.

In these gardens, the trees were less controlled. The moss accumulating on the soaring statues celebrating the fame of Louis XIV amplified this sense of *laissez-faire*. The jumble of colours painted on the autumn leaves echoed the absence of willed aesthetics.

When George finally crossed the moat's turning bridge and emerged onto la place Louis XV, he was ready to plunge into his workday.³ In the middle of the square stood a somewhat pompous equestrian statue of Louis XV—which Jefferson would express his disapproval of and warn Congress against considering a similar tribute to George Washington. The long, ornate, columned façade along the north side of the square, framing the space between the jumbled trees of the Tuileries gardens and the martial grounds of the Champs-Élysées, had been designed a decade and a half earlier by Gabriel. It was one of the first urban commissions in Paris—which hitherto had been mostly limited to religious edifices.

George was stopped from crossing the street by a long parade of horse-drawn wagons covered in black tarps. Ahead of

"lackeys," and soldiers. It was the first royal garden to be open to the public. Source: "Tuileries Garden," Wikipedia.

3 A movable bridge, a *pont-tournant*, was placed at the west end over the moat to make access to the garden easier. The creation of la place Louis XV (now place de la Concorde) created a grand vestibule to the garden.

the procession were men carrying torches, and between them priests chanting the Mass of the Dead. The Parisian cemeteries were overflowing with corpses. The living were clamouring for more space; the dead needed to move away, driven by their inexorable growth in numbers, as generation succeeded generation. A solution was found. The chain of wagons was transferring six million skeletons into the vast labyrinths carved over centuries in the limestone beneath the city. On a prior year's visit to these catacombs, as he walked through the tunnels carved under Paris, George had witnessed the bones sorted and stacked, femur upon femur, skull upon skull, and so on. It had struck him that his work was always concerned with the external shape of animals and that he never dealt in bones, which were a mere afterthought, and yet through their presence, millions of people retained a small toehold in today's reality. At the thought of his sister's bones, tears briefly surged to his eyes, as if propelled by a great pressure. Violette would have laughed dismissively at the mere thought of her bones being separated, sorted, and stacked.

Crossing the Seine, now walking at a brisk pace, he soon reached his atelier in the rue des Saints-Pères. The large oak doors onto the street were open, as was usual during the day. At the back of the second courtyard, he was engulfed by the familiar, mildly nauseating smell of formaldehyde from the atelier.

The workshop was the reign of his collaborators Gaston and Jeanne. They greeted him gaily, displaying not the slightest surprise at his late arrival. They were used to the alternative daily rhythm that distinguished the social strata.

When Gaston had started his employment over a decade before, he'd been very slim, but over the years, he'd grown both in size and in confidence. His girth, gradually expanding over the period, testified to the ample food that the workers enjoyed. Gaston interrupted his whistling to greet his employer with a joyous "Monsieur! You've returned. I hope your lunch was as good as ours. Jeanne only barely touched hers, so I enjoyed it for the both of us." His dark hair and eyes were offset by an even and joyous nature.

George had learnt to value Gaston's loyalty over his wits. Whenever Gaston left the atelier for his weekly visit to his brother in Saint Denis, his whistling echoed in the street, bouncing between the façades. He never failed to return with a bottle from his brother's meagre wine trade, which notwithstanding its basic nature, he insisted on sharing with Jeanne and George.

Jeanne pushed Gaston aside. "Monsieur George, you must see what has just been delivered!"

At twenty-one, Jeanne's steadfastness exuded seriousness, the sparkle in her eyes cast a mineral hardness that betrayed the harshness of her early years. Her lips had acquired the slightest Parisian pout. Her head tilted upwards, making her carved nose more enticing and prominent, and her chestnut hair flowed down the back to the hem of her corset.

George observed how she complemented Gaston's rougher presence with the undulating movements of her hands. But years of scrubbing floors and later carcasses had left a coarse imprint on those hands.

A client appeared in the entrance, and Jeanne smiled and bowed slightly. "I am sorry, sir," she politely told the man, "we are closed today, but if you can come back tomorrow, I will be very happy to show you all the new work."

The man smiled back and made his retreat.

Jeanne's unmistakable charm had become an additional enticement for George's clients to remain faithful to the atelier. Du Paon's firm was much sought after and his business was thriving, but most commissions consisted of mere foxes, deer, rabbits, or the odd peacock.

