Character

Characters:

Albertine and Marcel

After announcing in a “very loud voice” her intention to “be at the tennis-court about five” and “for a bathe tomorrow morning about eight,” Marcel sees Albertine “mount her bicycle and scorch away into the distance, I could not help thinking that she was on her way to join the girl to whom she had barely spoken.” —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 341.

We see in this passage that “fast” remains a defining feature of Albertine and that Marcel is constantly suspicious of any of her activities.

Cambremer

Proust has a lot of fun with the name that he invented for this family. In Swann in Love, when the duchesse de Guermantes is making catty remarks about people she doesn’t “know” or ever want to meet. She says that the word does not end well “mer” which is just short of “merde” and the beginning of the name also rings a bell with another word associated with “merde,” known euphemistically as the “mot de Cambronne.” You may recall this note from Swann’s Way (485). Le mot de Cambronne (merde) said to have been flung defiantly at the enemy by a general at Waterloo is the traditional euphemism for merde. As you have also seen, one of the servants at Balbec, mistakes the word for the name of the famous cheese: Camembert.

Mme de Cambremer-Legrandin

Mme de Cambremer-Legrandin unwittingly provides this humorous example of linguistic cross-pollination. The humor stems from the fact that this woman, who is such a snob and believes herself to be extremely cultivated, is, without knowing it, picking up terms from an actress-prostitute:
Thus, after saying to me of Saint-Loup (adopting for the purpose one of his expressions, for if in talking to her I employed Legrandin’s expressions, she by an inverse suggestion answered me in Robert’s dialect which she did not know had been borrowed from Rachel), bringing her thumb and forefinger together and half-shutting her eyes as though she were gazing at something infinitely delicate which she had succeeded in capturing: “He has a charming quality of mind,” she began to extol him with such warmth that one might have supposed that she was in love with him (it had indeed been alleged that, some time back, when he was at Doncières, Robert had been her lover). . .

―Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 296

Céleste Albaret

With a familiarity which I reproduce verbatim, notwithstanding the eulogies (which I set down here as praise not of myself but of the strange genius of Céleste Albaret) and the criticism, equally unfounded but absolutely sincere, which her remarks seemed to imply towards me. . . .—Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 332

Proust’s famous housekeeper, Céleste Albaret (1891-1984), is the only real person who makes two fairly extended cameo appearances in the novel as herself. She entered his service in the fall of 1914, when all the able-bodied men were in uniform fighting World War 1, and devoted herself to Proust until his death in 1922. As we know, the servant Françoise, has been with the family since the beginning of the story when she was Aunt Léonie’s maid and cook. Once he became acquainted with Céleste, Proust gave certain of her traits and notions to Françoise, notably her idea of piecing together the fragments of his manuscripts, as we will see in Time Regained.

Marcel

Marcel, like his creator, is hypersensitive and is especially bothered by noise from outside his apartment. Here is a humorous passage in which the offending source is an instrument that Proust played and loved: the piano:

I went upstairs to my room, but I was not alone there. I could hear someone mellifluously playing Schumann. No doubt it happens at times that people, even those whom we love best, become permeated with the gloom or irritation that emanates from
us. There is however an inanimate object which is capable of a power of exasperation to which no human being will ever attain: to wit, a piano. —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 255

Je remontais dans ma chambre, mais je n’y etuis pas seul. J’entendais quelqu’un jouer avec moelleux des morceaux de Schumann. Certes il arriver que les gens, même ceux que nous aimons le mieux, se saturent de la tristesse ou de l’agacement qui émane de nous. Il y a pourtant quelque chose qui est capable d’un pouvoir d’exaspérer où n’atteindra jamais une personne: c’est un piano. —Sodome et Gomorrhe 185.

