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PERFUME AND POLITICS

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François Coty, professional perfumer, politician, journalist, idealist, and millionaire, is a gentleman of mystery. Regiments of employees in uniform white smocks, all uniformly smelling sweetly, gather at his parent scent factory on the banks of the Seine near the Bois de Boulogne; hundreds more, dressed and smelling alike, troop to his newer filial establishment near the banks of the Hudson in western Manhattan. Hundreds of pressmen coöperate on the morning and evening editions of his new proletarian *Ami du Peuple* in the Rue de Bassano; a few hundred fewer at the Rond-Point work over old *Figaro*, which, being destined for aristocrats, takes less labor. Of these thousands of French and American citizens who owe him their livelihood, few except those at the top of the tree have ever laid eyes on him. Those who have never tell what they have seen. He gives no interviews, they give no information.

In Paris, where he lives, little that is precise is known about him even when he says it himself. He says that he is related to Napoleon Bonaparte; it is known that his real name is Spoturno, that Coty is a *nom de plume* he signs to perfumes, as poets, with modesty, might sign their young verse. It is known that he recently bought the hunting pavilion of Luciennes near St. Germain-en-Laye, once the property of Madame duBarry; that he is building an enormous modern pile placed like a restaurant on a high road in the Bois and affording from its bedrooms a free sight of the horse-racing at Longchamp, in which he is not interested; and that he owns a mansion in the Avenue Raphael which he uses as a postal address. It is known, furthermore, that he does not, and likely will not, reside in any of these. For Coty, as a man with views, takes his new Fascism and his more antique imperial descent both separately and seriously; in political life what he most fears is modern Bolshevism; in private life, old-fashioned assassination. He lives quietly in a hotel in the Champs-Élysées. He is not seen in public places, he dislikes congregations of all sorts. Though momentarily in favor of France's paying her war debt, when the American Debt Commission recently wished to descend upon his

hotel, he threatened to pack up and leave rather than be surrounded by a crowd, even of industrial

experts. Personal contact with the masses, so necessary to a man so determined to stamp out Communism, he establishes via his comforting curly-haired profile and his evangelist's message pasted on the boulevard billboards. Like a typographical vision, Coty appears to his followers only sidewise and in print. With that clannishness that marks the French *nouveaux riches*, the few friends to whom he appears in the flesh brag freely of the meetings but guardedly refrain from quoting what, if anything, might have been said. For Coty is powerful, hot-tempered, a watchful dreamer, creative, secretive, a man described as apt to make or break events with a "yes" or a "no," a man known to be red-haired and a Corsican. In consequence a vast, inexact, and fairly unfriendly legend hangs over him like a smoke screen which his enemies, among them the five greatest newspapers in Paris, have belched out to asphyxiate him, and in which, with superb psychology, he comfortably hides.

He was born in Ajaccio, Corsica, and in stature is one of those important little men in whom France has specialized since the rise of his relative, Napoleon. Two natural endowments are necessary to a fine perfumer—good taste and an olfactory nerve suited to segregating not only kinds of odors but their qualities. Coty's gift for his career was an olfactory nerve, marvellously talented and acute. Its judgment, incidentally, was once unquestioningly accepted by a rival who was bringing suit. Though he began by exporting essences from the flower fields of Grasse on the Riviera, and can still be recalled later peddling his perfumes to the barbers of Paris, it was by way of his bottles that he really broke into the big perfume business of Europe. For his was the merchandising genius that perceived perfume as something in a lovely bottle, rather than as merely something lovely in a bottle. Because of its Midi gardens and Bourbon courts, France had for generations made the world's perfume, but Coty changed its guise and its psychology. Viewed by the older houses as an upstart in the business, he revolutionized it and them by presenting scent in modern dress and as a luxury necessary to everybody. (It had hitherto been presented, with conservative lack of appeal, only to people who could afford it.) Coty was the first to have bottles designed by the great ceramist, Lalique; first to utilize the new decorative trend toward color, metal, lines; the first, in a word, to make perfume appeal to the eye as well as the nose. Presenting it as a symbol of luxury, he shrewdly sent it to America, where it was clamored for as a sign of class by women of every class. His also was the first effort to aestheticize the humble talc in his famous orange-and-white L'Origan box which, along with the Standard Oil can, may still be found in remote outposts the world over—pathetic signs of

advancing civilization. His policy won eight million Frenchwomen alone to use his powder at the rate of sixteen million boxes a year, and changed the face of the cosmetic business.

