The Fall

Margret Englesson∗

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1987 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The Fall

It is a driving, buoyant music, not quite earthly. A single note leaps up like the note of a viol from the string, to hang a long moment upon an immense chill volume of air. It breaks apart in subtle dissonance and then re-forms itself, alters, rises. Tossing the melody between them as a troupe of courtly dancers in trailing robes might toss, perhaps, a rose, the singers pause; they repeat a figure, treading a measured dance of voices. Against the drone of four tenors holding an organ-point they weave, for as long as it takes to recite a \textit{Salve Regina}, a web of melismas about a single word: \textit{Gaude}.

It is the feast of the Holy Annunciation and the nave of Origny cathedral is full of scaffolding and rubble, bits of jewel-colored glass and limestone dust; from all the unglazed windows in the upper arcades the light streams down clear and thin as water, and only a month ago workmen and people must step around and over the long drifts of snow that lay on the flagstones on the wintry mornings. In the twelve-hundred and forty-eighth year of Our Lord's incarnation a disaster befell the folk of Origny in Vermandois: the vault of their newly-built church collapsed during the Mass. The choir, the church's very center, was left open to the sky, and while most of the citizens escaped serious harm, this reverse threw them into dismay. So that the work, begun anew ten years ago, proceeds slowly, as if masons and carpenters as well as citizens had lost a part of their confidence.

\textit{O clemens, o pia, o dulcis Virgo Maria}... In the Lady-chapel of the north transient, Ysabeau's mind begins to wander from her devotions. Her nurse, Douce, is on her knees on the damp floor, holding out a two-pound candle in a hand which is starting to tremble, as if she were making an \textit{amende honorable}. From time to time a little shudder stirs her sturdy shoulders under her scarlet cloak; her brow is furrowed with concentration, and a tear dribbles slowly down her round cheek and catches in a pockmark on her chin. Ysabeau is tired of watching her. An interest in what Douce might be thinking is not yet part of her mental equipment. She wanders away from the chapel into the choir; to her left the apse of the cathedral is all fire and shadow: fire, from the five long lancet-windows above the high altar, whose colors blaze as if ignited by the sun, and shadow, because the apse of a Gothic church is unexpectedly dark. The smooth sheer height of the stone pillars seems to seize her gaze and direct it up.

Ysabeau's mysterious delight comes from her conviction that just so must the halls of Our Lord's house in the heavenly kingdom rise, up and up just like these, but with no shadows at all about their heights; their pillars are white and clear as the early spring sunlight. Ysabeau has no doubt at all that there are angels, impossibly light and diaphanous beings with grave round-chinned faces like those carved on the
rood-screen, or painted in colored inks in her mother’s psalter, beings who dance to
the music the singing-boys make in their choir-stalls. She has a tunic of light brown
chamblet and a russet-brown overgown with so much skirt that she must carry it
looped up over her arm, green stockings and shoes of dark-green Spanish leather;
she has a doting father, a furrier, whose oldest child she is, which is why at the age
of nine she has vair on the false sleeves which hang to her knees like a grown
woman’s; there is a string of amber tears about her throat, for he cannot resist his
pleasure in adorning her. She understands that she is a very important and particular
little girl, having a string of amber tears brought with peril from Novgorod to the fair
at Troyes, and a dowry chest covered in tooled and painted leather that is half-full
already, and a nurse to lead her about and amuse her, and see that she keeps clean
the beautiful clothes which are such a foolish extravagance for a child who will only
grow out of them. She does not yet know that she will not always be so favored, for
her mother, brought to bed just three days ago and still not yet churched after her
confinement, has just given Pons the furrier a son. But she is fully sensible of her
obligation to folk less fortunate than herself. On feast days, imitating her mother,
she doles out alms to the poor folk from her little purse, only a little afraid of the
beggars with their diseased limbs, their seamed faces which seem smeared and
puckered together, their empty eye sockets; her face is grave and kind and set like
that of a child-saint or a young abbess.

