

PERFUME

A Century of Scents



LIZZIE OSTROM 

PENGUIN BOOKS

PERFUME

A Century of Scents

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lizzie Ostrom is one of our most exciting commentators on all things perfume. A lifelong fragrance fan, she began hosting events and installations for people to discover the world of scent in 2010. From evenings on the aroma of outer space to scent tours of art galleries and trips to the past through perfume, Lizzie brings intelligence and wit to this most ravishing of subjects.

She has helped many beauty and food brands to innovate using sensory design, and has collaborated with cultural and scientific institutions including Somerset House for their cult 'Perfume' exhibition, Tate, the Royal Academy and the Royal Institution. Lizzie lives in London and her favourite perfume changes far too often.

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A Century of Scents

An Introduction

SCENT IS THE SILENT AND invisible companion that marches through our history. Sprayed or dabbed on in the mornings as we blink out the sleep in our eyes, and more emphatically in the evenings when it is time to be noticed as we play, it comes with us as we go about our lives. Some scents cling, koala-like, to their owners for decades, till death do them part. Others are not so fortunate, getting a few years, or months, before the next one knocks them over the head and steals their place. Some become fossilised into a certain life-stage: my first perfume; college; travel; living in that damp flat that got burgled; that weird six months we don't talk about.

Scent has radiated from the collars of politicians as they stand on the steps triumphant, and when they leave, hounded and broken. It has been dabbed on by performers getting into character for their next role. And it has been present – even playing a supporting or confidence-boosting role – in negotiations, tussles, crimes, parties, productions and seductions, in instances both infamous and prosaic. Scent, depending on who is wearing it and why, can mean power, emancipation, beauty, perversion, belonging or escape. It can stand for a movement, a tribe, a sub-culture. It can represent tradition or, as with patchouli oil in the 1960s, its rejection. Even after a person's death, scent offers a resurrection of sorts: we cannot speak to our loved one again, but we can smell their perfume on their clothes, almost as if they have only just taken off a favourite jumper.

When it comes to the initial sales pitch, this most puffed-up of products, often commanding eye-watering prices, is certainly boastful about its potential. It needs to be. After all, this is alcohol with added bits. It's one of the most indulgent pleasures and, in an age of sanitation and disinfectants when we rarely need to cover a stink, sits so far up Maslow's hierarchy of needs that the angels in heaven just saw a bottle shoot over their heads. When we are sold perfume, we are accustomed to also being sold the idea of a life we will never have. Of course sex – whether in a penthouse overlooking the Eiffel Tower or in a floral meadow carefully cleaned of cow dung – is a part of this. But with models lying draped across a lawn, chaise longue, bed or cliff-top, it also sells a mind-altering languor, a mood that is carefree, untroubled and peaceful. In enticing us towards this state, there is a fuzziness in perfume, a nonsense logic all too familiar from screen commercials with their bizarre moodscapes. To pastiche: 'She knew his essence. It was theirs. Their moment.'

When it roams into la-la territory, perfume risks becoming the next emperor's new clothes, more snake-oil even than bottled mineral water. Music is the pulse of an era, a portent of unrest, of revolution. Fashion demonstrates ideas about self-expression and acceptability. But perfume? A bit trivial, isn't it? What could it possibly have to say?

We are told that olfaction is the magic key to unlocking memory, and sometimes we do have a vivid picture connected to a particular smell. If we are lucky, it might be from an idyllic moment in childhood, when we had our own treehouse and hosted a tea party for the squirrels; if we are unlucky, it could be the classroom at school where we got thumped. But more often when we smell something not quite familiar, catching a whiff off another person's coat, it is as though we have been kidnapped and taken to a remote landscape. Blindfolded, disoriented, we sense something of the place but are unable to distinguish exactly where we are. There is that frustrating feeling of recognising a smell, of knowing we know it, but being completely flummoxed as to its identity. After a friend tells us 'that's Paco Rabanne' and puts us out of our misery, there is that moment of relief.

The Rubik's Cube is solved! All is well with the world. When fragrance more often than not renders us dumb, how are we supposed to start articulating its important role in our history?

Nearly all of us, though, are expert readers of scent. We may not be able to decipher individual notes or name the perfumer, but we are good at making judgements in order to place what we smell. These responses are personal to us, and they can feel unshakeable: 'That smells young. This one smells like my grandma. That one over there smells vintage. This bottle is cheap. That one's expensive. That one's for hippies. That's for one-night stands.' If we were to cluster together these archetypes – the trashy broad, the femme fatale, the old crone – we would be in the latest David Lynch project.