**Princesse Sherbatoff**

Albertine and Marcel go to Doncières on the little train to visit Saint-Loup. In the same car is the Princesse Sherbatoff, whom Marcel mistakes for the “manageress of some brothel, a procuress on holiday.” See Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 345, 347, 348

This error makes him less discreet in caressing Albertine than he would otherwise have been. This mistaken identity is a variation of those incidents during the first stay at Balbec when some of the vacationers, on the lookout for celebrities, mistook princesses for whores and vice versa.

**Madame Verdurin**

We can compare this portrait of Mme Verdurin, when we first met her in Swann in Love to the one in Sodom and Gomorrah, and see how she has evolved. I quoted portions from these two portraits in the lecture. Here are the full versions. First, the one from Swann in Love:

Mme Verdurin was seated on a high Swedish chair of waxed pinewood, which a violinist from that country had given her, and which she kept in her drawing-room although in appearance it suggested a work-stand and clashed with the really good antique furniture which she had besides; but she made a point of keeping on view the presents which her “faithful” were in the habit of making her from time to time, so that the donors might have the pleasure of seeing them there when they came to the house. She tried to persuade them to confine their tributes to flowers and sweets, which had at least the merit of mortality; but she never succeeded, and the house was gradually filled
with a collection of foot-warmers, cushions, clocks, screens, barometers and vases, a 
constant repetition and a boundless incongruity of useless but indestructible objects.

From this lofty perch she would take a spirited part in the conversation of the 
“faithful,” and would revel in all their “drollery”; but, since the accident to her jaw, she 
had abandoned the effort involved in wholehearted laughter, and had substituted a kind of 
symbolical dumb-show which signified, without endangering or exhausting her in any way, 
that she was “splitting her sides.” At the least witticism aimed by a member of the circle 
against a bore or against a former member who was now relegated to the limbo of 
bores—and to the utter despair of M. Verdurin, who had always made out that he was just 
as affable as his wife, but who, since his laughter was the “real thing,” was out of breath 
in a moment and so was overtaken and vanquished by her device of a feigned but 
continuous hilarity—she would utter a shrill cry, shut tight her little bird-like eyes, which 
were beginning to be clouded over by a cataract, and quickly, as though she had only just 
time to avoid some indecent sight or to parry a mortal blow, burying her face in her 
hands, which completely engulfed it and hid it from view, would appear to be struggling 
to suppress, to annihilate, a laugh which, had she succumbed to it, must inevitably have 
left her inanimate. So, stupefied with the gaiety of the “faithful,” drunk with good-
fellowship, scandal and asseveration, Mme Verdurin, perched on her high seat like a 
cage-bird whose biscuit has been steeped in mulled wine, would sit aloft and sob with 
affability. —Swann’s Way 1: 289-90

Mme Verdurin in Sodom and Gomorrah:

Let us here briefly remark that Mme Verdurin, quite apart from the inevitable changes 
dues to increasing years, no longer resembled what she had been at the time when Swann 
and Odette used to listen to the little phrase in her house. Even when she heard it played, 
she was no longer obliged to assume the air of exhausted admiration which she used to 
assume then, for that had become her normal expression. Under the influence of the 
countless headaches which the music of Bach, Wagner, Vinteuil, Debussy had given her, 
Mme Verdurin’s forehead had assumed enormous proportions, like limbs that become 
permanently deformed by rheumatism. Her temples, suggestive of a pair of burning, pain-
stricken, milk-white spheres, in which Harmony endlessly revolted, flung back silvery
locks on either side, and proclaimed, on the Mistress’s behalf, without any need for her to say a word: “I know what’s in store for me tonight.” Her features no longer took the trouble to formulate, one after another, esthetic impressions of undue violence, for they had themselves become as it were their permanent expression on a superbly ravaged face. This attitude of resignation to the ever-impending sufferings inflicted by the Beautiful, and the courage required to make her dress for dinner when she had barely recovered from the effects of the last sonata, caused Mme Verdurin, even when listening to the most heartrending music, to preserve a disdainfully impassive countenance, and even to hide herself to swallow her two spoonfuls of aspirin. —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 413-14

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