Now she looks about her, not wondering or greedy to understand, but
momentarily curious at each passing thing. Across from her, beneath one of the side
arches, a couple of apprentices squat beside a little pot of hot coals, warming their
hands and eating sausages. A sky-blue gown sweeps past her, embroidered as richly
as an altar cloth. A child—a girl a little younger than she, with a snubby nose that
is starting to run—stares rudely at her. Ysabeau stares frigidly back. She smells
wood shavings and limestone dust, beeswax and incense and a whiff of ammonia,
and damp frieze-cloaks, and she hears the dull blows of a carpenter’s mallet.

The singers have interrupted their tense leaping melody with a long skein
of plainchant. But now there is a long hoarse cry from near the apex of the roof.
Young Ysabeau looks up to see something extraordinary, a man falling out of the
shadows—so quickly that her eye cannot follow the descent—flailing his arms and
legs as if he were trying to fly. It is all so quick! while she is still looking for him
in the air he is already on the floor—not at her feet, but nearly so, a few paces away.
Her breath has stopped in her throat; for a moment she feels that she too is falling—
and the sound of his cry not yet faded from the air! The low murmur that is always
in the cathedral is now terribly loud; cries strike up out of it and the singers have
stopped, and there are people, adults who seem enormous, rushing toward the place.
Their bodies buffet her; the pent breath rushes from her own breast as she echoes
with her own voice the fallen man’s scream.
Where is Douce? Ysabeau runs, pushing her way between bodies. Suddenly the nurse’s big hands are on her shoulders, the nurse’s arm is around her waist, crushing her face against the scarlet cloak which smells strongly of Douce, and of the pungent herbs which are crushed in clothes-chests.

“The man—oh, oh, that man fell—I saw it,” she gasps out. She feels as if her chest were hollow and someone, shaking her, were making her heart roll about in it. “Oh, Douce.” She looks over the shoulder of the nurse who is kneeling beside her and holding her tight; she looks stupidly at a spill of colored light on the floor, still seeing the sprawled body almost at her feet, with its cracked skull so suddenly misshapen, and the slow rivulet of blood coursing down a groove between the flagstones.

At the top of the steep stairs in her father’s house, Ysabeau stands hesitantly, with a small cup in her hand. The cup was full of wine spiced with cumin when Douce brought it to her in bed; since the morning she has not had anything else and now night has fallen; it is late. If she goes down now the cook might give her at least a piece of bread and cold meat. Barefoot, she climbs down the steps.

A feeling that she is falling again overtakes her and she leans against the wall until it has gone. A light is showing under the door of her father’s scriptorium. She ventures near to listen: three men are conversing there, her father and two others, and one of them is certainly Alibaud the gem-graver, whose rich heavy voice is easily recognizable. Through the door, which is slightly ajar, she can see her father, comfortably spread out in his great chair and leaning his head against the dark carved wood, his back to the fire. A tankard stands on the table before him. The other guest is the notary’s clerk Gociaume, who is expounding the contents of a bit of writing in a dry nasal voice.

“By the conjunction of Mars with Saturn he will be framed to give commands and work his will where he desires. His friends will be few, but faithful; as I make it his temperament will be choleric, and will serve him well should he become a chieftain of soldiery—” Ysabeau’s father interrupts with a snort.

“The contingency is remote!”

“—or argue a case before the bar. He will have a long life. Yet let him have a care of his moody passions—”

“He’ll be neither a soldier nor an advocate,” says Ysabeau’s father; “he’ll take over my mastership in the guild, when he’s of age, and as for moody passions, by Saint Amant, I’ll beat them out of him. Go on.” Ysabeau now understands that they are talking about her three-day-old brother, asleep with her mother upstairs in the broad matrimonial bed. She has seen the child only in glimpses and does not yet quite believe in him, and yet—how strange—he already has a history... In her curiosity she leans too heavily on the door and makes it creak, and at once there is
the sound of three chairs being pushed back. They have heard her.

