

**From Book Four of *The Book of the Courtier*, translated by Thomas Hoby (1561—
spelling modernised)**

M. Peter Bembo held his peace, and those Lords still were earnest upon him to speak somewhat more of this love and of the way to enjoy beauty aright, and at the last: Me think (quoth he) I have showed plainly enough, that old men may love more happily than young, which was my drift, therefore it belongs not me to enter any farther.

Count Lewis answered: You have better declared the unluckiness of young men, than the happiness of old men, whom you have not as yet taught, what way they must follow in this love of theirs: only you have said, that they must suffer themselves to be guided by reason, and the opinion of many is, that it is impossible for love to stand with reason.

Bembo notwithstanding sought to make an end of reasoning, but the Duchess desired him to say on, and he began thus afresh: Too unlucky were the nature of man, if our soul (in the which this so fervent coveting may lightly arise) should be driven to nourish it with that only, which is commune to her with beasts, and could not turn it to the other noble part, which is proper to her. Therefore since it is so your pleasure, I will not refuse to reason upon this noble matter. And because I know myself unworthy to talk of the most holy mysteries of love, I beseech him to lead my thought and my tongue so, that I may show this excellent Courtier how to love contrary to the wonted manner of the commune ignorant sort.

And even as from my childhood I have dedicated all my whole life unto him, so also now that my words may be answerable to the same intent, and to the praise of him: I say therefore, that since the nature of man in youthful age is so much inclined to sense, it may be granted the Courtier, while he is young, to love sensually. But in case afterward also in his riper years, he chance to be set on fire with this coveting of love, he ought to be good and circumspect, and heedful that he beguile not himself, to be led willfully into the wretchedness, that in young men deserves more to be pitied than blamed: and contrariwise in old men, more to be blamed than pitied.

Therefore when an amiable countenance of a beautiful woman comes in his sight, that is accompanied with noble conditions and honest behaviors, so that as one practiced in love, he knows well that his heart hath an agreement with hers, as soon as he is aware that his eyes snatch that image and carry it to the heart, and that the soul begins to behold it with pleasure, and feels within herself the influence that stirs her and by little and little sets her in heat, and that those lively spirits, that twinkle out through the eyes, put continually fresh nourishment to the fire: he ought in this beginning to seek a speedy remedy and to raise up reason, and with her, to fence the fortress of his heart, and to shut in such wise the passages against sense and appetites, that they may enter neither with force nor subtle practice. Thus if the flame be quenched, the jeopardy is also quenched.

But in case it continue or increase, then must the Courtier determine (when he perceives he is taken) to shun thoroughly all filthiness of common love, and so enter into the holy way of love with the guide of reason, and first consider that the body, where that beauty shines, is not the fountain from whence beauty springs, but rather because beauty is bodiless and (as we have said) an heavenly shining beam, she loses much of her honor when she is coupled with that vile subject and full of corruption, because the less she is partner thereof, the more perfect she is, and clean sundered from it, is most perfect. And as a man hears not with his mouth, nor smells with his ears: no more can he also in any manner wise enjoy beauty, nor satisfy the desire that she stirs up in our minds, with feeling, but with the sense, unto whom beauty is the very butt to level at: namely, the virtue of seeing. Let him lay aside therefore the blind judgment of the sense, and enjoy with his eyes the brightness, the comeliness, the loving sparkles, laughters, gestures and all other pleasant furnishings of beauty: especially with hearing the

sweetness of her voice, the tunableness of her words, the melody of her singing and playing on instruments (in case the woman beloved be a musician) and so shall he with most dainty food feed the soul through the means of these two senses, which have little bodily substance in them, and be the ministers of reason, without entering farther toward the body with coveting unto any longing otherwise then honest.