Jeanne closed the door and walked to the back of the room towards the new arrival.

"Well done," said George, in appreciation of Jeanne's elegant handling of the client. "With such a charming rejection, he may well return."

The highlight of the morning had been a poorly cleaned new delivery betraying a disarming lack of skill. Jeanne had laid out the animal on the large wooden table at the centre of the back room of the workshop so they could all observe the sample.

After the initial thrill at the sight of the striped beast, George observed the deficiencies in its preparation and frowned. "This is very messy. Who prepared this? Where on earth did they learn their trade? I do hope that we can repair this."

Jeanne looked deeply concerned, then suddenly delighted. "These stripes! Not at all like a cow, much as if it was painted by someone. And so big!"

Salt had conserved the inside merely adequately, but George was relieved to see that the outer skin had remained in perfect

condition. This would be critical in obtaining the high-level result that the queen would surely expect.

“How should we proceed?” asked Jeanne as she bit her lip.

Such an exotic animal was the rarest of challenges. Alive, along with its sibling, it had been a present given in 1762 to the young Queen of England, a welcome distraction a year after her marriage to the rather dull King George III.

Before considering how to proceed, George stared at the striped apparition, recalling how it had been mentioned many times in the *Journal de Paris*. “Let me describe its English background a little. You realise the remarkable item we have here, right?”

“I always thought the English were strange, and their animals as well,” ventured Gaston.

“No, no really, these animals do not live in England,” George reassured him. “It comes from the south of the African continent. This one survived the long journey from the Cape of Good Hope, alongside its sibling, to England, where it was offered to the queen—and then went on to live to a remarkably old age—that alone should impress us. The queen had grown so excessively fond of it that she wanted it eternalised. That is how it has made its way to Paris.”

The zebra had been a source of inspiration for the satirist’s pens of the day, and George recalled one particularly bawdy song which he recited to his collaborators:

“Though squeamish old Prudes with Invective and Spleen,
May turn up their Noses and censure the Queen;
Crying out, ‘Tis a Shame, that her Queenship, alas

Should take such a Pride—in exposing her Ass.”

“Ass!” screamed Gaston in delight.

A text from the English court had been delivered along with the skin, and it related the story of the animal. George loosely quoted from it: “While the first zebra had been given away and finished stuffed in the Blue Boar pub in York, in keeping with the fashion to exhibit exotic animals in taverns and coffee houses, the queen, it seemed, desired a more deserving afterlife for her second one. The first one had been rapidly decaying through the ineptitude of an insufficiently skilled taxidermist. The Leverian collection at Leicester House was a great favourite of the queen. She had ordered the collection to be open and at no cost for visitors, a generous gesture her court had sought to temper by making the free access contingent on arriving in a private carriage.”

Skipping past a few less interesting paragraphs, George went on. “As the queen intended the second zebra to be included in the Leverian, she apparently sought out the most reputable artisans in Europe to conserve the animal. This led to the crate with the zebra materialising on this November day in the rue des Saints-Pères, on our doorstep. The choice of a French master over a British one was made barely palatable by a brief lull in the habitual tensions between our countries.”

A bundle of prints and a folder with several dozen drawings had been delivered along with the skin. George peered over Jeanne’s shoulder as she sifted through them. “It appears that an added benefit of the sordid past of the widely mocked ‘Queen’s Asses,’” George said, “is that there is no shortage

of sketches and drawings of the animals during their lives.” Since neither George nor any of his collaborators had ever seen a zebra, these images were of essential importance to their work.

“Last year they painted a horse for carnival. I thought it was a bad joke, but this one seems to have been created with stripes!” blurted out Gaston.

“They do look like grazing donkeys on the drawings,” Jeanne added, setting the stack of drawings down on a nearby cabinet, “but somehow more muscular, more ready to pounce.”

There was an additional reason why this commission was so important to George, and he was keen to discuss the history of the beast with his friend Nicolas de Condorcet during his next visit to the Palais-Royal. Well-read and well-connected, he would no doubt have an original view. Nicolas was a most prominent economist, mathematician, and nobleman. Their friendship was an improbable one—which made George all the more grateful for it. Sharing a compulsion to observe the world from a distance, Nicolas and George had become close friends, notwithstanding the gap in their social rank. They met regularly, most often at one of the cafés in the Palais-Royal, and thrived through each other’s observations and speculations on the challenges of the times.