It is in understanding how we respond to scent, collectively and as individuals, that we can begin to tell the story of the role this invisible reference point has played in the twentieth century. A perfume that was the height of daring fifty years ago and which stood for everything risqué now moves towards frumpiness as the people we associate with that sort of smell advance from being Gigs to grannies. It is a similar phenomenon to our assessment of Christian names as contemporary or old-fashioned, or to rewatching television programmes made ten years ago, which, once so crisp and fresh, now look fuzzy and dated.

Scent reflects what is appealing and exciting in an era, and our focus – the turbulent twentieth century – was crucial in forming fragrance as we know it today. It was the century in which we decided to spray scent on our skin as opposed to our handkerchiefs. It saw certain smells become gender-specific, defined, and understood as being suitably 'masculine' or 'feminine'. And it was a century of escalating chemical innovation. Instead of a limited palette of natural materials and fragrance types, perfumers found at their disposal hundreds of new molecules to play with. This led to an explosion of novel smells and odour effects, such as the aroma chemical Calone – also known as Watermelon ketone – which in the 1990s gave rise to all those marine scents promising snorkel dives amid the seaweed. We may not know

the names of these materials, but we know their smell once nestled in a composition.

What of the scent wearers? As with so many consumer goods in the last century, we saw fine fragrance burst out from being the exclusive bedfellow of the elite and leisured classes, transformed from an objet d'art to a mass-market proposition. Newly affordable, perfume became available to millions more people, who were enticed by ever more sophisticated marketing, by the inflation of celebrity culture, and by the centre of influence moving from Europe – particularly France – to the United States.

But really, when we speak of the twentieth century, we speak of our own nostalgia. An archaeological dig through the scents of the past one hundred years offers the opportunity for us to rake over the ones we wore and perhaps still enjoy, the ones our mothers and fathers and friends have worn, and the ones we wanted to wear but never dared. When we reach further back, to the people who are just out of our remembered history – our great-grandparents and their forbears – scent offers an enticing lens through which to imagine their world, as if by smelling the same perfume we might also breathe the same oxygen.

A warning: some of the scents included in this tour are now lost, particularly those from the start of the century. There are also those from more recent decades that flopped and were quickly swept off the shelves. Many of my choices that are still manufactured today have been reformulated – whether discreetly or dramatically – so they can keep in step with the market's notion of what is commercial and current, or on account of regulatory pressures, or because ingredients once readily available are now harder or more expensive to obtain. Today's version of a 1920s perfume may represent the same intention as the original, and will continue to offer pleasure under the same name, but some might consider it a new scent entirely.

You might also be wondering what is the point of including perfumes here that have gone the way of the dodo. We may remake old ballgowns from a sepia photo, but we cannot so easily replicate a scent

that has fallen into obscurity. The liquid in the bottle is, of course, not the whole story, so we can still enjoy discovering a fragrance after it has been laid to rest. Even with perfumes that are ready and waiting for us in the aisles, we need more than just a description of the smell. For just as we buy books because of their covers, we also buy and enjoy scents because of their names, straplines or cover stars, sometimes falling in love with the contents even before we've actually sprayed it on our skin.

This is why, in our century of scent through one hundred perfumes – ten for every decade – each scent speaks to us in a different voice. There are those which are the ultimate example of their maker's craft, seamlessly structured and unfolding beautifully, layers peeling back to reveal more beneath and achieving that rare accolade of 'classic'. These appear alongside 'the ones that got away', prized in their time but now alluringly obscure: Black Satin, Hypnotique, White Shoulders. There are perfumes that have made their way into these pages for pertinently expressing something about the era in which they were created, encapsulating to perfection a lifestyle craze, a pre-occupation, a culture, through the fragrance itself or through the bottle (the twentieth century saw flasks shaped like pipes, the Statue of Liberty and, more unfortunately, grenades).