Afterward let him obey, please, and honor with all reverence his woman, and reckon her more dear to him then his own lief, and prefer all her commodities and pleasures before his own, and love no less in her the beauty of the mind, then of the body: therefore let him have a care not to suffer her to run into any error, but with lessons and good exhortations seek always to frame her to modesty, to temperance, to true honesty, and so to work that there may never take place in her other then pure thoughts and far wide from all filthiness of vices. And thus in sowing of virtue in the garden of that mind, he shall also gather the fruits of most beautiful conditions, and savor them with a marvelous good relish. And this shall be the right engendering and imprinting of beauty, the which some hold opinion to be the end of love.

In this manner shall our Courtier be most acceptable to his Lady, and she will always show herself toward him tractable, lowly and sweet in language, and as willing to please him, as to be beloved of him: and the wills of them both shall be most honest and agreeable, and they consequently shall be most happy.

Here M. Morello: The engendering (quoth he) of beauty in beauty aright, were the engendering of a beautiful child in a beautiful woman, and I would think it a more manifest token a great deal that she loved her lover, if she pleased him with this, then with the sweetness of language that you speak of.

M. Peter Bembo laughed and said: You must not (M. Morello) pass your bounds. I may tell you, it is not a small token that a woman loves, when she giveth unto her lover her beauty, which is so precious a matter: and by the ways that be a passage to the soul (that is to say, the sight and the hearing) sends the looks of her eyes, the image of her countenance, and the voice of her words, that pierce into the lovers heart, and give a witness of her love.

M. Morello said: looks and words may be, and oftentimes are, false witnesses. Therefore whoso hath not a better pledge of love (in my judgment) he is in an ill assurance. And surely I looked still that you would have made this woman of yours somewhat more courteous and free toward the Courtier, then my L. Julian hath made his: but (methinks) you be both of the property of those judges, that (to appear wise) give sentence against their own.

Bembo said: I am well pleased to have this woman much more courteous toward my Courtier not young, then the L. Julians is to the young: and that with good reason, because mine covet but honest matters, and therefore may the woman grant him them all without blame. But my L. Julians woman that is not so assured of the modesty of the young man, ought to grant him the honest matters only, and deny him the dishonest. Therefore more happy is mine, that hath granted him whatsoever he requires, then the other, that hath part granted and part denied.

And because you may moreover the better understand, that reasonable love is more happy then sensual, I say unto you, that self same things in sensual ought to be denied otherwise, and in reasonable, granted: because in the one, they be honest, and in the other dishonest. therefore the woman to please her good lover, beside the granting him merry countenances, familiar and secret talk, jesting, dallying, hand in hand, may also lawfully and without blame come to kissing: which in sensual love, according to the L. Julians rules, is not lawful.

For sins a kiss is a knitting together both of body and soul, it is to be feared, least the sensual lover will be more inclined to the part of the body, then of the soul: but the reasonable lover knows well, that

although the mouth be a piercell of the body, yet is it an issue for the words, that be the interpreters of the soul, and for the inward breath, which is also called the soul: and therefore hath a delight to join his mouth with the womans beloved with a kiss: not to stir him to any dishonest desire, but because he feels that, that bond is the opening of an entry to the souls, which draws with a coveting the one of the other, power them selves by turn, the one into the others body, and be so mingled together, that each of them hath two souls, and one alone so framed of them both rules (in a manner) two bodies. Whereupon a kiss may be said to be rather a coupling together of the soul, then of the body, because it hath such force in her, that it draws her unto it, and (as it were) separates her from the body. For this do all chaste lovers covet a kiss, as a coupling of souls together.

And therefore Plato the divine lover saith, that in kissing, his soul came as far as his lips to depart out of the body. And because the separating of the soul from the matters of the sense and the through coupling her with matters of understanding may be betokened by a kiss, Salomon saith in his heavenly book of Balattes, Oh that he would kiss me with a kiss of his mouth, to express the desire he had, that his soul might be ravished through heavenly love to the beholding of heavenly beauty in such manner, that coupling her self inwardly with it, she might forsake the body.