Though ranking with Citroën as the outstanding Horatio Alger hero of modern selfmade French financiers, Coty has known downs as well as ups in the twenty-five stormy years of his career. What could be bankruptcy for other men, however, he manages as a success, for he is a great organizer in whom great organizations believe.

His Rose Jacqueminot scent, a floral base perfume, was his first huge success; L'Origan, an animal odor, was the second and, in conjunction with Chypre, constitutes three-quarters of his sales today. In volume Coty is not the largest producer in Paris, but though his output is less than one or two others, he is better known. Four and a half million bottles of his Paris-made perfumes are annually sold in all of the countries of the world except Rumania, the British Isles, and the United States. Branch establishments, separately incorporated, are maintained in these three, and make and sell their own from materials supplied to them by the Parisian parent house. Racial female taste furnishes quaint statistics; for instance, American women like middling-passionate fantasy odors and no posy smells, whereas the chillier, land-loving British dames require only the chastest invented odors and pure garden bouquets. Blunt amber and heliotrope, most passionate of beast and blossom odors, intoxicate all the Spanish-speaking señoritas. Amber and rose in their rarest forms, considered by perfumers to be the peak of their art, please the French.

Manufacturing modern perfumes is a complicated, expensive, far-reaching job. As contribution to a bottle of scent they never see, foreign fishermen stroll oceans with a weather eye open for ambergris, that odd, floating bilious attack of the sperm whale; Chinese merchants wrangle in Tonkin over the spoils of the Tibetan musk ox; hunters trap the male civet. These three beasts form the main trio necessary to the making of most fine perfumes today, for they furnish the fatty fixatives which prevent the perfume itself from evaporating. Then alcohol must be added to the fixatives to preserve them from decay, and doubtless something must be done to the alcohol to preserve it from being drunk. In any case, Coty's chemists, who are highly paid and sworn to secrecy, take at least a year to formulate a new odor, whose degree of perfection even then must be variable, since good perfume, like good wine, depends on the flavor of the year's crop. In Coty's New York warehouse are priceless bottles of flower

essence of vintage seasons, being allowed to ripen as herbs ripen in the famous Chartreuse liqueur, and being rolled on their cribs as champagne is rolled to insure its primary purifying.

No one knows exactly the relation between Coty and his old associate, B. Levy, the head of the New York establishment. In Paris there was a rumor that Coty had sold his business here for an enormous sum, but this was denied. The staff here still refers to M. Coty, on the rare occasions when he comes to New York, as hierarchal head of the house. It cannot be decided whether it was his or Levy's shrewd eye which shrewdly saw the desirability of avoiding the high tariff on bottled perfumes by importing raw essences, assembling them according to the French formula in New York, and thus endearing themselves to the American perfume-buying public by prices lower than some of their foreign competitors could stoop to. More than half the New York employees are, like the establishment's essential oils, also imported from France, including the half-dozen "smellers" whose delicate, important duty would correspond to that of tasters in a Chinese tea house.

Until recently, like all the other perfume manufacturers, Coty bought most of his floral essences near the vast flower fields of Grasse on the Riviera, where common attar of roses could cost one hundred and twenty dollars a pound. Three years ago the Coty interests started to develop their own gardens in France and Italy, concentrating on raising the two flowers most constantly used and most expensive — orange blossoms and jasmine. Jasmine oil can fetch as high as eight hundred dollars a pound in the open market.

The flower essence and animal organs once obtained, Old Mother Nature is dismissed by him; from then on everything is made by Coty for himself, and alone. His organizations not only blend his perfumes, make his soaps, creams, etc., at the laboratories at Suresnes, but on the Île de Puteaux make all metal gadgetry such as powder and rouge cases, capsules, and other odds and ends which include nickelling, gilding, and printing. At Neuilly he manufactures his own boxes of leather and paper, and at Pantin and at Lilas cuts the Baccarat crystal for his grander bottles and runs six furnaces for molding his commoner phials of glass. When Coty can find a moment off from all these details, he occasionally founds his own banks for his own purposes, his energy interlocking money and industries in a fury of domineering organization and brilliant economic efficiency rarely seen in France. What Coty does not make for himself, he subsidizes others to make for him—atomizers or

other odd distractions for the toilet table. It is part of Coty's financial genius that he will pay no tribute; everything that touches upon the exploitation of his properties he finally gathers, willing or unwilling, into his own hands. Because of his vague connection with Napoleon, Coty, more specifically than most triumphant industrialists, probably sees himself as a Little Conqueror indeed.

