



**CHÉRI**  
COLETTE

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## COLETTE

Colette was an intriguing and flamboyant figure. Born Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette in Burgundy in 1873, she moved to Paris at the age of twenty with her husband, the writer and critic Henry Gauthier-Villars (Willy). Forcing Colette to write, Willy published her novels in his name and the Claudine series became an instant success. She escaped her exploitative first husband to live by her pen and work in music halls as a dancer. Colette had a lesbian love affair with Napoleon's niece, she married three times, had a baby at forty, and at forty-seven, preferring 'passion to goodness', she seduced her teenage stepson. In the meantime, she wrote stunning novels that were admired by Proust and Gide – *Gigi*, *Sido*, *Chéri* and *Break of Day*. Colette lived to be over eighty. She was the first woman President of the Académie Goncourt and was the first woman in France to be accorded a state funeral.

## ROGER SENHOUSE

Roger Senhouse (1899–1970) was a publisher and translator, and a member of the Bloomsbury Group. He was co-owner of the publishing house Secker and Warburg in the 1930s, which published many notable books of the time, including George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. He translated several works by Colette and co-translated *The*

*Blood of Others* by Simone de Beauvoir.

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ALSO BY COLETTE

FICTION

*Claudine and Annie*

*Claudine Married*

*Claudine in Paris*

*Gigi*

*The Cat*

*The Last of Chéri*

*Chance Acquaintances*

*Julie de Carneilhan*

*The Ripening Seed*

*The Vagabond*

*Break of Day*

*The Innocent Libertine*

*Mitsou*

*The Other One*

*The Shackle*

NON-FICTION

*My Apprenticeships and Music-Hall Sidelights*

*The Blue Lantern*

*My Mother's House*

*Sido*

*The Pure and the Impure*

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COLETTE

# Chéri

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY  
Roger Senhouse

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‘Give it me, Léa, give me your pearl necklace! Do you hear me, Léa? Give me your pearls!’

No answer came from the huge brass-bedecked wrought-iron bedstead that glimmered in the shadows like a coat of mail.

‘Why won’t you let me have your necklace? It looks every bit as well on me as on you – even better!’

At the snap of the clasp, ripples spread over the lace-frilled sheets, and from their midst rose two magnificent thin-wristed arms, lifting on high two lovely lazy hands.

‘Leave it alone, Chéri! You’ve been playing long enough with that necklace.’

‘It amuses me . . . Are you frightened I’ll steal it?’

He was capering about in front of the sun-drenched rosy-pink curtains – a graceful demon, black against a glowing furnace; but when he pranced back towards the bed, he turned white again from top to toe, in his white silk pyjamas and white Moorish slippers.

‘I’m not frightened,’ the soft, deep voice answered from the bed. ‘But you’ll wear out the thread. Those pearls are heavy.’

‘They certainly are,’ Chéri said with due respect. ‘Whoever gave you this lot never meant to make light of you!’

He was standing in front of a pier-glass framed in the space between two windows, gazing at the reflection of a very

youthful, very good-looking young man, neither too short nor too tall, hair with the blue sheen of a blackbird's plumage. He unbuttoned his pyjamas, displaying a hard, darkish chest, curved like a shield; and the whites of his dark eyes, his teeth, and the pearls of the necklace gleamed in the over-all rosy glow of the room.

'Take off that necklace!' The female voice was insistent. 'Do you hear what I say?'

The young man, motionless in front of his image, laughed softly to himself: 'Yes, yes, I heard you. I know so well you're terrified I'll make off with it!'

'No, I'm not. But if I did offer it to you, you're quite capable of taking it.'

He ran to the bed and bounded into it. 'You bet I am! I rise above the conventions. Personally, I think it's idiotic for a man to allow a woman to give him a single pearl for a tie-pin, or two for a pair of studs, and then to consider himself beyond the pale if she gives him fifty . . .'

'Forty-nine.'

'Forty-nine – as if I hadn't counted! I dare you to say they don't look well on me! Or that I'm ugly!'

Léa sat up in bed. 'No, I won't say that. For one thing, because you'd never believe me. But can't you learn to laugh without crinkling up your nose like that? I suppose you won't be happy till you've wrinkles all up the side of your nose!'

He stopped laughing at once, let the skin on his forehead relax, and drew in the fold under his chin like a coquettish old woman. They looked at each other in open hostility – she, leaning on her elbow in a flurry of frills and lace; he, sitting side-saddle on the edge of the bed. He was thinking 'Who's she to talk of any wrinkles I may have one day?' and she 'Why is he so ugly when he laughs? – he who's the very picture of beauty!' She thought for a moment, then finished aloud: 'It's because you

look so ill-natured when you're joking. You never laugh except unkindly – *at* people, and that makes you ugly. You're often ugly.'