They stood all hearkening heedfully to Bembo's reasoning, and after he had staid a while and saw that none spake, he said: Sins you have made me to begin to show our not young Courtier this happy love, I will lead him somewhat farther forwards, because to stand still at this stay were somewhat perilous for him, considering (as we have often times said) the soul is most inclined to the senses, and for all reason with discourse chooses well, and knows that beauty not to spring of the body, and therefore sets a bridle to the dishonest desires, yet to behold it always in that body, does oftentimes corrupt the right judgment. And where no other inconvenience ensues upon it, one's absence from the wight beloved carries a great passion with it: because the influence of that beauty when it is present, gives a wondrous delight to the lover, and setting his heart on fire, quickens and melts certain virtues in a trance and congealed in the soul, the which nourished with the heat of love, flow about and go bubbling nigh the heart, and thrust out through the eyes those spirits, which be most fine vapors made of the purest and clearest part of the blood, which receive the image of beauty, and deck it with a thousand sundry furnitures. whereupon the soul taketh a delight, and with a certain wonder is aghast, and yet enjoys she it, and (as it were) astonished together with the pleasure, feels the fear and reverence that men customarily have toward holy matters, and thinks her self to be in paradise.

The lover therefore that considers only the beauty in the body, loses this treasure and happiness, as soon as the woman beloved with her departure leaves the eyes without their brightness, and consequently the soul, as a widow without her joy. For sins beauty is far of, that influence of love sets not the heart on fire, as it did in presence. whereupon the pores be dried up and withered, and yet does the remembrance of beauty somewhat stir those virtues of the soul in such wise, that they seek to scatter abroad the spirits, and they finding the ways closed up, have no issue, and still they seek to get out, and so with those shootings enclosed prick the soul, and tournament her bitterly, as young children, when in their tender gums they begin to breed teeth. And hens come the tears, sighs, vexations and torments of lovers: because the soul is always in affliction and travail and grows hard, until the beloved beauty comes before her once again, and then is she immediately pacified and taketh breath, and thoroughly bent to it, is nourished with most dainty food, and by her will, would never depart from so sweet a sight. to avoid therefore the torment of this absence, and to enjoy beauty without passion, the Courtier by the help of reason must fully and wholly call back again the coveting of the body to beauty alone, and (in what he can) behold it in it self simple and pure, and frame it within in his imagination sundered from all matter, and so make it friendly and loving to his soul, and there enjoy it, and have it with him day and night, in every time and place, without mistrust ever to lose it: keeping always fast in mind, that the body is a most diverse thing from beauty, and not only not increases, but diminishes the

perfection of it.

In this wise shall our not young Courtier be out of all bitterness and wretchedness that young men feel (in a manner) continually, as jealousies, suspicions, disdain, angers, desperations and certain rages full of madness, whereby many times they be lead into so great error, that some doe not only beat the women whom they love: but rid them selves out of their life. He shall do no wrong to the husband, father, brethren or kinsfolk of the woman beloved. He shall not bring her in slander. He shall not be in case with much a do otherwise to refrain his eyes and tongue from discovering his desires to others. He shall not take thought at departure or in absence, because he shall ever more carry his precious treasure about with him shut fast within his heart. And beside, through the virtue of imagination he shall fashion within himself that beauty much more fair, then it is in deed. But among these commodities the lover shall find an other yet far greater, in case he will take this love for a stayer (as it were to clime up to an other far higher then it. The which he shall bring to pass, if he will go and consider with himself, what a strict bond it is to be always in the trouble to behold the beauty of one body alone.

And therefore to come out of this so narrow a room, he shall gather in his thought by little and little so many ornaments, that meddling all beauties together, he shall make an universal concept, and bring the multitude of them to the unity of one alone, that is generally spread over all the nature of man. And thus shall he behold no more the particular beauty of one woman, but an universal, that decks out all bodies. Whereupon being dim with this greater light, he shall not pass upon the lesser, and burning in a more excellent flame, he shall little esteem it, that he set great store by at the first. This stayer of love, though it be very noble, and such as few arrive at it, yet is it not in this sort to be called perfect, insomuch as where the imagination is of force to make conveyance and hath no knowledge, but through those beginnings that the senses help her withal, she is not clean purged from gross darkness: and therefore though she do consider that universal beauty in sunder and in it self alone, yet does she not well and clearly discern it, nor without some doubtfulness, by reason of the agreement that the fancies have with the body. Wherefore such as come to this love, are like young Bides almost flush, which for all they flutter a little their tender wings, yet dare they not stray far from the nest, nor commit themselves to the wind and open weather.