It was doubtless this psychology, coupled with his Messiah-instinct for leading his fellow-men, that directed Coty toward politics, which he entered in 1923 as Senator-elect from Corsica. It was a brief venture, however, for after listening to reports of one Corsican electoral delegate who swore Coty's henchmen offered him "two thousand francs, which wouldn't buy a horse today, let alone a vote," and to another patriarch who, when offered a similar sum, regretted that he'd been honest for ninety years and found himself too old to change, the French Senate's High Commission decided that Coty's election had perhaps been a trifle irregular. They turned their thumbs down. Coty lost his seat in the Senate without, indeed, ever having sat in it. A Bonaparte by blood, a perfumer by trade, this was his little Waterloo.

His subsequent retreat into journalism was admirable. Restrained from governing, he decided to guide. To this end he founded his famous *L'Ami du Peuple*, a paper written by capitalists to be read by the working classes and, to make sure of their reading it, offered at the cut-rate price of two *sous*. French thrift being what it is, all classes read it; the journal automatically gained an ascendancy which could be more ascendant only if it sold for one *sou*. Three years after its founding, *L'Ami du Peuple's* morning and evening editions combined have a circulation of almost a million. Its news is limited, its paid advertising small; its rivals swear it costs Coty millions of francs annually to run. However, the Big Five five-*sous* Parisian papers, among them *Le Matin*, *Le Journal*, and *Le Petit Parisien*, in their lawsuit apropos of the two-*sous* fight, were ordered by the court to pay him nearly two million francs' damages. At such a rate, *L'Ami du Peuple*, as a losing proposition, should make money.

The only regular contributions signed in it by Coty are a solemn series of Roman-numeralled belles-lettres against Bolshevism now high in their XXX's. Half of his enemies say he couldn't have written them himself; the other half say no one else could. In local politics *L'Ami du Peuple* has been occasionally against the French payment of debts, against the British Labor Party lately, and against Lloyd George, the Bloc National, and Herriot forever. On the whole, the lofty ideals of prime ministers do not distract it; it keeps its eyes on the budget boys. So far as international treaties are

concerned, the only scrap of paper Coty seems to believe in is a certified cheque. For the purely personal reasons of a mere millionaire, he rightly envisages the political peace of Europe as a public financial necessity and properly regards vulgar trade as a higher envoy than refined plenipotentiaries. It was probably more with a realist's eye on his and everyone's bank account than on the theoretic dove of peace that he was first among French industrialists to bury the hatchet with Germany after the war.

As a big French businessman in the new American manner, Coty is, after twenty-five years of commerce, still greatly respected. As a journalist-politician and public mentor of briefer practice, he is still enormously enjoyed. In a government crisis he can always be relied upon to offer, not a solution, but a gesture which is magnificent, usually unacceptable, and which makes delicious reading as described fully in *L'Ami du Peuple* and, depending upon circumstances, a little more or less so in his two upper-class journals, *Figaro* and *Le Gaulois*. At the worst of France's fiscal crises he offered a loan of one hundred million francs, presumably to be applied to her war debt, the political conditions he imposed being such that he and Poincaré started a new war of their own and France's amortization was left where they had found it. Another time he offered to buy the gem-like Renaissance château of Chambord, which had once housed Charles X, and which he rhetorically promised the Beaux Arts would, under his care, house nothing more anachronistic than his strictly up-to-date perfume factory.

Harassed by falling cabinets and fallen francs, postwar politicians in France are a solemn lot. Against them Coty, with his bright ideas and Mediterranean blood, seems like a red-wigged character from the old Italian comedy—one of those sympathetic and declamatory *saltimbanques* who from the top of a tight-rope offer marvellous cure-alls which have the high merit of relieving nothing but public tedium. Such humorists (even when they take their jokes seriously) are peculiarly useful to an impatient, critical people like the French, who, especially when troubled, would be under the necessity of inventing such persons, as Voltaire said of someone else, if they did not already exist. In a certain fashion, Coty has spared French ingenuity that necessity. ♦

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