Be ready to encounter, and let us not beat around the bush here, a fair few fragrances with dubious reputations in terms of artistry – fragrances that might be said to barely qualify as 'perfumes' (Mennen's Skin Bracer, anyone?). These are the scents that, through a combination of sheer persistence, marketing genius and hitting the zeitgeist, went global. They fizzed around networks and neighbourhoods, were instantly recognised on the streets and could be found under Christmas trees throughout the land. And this is the thing: a scent is as much about the people who wear it as the people who make it. Sometimes the stories of those who got hold of a scent and made it theirs are more engrossing than the concept behind its creation. It might be the tale of one individual or the collective shared narratives of the masses: the millions of American women in the 1950s who bathed in Youth Dew

before an evening out with their husbands, the hordes of teenage boys with a can of Lynx, the generation of men for whom an evening of clubbing began with a splash of Joop!

Sometimes all you want is a beautifully cooked steak as a proper treat; at other times only a hot bacon sarnie from your local cafe will hit the spot. In the same way, our century of scents brings together the rarefied and the regular joes. This is not a book about the best (only a small percentage of people would, in a blind sniffing, be able to identify the finest); it is about the beloved. The strangest. The most outrageous. The scents we groan about because we remember thinking we were so attractive in them.

In our tour we will travel to belle époque Paris and her court perfumers, once the darlings of the French aristocracy and now re-inventing themselves for the modern world of the bourgeoisie. We will meet the visionaries and mavericks of the 1920s who packaged up perfumes that sold back to the Bright Young Things their thrilling, illicit behaviour in olfactory form. In 1940s America we will discover how the Second World War led to failed attempts to turn the Florida marshlands into the new south of France, where jasmine would grow as far as the eye could see. Later we will open the bathroom cabinet of 1950s 'Executive Man', for whom an interest in fragrance had to go hand-in-hand with a brutal stinging and a'slapping of the cheeks, and we will get to know his baby-boom daughters of prosperity, demanding new perfumes for their sweet sixteenth. 1980s corporate power perfumes will naturally come out to play, along with their reactionary successors of the following decade, the office-appropriate fragrance equivalent of the white shirt and black trousers.

Every scent has something to say. Each is bounded by its decade but also reverberates into others. As we march through the century, many of the old guard continue to walk with us, blossoming in later life or finally finding their metier years after launch. Thus when we speak of the scents of, say, the 1990s – of L'Eau d'Issey and Thierry Mugler's Angel – we speak of scents still with us, with narratives that have some way to go; whether they will sprint or limp towards the

finish line, and the moment of their withdrawal from the shelves, is still to be discovered.

Even scents that are unfamiliar may be recognisable in the role they played during their time. For me, The Body Shop's White Musk was the coming-of-age fragrance; for someone fifteen years older, that might have been Aqua Manda by Goya, and fifteen years before that, Ma Griffe by Carven. And that's just in the United Kingdom – other perfumes referenced in these pages will resonate with readers elsewhere in the world. Whether we're scent fiends or casual users, we can all look back and consider what we've worn and when: the smells that evoke a particular person we were dating or hanging out with; the ones that went with a scene we were once part of. The story of the twentieth century through perfume is also the story of our own personal century of scent.

Read, reminisce and keep those nostrils keen . . . there is a lot of perfume coming up.

*Yours,
Lizzie Ostrom*

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The Bountiful Belle Époque

1900–1909

WE BEGIN WITH A NEW century, one so sparkling in its remoteness to us that it can come across as curiously without odour, just out of range of our nostrils. How can we get its perfumes to come into focus, especially when so few of them still exist for us to discover? Did people even *use* perfume back then or were they gripped by a prudishness about scent?

To set the scene, we are going to take a journey to London Bridge, where in 1908 the English fragrance firm of Gosnell's had mounted an audacious spectacle to attract the gaze of busy passers-by crossing the river or rushing to make the train home from work. Flying high in the sky was a hot-air balloon shaped like a perfume bottle, specifically Gosnell's famous Cherry Blossom, which was celebrating its twentieth successful year. From its hovering basket, thousands of flyers were flung over people's heads, and probably into the River Thames. The stunt, equivalent to those aeroplanes that expel coloured smoke spelling out 'Marry me, Sheila!', was risky, not least because the unconventional shape meant the balloon would rise or fall suddenly, much to the concern of the pilot. Over in Paris, another balloon was entertaining French consumers, who also favoured the wares of English companies.