A regular at court, Nicolas had told him of the zebra that lived at the Versailles court and was the subject of many experiments. “Buffon,” Nicolas explained, on one of their recent outings, “wanted to understand whether they might improve the species, perhaps by crossing it with a French female ass.”

The main court naturalist Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon was a shared acquaintance.

“Buffon has been a great supporter of my workshop, and I owe him much gratitude. You, my friend, probably owe him much champagne!” George had commented in jest.

With a brief smile, Nicolas had gone on to describe the outcome of Buffon’s efforts. “Alas,” he told George, a sparkle in his eye, “the zebra spurned all attempts at forced courtship. Painting stripes on the unfortunate French ass could equally not excite the Versailles zebra. The comte had concluded that this coldness could not be attributed to another cause than the disagreement of their natures, for this zebra was then four years of age and was very lively in every other exercise.”

George had heard from a colleague naturalist that this experiment was widely followed with considerable interest, as zebras were notoriously untameable, contrary to their European cousins, who were the very metaphor of domestic servitude in the city, farm, and on the battlefield. The inability of man to subjugate the zebra, a beast so much a horse in its likeness, was felt as a notable failure.

This had an impact well beyond the loss of an ornamental carriage puller, casting a shadow over the essence of the relationship of man with the natural world. Although eroding under the rise of the scientific mind, George regularly observed how the biblical realm still strongly shaped expectations. He had heard directly, alongside many of his colleagues, how perfectly legitimate scientific explanations grounded in empirical observations struggled to displace revealed knowledge from

scripture. The dominion of man over nature trumpeted by Genesis 1:26 went mostly unchallenged.

George mumbled to Jeanne almost inaudibly, “And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”

“What?” said Jeanne, and George resisted the urge to smile—clearly she was unaccustomed to hearing her master quote scripture. “I don’t recall this in last week’s mass,” she added mischievously. “If my memory serves me correctly, I recall you had slept late, and I had gone ahead with Gaston.”

“My apologies, Jeanne and Gaston, I was then and am now quite exhausted and will retire. I’ll be back down in a few hours.” George acutely felt the aches from his morning on the park bench.

“Here are some sketches I have made for the zebra,” Jeanne called out in mild rebuke. From a wide drawer under the table, she pulled out a big sheet of paper that showed various equine positions. George noticed that they bore a distant resemblance to the statues that had served as backdrop during Jeanne’s education in her previous workshop.

George replied in a flat tone, betraying his lack of sleep, “Thank you, Jeanne. I see you’ve been diligently studying horses, as we had discussed.”

“Indeed, she has,” interjected Gaston. “She has even got me to stop a carriage in the street. She wanted to see what the

muscles looked like when the horses get back into motion. The owners did not look happy, not happy they were.”

The atelier’s aim in the preparation of the animal would be to represent this tension, how the zebra had defied the best efforts of the court’s scientists at imposing man’s will on the natural world. George’s zebra would incarnate the vitality of nature.

Jeanne looked at George with despair. “Do you not like the drawings? Perhaps you’re right. I should have drawn more different kinds of horses, perhaps the funny Flemish ones with the broad legs and big buttocks.”

His lack of reaction to the drawings clearly worried her. George knew about her lack of confidence and noticed it now, but his tiredness hardened him into being less considerate than usual.

Her previous employer’s recommendation contradicted her self-image, as he had praised her highly. Robert-Guillaume Dardel was an acquaintance of George, a member of an informal league of ateliers that were highly regarded by their wealthy clients, and they regularly provided recommendations for work to each other. Dardel’s workshop had become fashionable as a source of portraits and busts for minor aristocrats and newly wealthy members of the bourgeoisie.

A year earlier, he had come to George to place Jeanne—one of his collaborators. “She was orphaned at an early age and was fortunate enough to be hired by my atelier to clean and order the halls,” Dardel had said, although with fondness. “Many evenings before retiring to her room in the servant’s quarters

in the small, all-too-well-ventilated rooms under the roof, she lingered in the workshop, doodling sketches in the margins of some discarded papers. When I came in one morning, I was surprised that Jeanne was not there yet. I noticed some drawings that had been left behind on the table in a rush. I had never seen these before and was struck by the assertiveness of the lines, by the sensitivity of the treatment of the shadows. Clearly not the hand of a learned artist, it was nevertheless a gifted one, bearing promise. I queried my apprentices as to whether they were the authors and was met with rebuttals and a grudging acknowledgement of the talent of the draftsman. At no time did I suspect that the unassuming, simple girl who kept order might have been the author.”