'That's not true!' Chéri exclaimed crossly.

Anger knitted his eyebrows close above his nose, magnified his eyes, glittering with insolence behind a palisade of lashes, and parted the chaste bow of his disdainful mouth. Léa smiled to see him as she loved him best: rebellious only to become submissive, enchained lightly but powerless to free himself. She put a hand on his young head, which impatiently shook off the yoke. Like someone quieting an animal, she murmured, 'There, there! What is it? What is it, then?'

He fell upon her big beautiful shoulder, nuzzling and butting his way into his favourite resting-place with eyes already shut, seeking his customary long morning sleep in the protection of her arms. But Léa pushed him away. 'None of that now, Chéri! You're having luncheon with our national Harpy, and it's already twenty to twelve!'

'Not really? I'm lunching at the old girl's? You too?'

Lazily Léa settled deeper into the bed.

'Not me, I'm off duty. I'll go for coffee at half past two, or tea at six, or for a cigarette at a quarter to eight. Don't worry; she'll always see enough of me. And besides, I've not been asked.'

Chéri's sulky face lit up with malice.

'I know, I know why! We're going to have high society. We're going to have the fair Marie-Laure, and that poisonous child of hers.'

Léa brought her big blue wandering eyes to rest.

'Oh, really! The little girl's charming. Less so than her mother, but charming. Now take off that necklace, once and for all.'

'Pity,' Chéri sighed, as he undid the clasp. 'It would look so well in the trousseau.'

Léa raised herself on her elbow: 'What trousseau?'

'Mine,' Chéri said with ludicrous self-importance. 'My trousseau, full of *my* jewels, for *my* marriage!'

He bounded in the air, executed a perfect *entrechat-six*, returned to earth, butted his way through the door-curtains, and disappeared, shouting: 'My bath, Rose! And quick about it! I'm lurching at the old girl's!'

'That's that,' Léa thought. 'We'll have a lake in the bathroom and eight towels floating in it, and razor scrapings in the basin. If only I had two bathrooms!'

But, as on former occasions, she soon saw that this would mean getting rid of a wardrobe and lopping off a corner of her dressing-room, and so concluded, as on former occasions: 'I shall simply have to put up with it till Chéri gets married.'

She lay down again on her back and noticed that Chéri, undressing the night before, had thrown his socks on the mantelpiece, his pants on the writing-table, his tie round the neck of her portrait bust. She could not help smiling at this hasty masculine disorder, and half closed her large tranquil eyes. Their blue was as beautiful as ever, and so were the thick chestnut lashes.

At the age of forty-nine, Léonie Vallon, called Léa de Lonval, was nearing the end of a successful career as a richly kept courtesan. She was a good creature, and life had spared her the more flattering catastrophes and exalted sufferings. She made a secret of the date of her birth; but willingly admitted – with a look of voluptuous condescension for Chéri's special benefit – that she was approaching the age when she could indulge in a few creature comforts. She liked order, fine linen, wines in their prime, and carefully planned meals at home. From an idolized young blonde she had become a rich middle-aged *demi-mondaine* without ever attracting any outrageous publicity. Not that she went in for any pretences. Her friends remembered a Four-in-Hand

Meet at Auteuil, about 1895, when the sub-editor of *Gil Blas* had addressed her as 'dear artist' and she had answered: 'Artist! Oh come, my good friend, my lovers must have been telling tales . . .'

Her contemporaries were jealous of her imperturbable good health, and the younger women, whose figures were padded out in front and behind after the fashion of 1912, scoffed at her opulent bust. Young and old alike envied her the possession of Chéri.

'Though, good heavens!' Léa used to say, 'there's no reason why they should. They're welcome to him! I don't keep him on a lead. He goes out by himself.'

But in this she was not altogether speaking the truth, for she was proud of a liaison – sometimes, in her weakness for the truth, referring to it as 'an adoption' – that had lasted six years.

'Trousseau,' Léa said over again. 'Marriage for Chéri! It's not possible, it's not . . . human . . . you can't give an innocent girl to Chéri! Why, it would be throwing a doe to the hounds! People don't know what Chéri is!'

As if telling the beads of a rosary, she ran her fingers over the necklace which Chéri had tossed on the bed. She put it away at night now because, with his passion for fine pearls and his fondness for playing with them in the morning, he would have noticed too often that her throat had thickened and was not nearly so white, with the muscles under its skin growing slack. She fastened the pearls round her neck without getting up, and took a hand-mirror from the bedside-table.

'I look like a gardener's wife,' was her unflattering comment, 'a market-gardener's wife. A market-gardener's wife in Normandy, off to the potato-fields wearing a pearl necklace. I might as well stick an ostrich feather in my nose – and that's being polite!'