It seems like a modern idea even now, and in fact so much that appears to be new and exciting in perfume was already being tried out in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before scent became

defined more narrowly as a liquid we spray on our wrists. To offer a flavour: in Victorian England, the well-known perfumery firm of Eugène Rimmel had employed all sorts of whimsical marketing strategies. There had been perfume fountains available for hire at balls and parties, their delightful waters spilling out to fragrance the air (how long until a twenty-first-century version, perhaps installed at a fancy new cocktail bar, is heralded as a novelty?). At the 1867 Paris Exhibition, Rimmel arranged for the construction of a cottage housing a scent distiller for live demonstration, and floral clocks that revealed different flowers according to the time of day. What they couldn't do with paper wasn't worth knowing: perfumed programmes, fans and almanacs, and Valentine's cards with greetings such as 'May we row in the same boat? I'll have you now!' You could even buy a Rimmel perfume bottle with a handy opera glass at one end. Meanwhile, a competitor – Piesse & Lubin of 2 New Bond Street – were busy promoting 'The Fountain Finger Ring' which, disguised as a piece of ornamental jewellery, would spurt out jets of scent at a ball or concert.

Though Rimmel's ingenious practices were old hat even by 1900, they help to convey just how pervasive scented goods were during this period. They could be bought as finished products but were also made at home as a hobby. A feature in a December 1903 edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* described a mania among sewing-bee clubs for making scented Christmas sachets, which could come in oriental-themed designs (Japanese doll heads, or 'Chinamen') and be filled with sandalwood-perfumed beads. Another common practice was to line the walls of wardrobes with cotton, sprinkle over a sachet of perfumed powder, and cover it with cheesecloth to encourage the slow, subtle permeation of fragrance into clothes.

Neither was perfume 'for the rich'. The names that have survived in the annals are the brands of prestige and glinting luxury, of Lalique bottles and rustling printed tissue paper, the likes of Houbigant, Guerlain, Coty and Caron, and rightly so, given their artistic achievements. But no less important were the much less glamorous providers of perfume such as Sears, Colgate and the California Perfume Company,

who brought fragrant wares to millions through their catalogues and door-to-door sales forces, but which by virtue of being mass market and generic became obscure.

As we will see, in the bountiful belle époque perfumes were talked about extensively. Brand names were understood, loved and disparaged in the way we might adore and mock our own notorious perfumes. But because such references often came not in literary but in popular fiction – as obscure now as Sears' offerings – they are hard to find. The incidental reference to a *Le Trèfle Incarnat* in a romance story is easy to miss and difficult to contextualise when nobody alive remembers the scent, let alone understands truly what it meant to the people of that generation. The reconstruction of these contexts is attempted here, but with an inevitable loss of nuance.

What we can more readily understand is the story backstage, which is much better documented. It is a story of technological innovation and the triumph of chemistry. Following the discovery of how to isolate specific molecules from raw materials, and how then to synthesise them, the first perfumes still available today to incorporate early synthetic molecules coumarin (named after coumarou, French for the tonka bean) and vanillin were *Fougère Royale* by Houbigant in 1882 and *Jicky* by Guerlain in 1889. Their launches were the starting gun, the transition from purely natural fragrances, lovely in their own way but limited, to what we know as 'modern' perfumery. A few years after these early pioneers, at the turn of the twentieth century, firms realised that they could now re-create prohibitively expensive perfumes at a fraction of the price if they worked in some of the new materials in their palette. Perfume lovers of 1900 would never have guessed that the arrival of so many violet scents was to do with recently discovered aroma compounds called ionones; it was a trade story, not relevant to the customer and with the potential to interfere with their notion of what perfume was. While other inventions – telephones, gramophones, cars – excited, delighted and disturbed with their phantom-like powers to convey information and people, perfume sat outside the technological discourse because the chemicals

so effectively mimicked the real thing that they were camouflaged in plain view.

That this changing face of the industry was not yet registering with the public is clear from a 1906 article in American *Vogue* about the rose harvest in Grasse in southern France. The writer saw it as an Arcadian experience, a pastoral idyll in which ‘hundreds of women and children, in their picturesque national costumes, gather the blossoms of the flowers, merrily chatting and singing at their poetical task’. The journalist then equated each flower to a fairy or elf containing a spirit which might be captured and trapped in a bottle for the consumer’s delight – a firefly of fragrance. Of course harvests continue to this day – rose petals are subjected to solvent extraction to produce absolute – and these sorts of ‘romancing the perfume’ articles are still written, as the idea is so compelling. But in this first decade of the century, the old style of floral perfumery – of stephanotis, heliotrope and verbena – was about to make room for some altogether more exciting fragrances. And they would cause a stir without their fans being any the wiser about the industrial manufacturing facilities whence their ingredients emerged.