Gociaume is long and dry, his shoulders stooped with hunching over his copy and his nose thin as a fishbone, and his thick black hair cut level with the tops of his ears; Alibaud is broad and pockmarked and apoplectic of complexion, with a hideous purple nose and as many pimples as the spring has buds. Her father fills her little cup with more wine and puts a small chunk of sweet sesame paste in her hand. By the morning she will have forgotten Gociaume’s prognostics. But she will not forget how she sat on the settle nibbling at the sweet paste, and watching the big people until she grew sleepy, while from the great iron spider of a candelabrum hanging in chains above them, thick tears of tallow pattered down on the smooth boards. She will remember her father’s face in the ruddy light, as smooth as if it were polished, his thick eyebrows and his mouth which seems to have no lips. The night will carve out in her memory the three figures, the three faces, dark and intent, like a group the cathedral sculptors might carve out of limestone. Now, a child privy to the converse of adults, but falling asleep, she understands that this conversation, these voices and faces, contain a story which she has to know, but her eyes close against her wishes; her father carries her upstairs.

Ysabeau at fifteen, a woman and marriageable, holds her youngest brother by silk leading-strings and catches him when, unsure of his legs, he starts to tumble; she knows well that, before she is twenty, she will be teaching children of her own to walk, if she is not cursed with sterility. They frighten her at times: little creatures, round flat faces and delicate mouths, small bones with their slight upholstery of flesh; their fragility frightens her, when she thinks about it, though she does so less and less. Really, there is not much to a child, and less still to a baby; Ysabeau has held them in her arms, ever so lightly: a little squeeze would do them a great mischief, and she has heard that sometimes, if they are taken into bed with the big folk of a night, their mother may crush them unwittingly in her embrace. At fifteen she has four brothers, two living and two dead, and a sister, never baptized, stillborn: two live boys of six and two-and-a-half, and three mysterious childish presences that she pictures sometimes to herself, without telling anyone of the pagan notion, as little genii of her father’s house.

In the Saint Jean cathedral there is a corbel she knows of at the juncture of two arches, carved with the portrait of a man: not a saint or prophet or angel, but an ordinary man, who seems to be looking down as if he’d stuck his head out of a window in the yellow-grey stone. His face is not exactly a pleasant one, beneath its foppish cap and long wiry stone curls. Ysabeau sees strength and pride in the mould of brow and cheekbones, but the face terminates in a jutting, foxy chin: crafty and overweening as well as bold and alert, a man loud and proud and full of temper, which indeed he had been in life. The big hands hold the tools of a builder, compass
and square, and below them, around a narrow ledge, run words: **Ego Iacobus Aquisgranense magister ann. MCXVII complevi.** Gociaume, who is now dead, once translated them for Ysabeau: I, Master Jacques of Aix, in the year 1247... The last word, Gociaume told her, might have more than one meaning—"That is the beauty of the Latin tongue, child"—I built, I completed, I accomplished this. He had thought it his right to carve this boast in stone, for he was the master builder. Ysabeau was twelve when she learned that this was the man who had fallen from the scaffolding, having lived to see his cathedral collapse, his proud words made a lie, for Ysabeau is fifteen now and the church is not yet finished. Year by year the townsfolk continue the work of rebuilding it. But the young woman, who has watched its vault take shape like a growing crystal all her days, has not yet lost a sense of something frightening in that inhuman height and space. There is hazard as well as glory in such an undertaking, and no doubt every one of the great cathedrals has been the death of some unlucky workman, but Ysabeau has seen it happen in the church of Saint-Jean where she hears Mass every morning, and she will be much older before this ceases to be, to her, a source of wonder.

"When I was nine, and you just three days old, and the baby not even thought of yet—" To the elder of her two brothers, the one about whom Gociaume had made so many predictions, she once tried to tell the story. But he was, and is, too young to understand, so Ysabeau keeps it to herself.

-Margret Englesson