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She shrugged her shoulders, severely critical of everything she no longer loved in herself: the vivid complexion, healthy, a little too ruddy – an open-air complexion, well suited to emphasize the pure intensity of her eyes, with their varying shades of blue. Her proud nose still won her approval. ‘Marie-Antoinette’s nose!’ Chéri’s mother was in the habit of saying, without ever forgetting to add: ‘and in another two years our Léa will have a chin like Louis Seize.’ Her mouth, with its even row of teeth, seldom opened in a peal of laughter; but she smiled often, a smile that set off to perfection the lazy flutter of her large eyes – a smile a hundred times lauded, sung, and photographed – a deep, confiding smile one never tired of watching.

As for her body – ‘Everyone knows’, Léa would say, ‘that a well-made body lasts a long time.’ She could still afford to show her body, pink and white, endowed with the long legs and straight back of a naiad on an Italian fountain; the dimpled hips, the high-slung breasts, ‘would last’, Léa used to say, ‘till well after Chéri’s wedding.’

She got out of bed, and, slipping into a wrap, went to draw back the long curtains. The noonday sun poured into the gay, rosy, over-decorated room. Its luxury dated: double lace curtains, rose-bud watered silk on the walls, gilded woodwork, and antique furniture upholstered in modern silks. Léa refused to give up either this cosy room or its bed, a massive and indestructible masterpiece of wrought iron and brass, grim to the eye and cruel to the shins.

‘Come, come!’ Chéri’s mother protested, ‘it’s not as bad as all that. Personally, I like this room. It belongs to a period. It has a style of its own. It suggests La Païva.’

The remembrance of this dig made Léa smile as she pinned up her hair. She hurriedly powdered her face on hearing two doors slam, and the thud of a male foot colliding with some delicate piece of furniture. Chéri came back into the room in shirt

and trousers, his ears white with talcum powder. He was in an aggressive mood.

'Where's my tie-pin? What a wretched hole this is! Have they taken to pinching the jewellery?'

'Marcel must have stuck it in his tie to go to the market,' Léa gravely replied.

Chéri, who had little or no sense of humour, was brought up short by the little quip like an ant by a lump of coal. He stopped his angry pacing up and down, and found nothing better to say than: 'Charming! and what about my boots?'

'Your what?'

'The calf, of course!'

Léa smiled up at him from her dressing-table, too affectionately. 'You said it, not I,' she murmured in caressing tones.

'The day when a woman loves me for my brains,' he retorted, 'I shall be done for. Meanwhile I must have my pin and my boots.'

'What for? You don't wear a tie-pin with a lounge suit, and you've got one pair on already.'

Chéri stamped his foot. 'I've had enough of this! There's nobody here to look after me, and I'm sick of it all.'

Léa put down her comb. 'Very well, say goodbye to it all for good!'

He shrugged his shoulders, like a young tough. 'You wouldn't like it if I did!'

'Be off with you! I hate guests who complain of the cooking and leave bits and pieces all over the place and cream-cheese sticking to the mirrors. Go back to your sainted mother, my child, and stay there.'

Unable to meet Léa's gaze, he lowered his eyes, and broke out into schoolboy protests. 'Soon I shan't be allowed to open my mouth! Anyhow, you'll let me have your motor to go to Neuilly?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm going out in it myself at two, and because the chauffeur is having his dinner.'

'Where are you going at two?'

'To say my prayers. But if you need three francs for a taxi . . . Idiot,' she added tenderly. 'At two I'll probably come to your lady mother's for coffee. Does that satisfy you?'

He tossed his head like a young buck. 'You bite my head off, you won't give me anything I ask for; they hide my things away, they -'

'Will you never learn to dress yourself?'

She took the tie from Chéri's hands and tied it for him.

'There! And that frightful purple tie . . . However, it's just the thing for the fair Marie-Laure and family . . . And you wanted to wear a pearl on top of all that! You little dago . . . Why not earrings into the bargain?'

His defences were down. Blissful, languid, irresolute, supine, he surrendered again to a lazy happiness and closed his eyes . . .

'Nounoune darling . . .' he murmured.

She brushed the hair off his ears, combed a straighter parting in the bluish locks of his black hair, dabbed a little scent on his temples, and gave him a quick kiss, unable to resist the tempting mouth so close to her own.

Chéri opened his eyes, and his lips, then stretched out his hands.

She moved away. 'No. It's a quarter to one! Be off now, and don't let me see you again!'

'Never?'

'Never,' she laughed back at him with uncontrollable tenderness.

Left to herself, she smiled proudly, and a sharp little sigh of defeated desire escaped her as she listened to Chéri's footsteps

crossing the courtyard. She saw him open and close the gates, drift away on his winged feet, only to encounter the adoring glances of three shop girls walking along arm-in-arm.

'Lawks! He's too good to be true! Let's touch him to see if he's real!'

But Chéri took it all for granted and did not even turn round.