George had nodded with understanding and had theatrically spread his arms, as if announcing a surprise guest.

Dardel had gone on to explain. “One morning, a complaint from the Marquis Louis Georges Érasme de Contades for the late delivery of a statue for the gardens of his hotel in the rue d’Anjou had sent me back to the atelier later than usual. Hunched over a table, with a thin piece of charcoal in her hand, her coarse grey linen dress hugging her waist and lower back, was Jeanne, absorbed in her sketching. My voice startled her, and she attempted to whisk away the drawing scraps. I noticed her cheeks flush,” he added with the precision of a painter, “offsetting the dark colour of the locks escaping underneath the constraints of her plain cream-coloured bonnet.”

The accidental discovery of her talent reoriented the direction of her life’s glide path. Because of her lowly origins, with

the added burden of her gender, the likelihood of escaping eternal servitude—or worse—was grim. Dardel had told George that he had offered her a position to help with the draughting work of the atelier, and her fate improved markedly. She had moved down from the servant's quarters in the attic, into a modest but comfortable room on one of the lower floors.

George had volunteered that it must have been problematic for the other apprentices of the workshop to have a woman working at their side.

Dardel had replied, "Indeed, but I endeavoured to get Jeanne accepted and gave her drawing lessons when the others were gone, but the situation became increasingly untenable. She convinced no one by pointing to Élisabeth Vigée le Brun, whose portrait of Marie Antoinette from 1783 had led to her admission at the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture."

"Clearly she was also exploring your library, this simple servant of yours," George had observed.

He had heard how Dardel's staff had opposed Jeanne's promotion. "Vigée le Brun was not a cleaning maid," noted her reluctant colleagues. So Jeanne had to go, and Dardel set about looking for a suitable position. After being turned down by his fellow painters and sculptors, it occurred to him that George du Paon might require an artist with an aptitude for sketching animals, and who could perhaps sculpt the models around which the skins were hung.

The first time they met, Jeanne had described to George how she had begun drawing. "One night," she explained, tucking her chestnut curls behind her ears, "I had fallen asleep over

the drawings and woken in the middle of the night in the dark and cold atelier. I was startled by the dark and the staring gaze of the white marble people. It felt as if they had woken up and had moved around the room, but the moment I woke up, they froze in their movements. I rushed upstairs and buried myself under the blankets. I was terrified but also excited at the force awoken by pen and paper. I resolved to draw as often as I could.”

Now Jeanne was sketching the queen’s zebra in George’s workshop. After George had observed her squinting over her drawings, he had offered her his father’s eyeglasses. Though they were too big for her, the lenses serendipitously offered the proper amount of correction, and she now wore them proudly, sliding them up her nose whenever they slumped.

Jeanne Laplume straightened from a deep hunch over a set of drawings of the zebra. “What do you think?” she asked George, with the assertiveness that characterised her independence but also betrayed a hint of uncertainty.

He recognised the tone and knew he needed to make her comfortable before engaging in a conversation, let alone criticising her designs. “Strong and clear—I like the powerful stance of the back legs, like a horse prepped for battle.”

“Yes,” she retorted, settling into her identity as an artist, “but I’m not really sure what a zebra is. Is it a small horse or just the ornate cousin of an ass?”

George proceeded to tell her the story of the unhappy experiments with its brethren at Versailles and how zebras defied the dominance of man over nature promised in the Bible through their stubborn refusal to be tamed.

“Really? It could not be domesticated in any way?” She removed the glasses and stared at George.

“Notwithstanding the efforts of all the scientists of the court, it remained the very symbol of wildness. The king dismissed the scientists and called in the horse trainers of the cavalry, but they also failed. In a desperate final attempt, they turned to the farmers of the royal estates, but they, too, fell short.”

“Not tamed.” She sighed in admiration, leafing through the stack of zebra drawings in the English folder.

“Yes—and to speak to that, what I want is the shape of a cousin of the horse and the ass, but most importantly an expression of the wildness of nature shining through. The Queen of England should be mildly disturbed by seeing our stuffed zebra—it should remind her of the Dionysian convulsions in the immense Rubens ceilings in the Banqueting House at Whitehall. There are some impressions upstairs of those paintings that I made a few years ago in London.”

