

In the early 1930s, the French Mediterranean, explored by the Fitzgeralds and the Murphys, was a coastline of fishing villages, sandy coves and umbrella pines, smelling strongly of wild herbs. It was largely deserted, particularly in summer, fear of the heat, octopuses and sewage keeping foreigners away, though Colette, who had bought a house in St Tropez in 1926, spoke of it as a place for siestas and making love. Martha found a pension by the sea, brought out her note book and sat waiting for inspiration. Nothing happened. She did not wait for long, having already understood that, for her, the way to escape despair was to walk rapidly away from it, so she packed a knapsack and took to the empty roads, paying her way by making up fashion articles and posting them to American magazines. One, on the latest Parisian style in men's pyjamas, invented while staying in a hut in the hills, earned her a much needed \$25. She had taken a volume of Nietzsche with her, and, as she climbed the pass leading from France into Andorra, she thought profound thoughts about the bridge between man and superman. She was twenty-one.

Bertrand was married to a woman called Marcelle Prat who was twelve years older than himself, something that no one found surprising. What everyone knew about Bertrand was that at the age of sixteen and a half, a shy, bookish boy studying for his baccalaureat, he had been seduced by Colette, his father's second wife. The seduction had taken place the day that Claire had sent her son to ask Colette to intervene with his father on her behalf, as she wanted to keep the name de Jouvenel, which Henri was opposing on the grounds of her increasingly embarrassing political manoeuvrings. Later, Bertrand would write that Colette had first struck him as 'small, stocky, quick', and that he had immediately noticed her imperious forehead and slanted eyes, and the thick lines of kohl she wore around her eyes. The impression she gave him, he said, was of power, not age.

It was **Colette**, then reaching the height of her fame and popularity, who had given Bertrand his literary education, during long summers spent in the country and on holiday at the oasis of Bou-Saada in the Algerian desert. Colette called Bertrand her 'little leopard' and her 'great whippet of a boy'

and became obsessed with his weight, trying to feed him up on lobster and cream. When Martha first met him, she was in fact somewhat put off by his reputation as one of Paris's most desirable lovers, but he was a good-looking man, slender, with the body of a runner, high cheekbones and eyes that looked either grey or green, depending on the light. At the time of their affair, Colette had been forty-six, and even as it was going on, life imitating art, *Chéri*, her story of the seduction of an exquisitely beautiful boy by an older woman, Léa, was being serialised in *La Vie Parisienne*. Like Chéri, Bertrand never saw Colette naked. But then Colette herself, unlike the youthful and svelte Léa, was decidedly fat. In his own autobiography, *Un Voyageur dans le siècle*, published in 1979, Bertrand makes little of his seduction by Colette, though he admits that he surrendered to her instantly and totally. What he felt about the portrait of the spoilt and tyrannical Chéri, whose beauty was matched only by his narcissism, is not recorded. Much as Colette overfed Bertrand in real life, the emotionally generous Léa pressed on to Chéri the rich food he craved. 'A mon fils CHERI Bertrand de Jouvenel,' Colette wrote in the flyleaf of the copy of *Chéri* she gave him.

By the summer of 1930, Bertrand's affair with Colette, which had lasted five years, lay in the past, having been brought to an end by Bertrand's mother, when the suggestion of a scandal threatened to tarnish all their political lives; but Colette had retained a motherly concern for her boy lover, telling friends that she was proud of the way she had opened up the world to him. 'I rub him down,' she told her friend Marguerite Moreno, 'stuff him, scrub him with sand, and burn him in the sun.' The affair had effectively finished her marriage to Henri – it was rumoured that Henri found them in bed together – but Bertrand continued to see his stepmother from time to time. Marcelle, to whom he had now been married for six years, was also a writer and it was said in Paris – and repeated later by Martha in a long, confessional letter to a friend – that Marcelle, in contrast to the considerably older Colette, had always seemed to Bertrand young and virginal, and that in any case he had inherited from Colette the 'habit of being

taken and looked after'. When it came to his living habits, Bertrand was simply, as she rather coldly put it, a '*poule de luxe*'.

He was also, however, a clever and remarkable man, and his encounter with Martha in the summer of 1930 played a significant part in his long and controversial life.

She (Martha) had found Colette's *La Vagabonde* in the basement of the Carmel library, and wrote to tell Bertrand that she considered his stepmother to be her '*chère maître*': 'Even in matters of style I can find many gropings in me which look like her finished product. Moreover, we have both got one obsession: the individual. She has no "*thèse*" and neither have I; the life of any man or woman being in itself the highest unreason and therefore mystery,

wonder, beauty.' Only, she added, Colette 'should have left you alone'.

Martha, tall, strikingly thin despite her words to her mother, was much in demand by Chanel and Schiaparelli, newly arrived from Italy and captivating Paris with her shocking pinks. Even Colette seems to have been willing to receive her stepson's mistress, talking to her about the difficulties of writing fiction, and urging her to waste no time worrying about whether a book was good or not until it was

finished. '*Je crains que vous êtes trop intelligente*,' she told her.

Martha, who admired Colette hugely as a writer, took strongly against her as a person. She said that she had a 'mean, bitter little mouth' and found it hard to forgive when Colette, having looked her up and down, told her that she absolutely must pencil in her faint blonde eyebrows in heavy black, drawing the lines so that they almost met in the middle. Martha obeyed. It was three days before a kind friend told her that she looked grotesque. Martha was sure that Colette had done it on purpose, and that she was not merely malicious but jealous.

She (Martha) spent August travelling around England, pondering possible stories and wondering whether she could interest British newspapers in portraits of Colette or the film director René Clair, or an article about 'France's Mussolinis', the 'little crowds of pseudo-Mosleys', as Bertrand described them. She also started an affair with an earl, whom she never named, but whom she liked, she told a friend, in spite of all his money. In October she packed and left for America.

Even Colette, whose husband Maurice Goudekot was Jewish, had a slight cloud hanging over her, because she had written for the collaborationist paper, *Le Petit Parisien*. And both Arletty, the singer, and Coco Chanel, who had taken German lovers and lived in the Ritz, were briefly arrested. Arletty had had her head shaved.

In 'A Honeyed Peace', a short story written after the war about Paris soon after liberation, Martha is less absolute and censorious than in much of her earlier fiction. The story centres around two foreign women, one English and one American, who return to Paris with the Allies and discover that their close French friend Evangeline has been ostracised by smart society as well as by local tradesmen because her husband

Renaud has been arrested for collaboration. As the two women explore their own reactions and those of their former friends, there is both compassion and cynicism about the reckoning and the settled scores.