When our Courtier therefore shall be come to this point, although he may be called a good and happy lover, in respect of them that he drowned in the misery of sensual love, yet will I not have him to set his heart at rest, but boldly proceed farther, following the high way after his guide, that leads him to the point of true happiness. And thus instead of going out of his wits with thought, as he must do that will consider the bodily beauty, he may come into his wits, to behold the beauty that is seen with the eyes of the mind, which then begin to be sharp and thorough-seeing, when the eyes of the body lose the flower of their sightliness. Therefore the soul rid of vices, purged with the studies of true Philosophie, occupied in spiritual, and exercised in matters of understanding, turning her to the beholding of her own substance, as it were raised out of a most deep sleep, opens the eyes that all men have, and few occupy, and sees in herself a shining beam of that light, which is the true image of the angel-like beauty partnered with her, whereof she also partners with the body a feeble shadow: therefore waxed blind about earthly matters, is made most quick of sight about heavenly. And otherwise when the stirring virtues of the body are withdrawn alone through earnest beholding, either fast bound through sleep, when she is not hindered by them, she feels a certain smell of the right angel-like beauty, and ravished with the shining of that light, begins to be inflamed, and so greedily follows after, that (in a manner) she waxes drunken and beside herself, for coveting to couple herself with it, having found (to her weening) the footsteps of God in the beholding of whom (as in her happy end) she seeks to settle herself.

And therefore burning in this most happy flame, she arises to the noblest part of her (which is the

understanding) and there no more shadowed with the dark night of earthly matters, sees the heavenly beauty: but yet does she not for all that enjoy it altogether perfectly, because she beholds it only in her particular understanding, which can not conceive the passing great universal beauty: whereupon not thoroughly satisfied with this benefit, love giveth unto the soul a greater happiness. For like as through the particular beauty of one body he guides her to the universal beauty of all bodies: even so in the last degree of perfection through particular understanding he guides her to the universal understanding.

Thus the soul kindled in the most holy fire of true heavenly love, flees to couple herself with the nature of Angels, and not only clean forsakes sense, but hath no more need of the discourse of reason, for being changed into an Angel, she understands all things that may be understood: and without any veil or cloud, she sees the main sea of the pure heavenly beauty and receives it into her, and enjoys that sovereign happiness, that can not be comprehended of the senses. Since therefore the beauties, which we daily see with these our dim eyes in bodies subject to corruption, that nevertheless be nothing else but dreams and most thin shadows of beauty, seem unto us so well favored and comely, that oftentimes they kindle in us a most burning fire, and with such delight, that we reckon no happiness may be compared to it, that we feel otherwise through the only look which the beloved countenance of a woman casteth at us: what happy wonder, what blessed abashment may we reckon that to be, that taketh the souls, which come to have a sight of the heavenly beauty? what sweet flame? What sweet incense may a man believe that to be, which arises of the fountain of the sovereign and right beauty? which is the origin of all other beauty, which never increases nor diminishes, always beautiful, and of itself, as well on the one part as on the other, most simple, only like it self, and partner of none other, but in such wise beautiful, that all other beautiful things, be beautiful, because they be partners of the beauty of it.