“I’ll take a look at the sketches of wild torrents I made during our stay in the Forêt de Fontainebleau last year—and cross the horse with the tempest.”

George was confident that she had glimpsed the ambition of the task, and unable to add anything to further stimulate her considerable imagination, he retired to his private apartments above the workshop. A single flight of a broad staircase with concave low steps led from the courtyard to the entrance of George’s living quarters on the first-floor landing.

He stopped outside the tall green double doors that separated the outside world from his apartment. His gaze followed the

railing that had held the grasp of so many strangers, the stairs winding upwards to neighbours above. He almost never engaged with the other people in the building. They were, he assumed, uncomfortable with the idea that his hands touched lifeless matter so frequently and suspicious that he had never wed.

The dark green double panelled doors opened onto a small hallway that looked down three door openings in a row, providing an immediate perspective to the other end of the apartment, where a narrow winding staircase led to the diminutive room where his servant slept. He had lived here for the last seven years since moving to Paris. Even when it was cold outside, and perhaps even more so, he felt an imperceptible surge in his chest whenever he entered this space—Violette was gone.

•

Violette and George had been symbiotic as children, and inseparable. George remembered how people would comment on it, always in a doting sort of way. “How precious,” an overbearing aunt would exclaim. A teacher would scold them for not working more independently. That sort of thing. Had it not been for the attention others poured on them, George wouldn’t have noticed how inextricable they were from one another—his twin had always been second nature to him.

Their ability to finish each other’s sentences had waned over time, but they continued to hold hands while walking along the Seine or through the Tuileries, shunning the asymmetry of a mere arm hold. “And I’m not an old lady who needs to be steadied,” Violette had once said. George replied by rotating both

their hands above their heads and smiled at her. Concerned about excessive dependence, their father had insisted that they attend separate schools, until he noticed that this led to even greater closeness in the evenings. As children, they had few other friendships as he and Violette were so close, and though he could not speak for her, he felt entirely content with only her presence to entertain and stimulate him. It was not something they talked about, but he guessed that she felt the same way.

They grew up in a small town near Metz in eastern France, in the strictly segregated social structure of the day. They befriended peasant children for the purpose of play and merely observed the nobility from a suitable distance.

When George moved to Paris to establish the firm, she had remained behind for less than a year, assisting their mother. She soon followed him to the capital, taking the room next to his in the apartment.

George was devastated when Violette had died three years earlier. They had shared the enterprise. She had been the artist, shaping the animals to perfection, expressing ferocity, docility, meanness, or the restrained violence that characterises much of the natural world. Working together had been a natural continuation of the proximity of their youth. While they differed in many ways, small and large, they always sensed precisely what the other was wrestling with. George understood that this was not unusual between twins, but they had lived and worked together inseparably.

Violette was a happier soul than George, finding in every moment a source of joy, ever so small, the potential for some

new improvement, or the goodness of any person who crossed the doorstep of the rue des Saints-Pères. She offered roots to George's wandering thoughts, with an earthiness that was always light.

Inevitably bubbling with an inexhaustible supply of energy, she sometimes overreached, causing a tray of tools to tumble or a vat of chemical substance to spill. Gaston was accustomed to these events and rushed to remediate. When she cut her left hand while cleaning the skin of a marmot, no one gave it a second thought. The wound was quickly cleaned and bound, and she continued to work as best as she could the same afternoon. Over the next days, the arm reddened increasingly, and she became bedridden with a rising fever. George had called for a doctor who had bled her more—which besides being counterintuitive was also counterproductive. The fever kept rising, and she gradually grew more distant. George sat by her bedside from the third day, sensing and fearing the worst. At dawn of the sixth day, her arm swollen, the fever blistering, Violette was dead.

George had thrown himself into his work and was grateful that Jeanne had been recommended to him by Dardel to assist him. But he found himself fleeing more regularly to the earthly pleasures and the intellectual jousts at the Palais-Royal.

This evening, having agreed upon the next steps for the queen's zebra with Jeanne in the atelier and craving quietude, he took the stairs to his flat. Light poured in through five tall double windows along the courtyard to the left of the entrance door. Each window provided a perspective on the courtyard

A Wild Ass

below, through the translucent branches of an acacia tree in its centre. Each room was sparsely, if elegantly, furnished, and dominated by sober marble chimney mantles bearing a small oval portrait under the simply ornamented mirrors.

A dog barked in the distance.