This is the beauty inseparable from the high bounty, which with her voice calls and draws to her all things: and not only to the endowed with understanding gives understanding, to the reasonable reason, to the sensual sense and appetite to live, but also partakes with the plants and stones (as a print of her self) stirring, and the natural provocation of their properties. So much therefore is this love greater and happier then others, as the cause that stirs it, is more excellent. And therefore, as commune fire tries gold and makes it fine, so this most holy fire in souls destroys and consumes whatsoever there is mortal in them, and relieves and makes beautiful the heavenly part, which at the first by reason of the sense was dead and buried in them. This is the great fire in the which (the Poets write) that Hercules was burned on the top of the mountain Oeta: and through that consuming with fire, after his death was holy and immortal. This is the fiery bush of Moses: the divided tongues of fire: the inflamed Chariot of Helias: which doubles grace and happiness in their souls that be worthy to see it, when they forsake this earthly baseness and flee up into heaven. Let us therefore bend all our force and thoughts of soul to this most holy light, that shows us the way which leads to heaven: and after it, putting of the affections we were clad withal at our coming down, let us clime up the stayers, which at the lowermost step have the shadow of sensual beauty, to the high mansion place where the heavenly, amiable and right beauty dwells, which lies hid in the innermost secretes of God, least unhallowed eyes should come to the sight of it: and there shall we find a most happy end for our desires, true rest for our travails, certain remedy for miseries, a most healthful medicine for sickness, a most sure haven in the troublesome storms of the tempestuous sea of this life.

What tongue mortal is there then (O most holy love) that can sufficiently praise thy worthinesses? Thou most beautiful, most good, most wise, art derived of the unity of heavenly beauty, goodness and wisdom, and therein does thou abide, and unto it through it (as in a circle) turns about. Thou the most sweet bond of the world, a mean betwixt heavenly and earthly things, with a bountiful temper bends the High virtues to the government of the lower, and turning back the minds of mortal men to their beginning, cools them with it. Thou with agreement brings the Elements in one, stirs nature to bring

forth, and that, which arises and is born for the succession of the life. Thou brings severed matters into one, to the imperfect gives perfection, to the unlike likeness, to enmity amity, to the Earth fruit, to the Sea calmness, to the heaven lively light. Thou art the father of true pleasures, of grace, peace, lowliness and good will, enemy to rude wildness and sluggishness, to be short, the beginning and end of all goodness. And insomuch as thou delights to dwell in the flower of beautiful bodies and beautiful souls, I suppose that thy abiding place is now here among us, and from above otherwise shows thyself a little to the eyes and minds of them that be worthy to see thee.

Therefore vouchsafe (Lord) to hearken to our prayers, power thyself into our hearts, and with the brightness of thy most holy fire lighten our darkness, and like a trusty guide in this blind maze, show us the right way: reform the falsehood of the senses, and after long wandering in vanity gyve us the right and sound joy. Make us to smell those spiritual savors that relieve the virtues of the understanding, and to hear the heavenly harmony so tunable, that no discord of passion take place any more in us. Make us drunken with the bottomless fountain of contemplation that always does delight, and never gives fill, and that giveth a smack of the right bliss unto who so drinks of the running and clear water thereof. Purge with the shining beams of thy light our eyes from misty ignorance, that they may no more set by mortal beauty, and well perceive that the things which at the first they thought themselves to see, be not in deed, and those that they saw not, to be in effect. Accept our souls, that be offered unto thee for a sacrifice. Burn them in the lively flame that wastes all gross filthiness, that after they be clean sundered from the body, they may be coupled with an everlasting and most sweet bond to the heavenly beauty. And we severed from our selves, may be changed like right lovers into the beloved, and after we be drawn from the earth, admitted to the feast of the angels, where fed with immortal ambrosia and nectar, in the end we may dye a most happy and lively death, as in times past died the fathers of old time, whose souls with most fervent zeal of beholding thou did hale from the body and couples them with God.

When Bembo had hitherto spoken with such vehemence, that a man would have thought him (as it were) ravished and beside himself, he stood still without once moving, holding his eyes toward heaven as astonished, when the Lady Emilia, which together with the rest gave most diligent care to this talk, took him by the plait of his garment and plucking him a little, said: Take heed (M. Peter) that these thoughts make not your soul also to forsake the body.

Madam, answered M. Peter, it should not be the first miracle that love hath wrought in me.