Le Parfum Idéal

BY HOUBIGANT, 1900



THE QUEEN-BEE PERFUME

AT THE END OF THE nineteenth century a tribe of über-stylish young women called the Gibson Girls came to represent fin-de-siècle good living. The lightly satirical pen-and-ink creation of American artist Charles Dana Gibson, the Gibson Girls captured the vivacity of a new generation, freer than their predecessors to lark about and break gentlemen's hearts. Gibson Girls were proto pin-ups with Barbie-doll figures, boasting tiny waists and arms, and improbably enormous boobs. Their shape was supposedly down to their sporty pursuits but really came enhanced by the fashionable swan-bill corsets of the time. And that Edwardian hair! Their top buns were so bouffant, they could have stored a packed lunch in there.

The Gibson Girls appeared so effortlessly cool, one might have thought they would be up for a friendly game on the tennis court, but look closely and they invariably bore a dismissive, too-good-for-thou expression. In other words, they were rich bitches. The best of the cartoons showed the girls in packs, torturing their male admirers with a 'Who, me?' smile, or prodding a Tom-Thumb-scale man with a pin. There is a wonderful example called 'Love in a Garden', in which one

girl, impeccable in pressed whites, instructs five lovelorn specimens to tidy up her lawn. One is staring at her gormlessly, not noticing his mower is crushing some terracotta pots. Another duo are too enamoured to realise they just planted a tree upside-down.

The Gibson Girls soon moved from their newssheet beginnings to become a merchandise phenomenon, their faces popping up on porcelain plates, tablecloths and ashtrays. If she could be deployed to sell a colander, imagine the power a Gibson Girl would bring to a bottle of fragrance. That scent was *Le Parfum Idéal*.

This 'Perfect Perfume' came from Houbigant, a French house with an enviable aristocratic heritage dating back to 1775. Rumour, or sales copy, had it that when Marie Antoinette attempted to flee the Jacobins in peasant clothing, she was detected, and captured, because of the wafts of Houbigant fragrance coming from her person. Houbigant had survived the revolution and were now patronised by the Tsar and Tsarina, and most of the Russian nobility, whose grace and favour were critical to the success of the industry. With such illustrious customers, the pressure to produce something special must have been intense.

Le Parfum Idéal was one of the first major launches of the twentieth century. It had actually been created a few years earlier but had its unveiling at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris as *the* fragrance for the new era. As the biggest ever global trade fair – with eighteen dazzling sections, show-villages for each country, and the Eiffel Tower as its main entrance – the Exposition Universelle attracted millions of visitors, swelling the population of the capital by 7 per cent. Alongside the first public demonstration of escalators and magical, electrical light displays, there was a substantial focus on the emergent art nouveau movement in arts and crafts. All the perfumers who mattered had jostled to showcase their wares in themed pavilions commissioned from the most fashionable architects available, including Hector Guimard, who had just unveiled his new *Métro* designs. There were arbours, frescos and fountains galore, all intended to make the displays of perfume bottles a bit more thrilling, especially given that down the road visitors could watch the first ever film recording with sound.

Le Parfum Idéal was Houbigant's crowning glory. Its cut-glass bottle, designed by Baccarat in their signature decanter style, was housed in an ornate box patterned with oriental-rug motifs. It was finished off with a glinting golden label on which could be seen a Gibson Girl in profile, sniffing a flower and looking delighted. This fictional, generic ideal of beauty had become the face of a product, as vivid a brand ambassador as a real celebrity. As *Vogue's* beauty writer reminisced years later, in the 1930s: 'The very thought of that golden lady on the label makes us break into nostalgic memories of the day when a bottle of "Idéal" occupied the place of honour on the dressing table of our mama.'

The perfume itself also evoked an ideal; it smelt of the perfect flower – not one particular variety, but a bouquet. 'Millefleurs' fragrances had been a common conceit through the nineteenth century, but relied upon the available glut of natural materials. Le Parfum Idéal, in a celebration of technology, stood above the others by the inclusion of some of the exciting new synthetic ingredients on the market. And, for the wearer, Le Parfum Idéal offered a certain opacity. It was difficult to deconstruct the scent and pinpoint exactly what it was, and that was the point. This was fragrance as artistry and mystery, something far beyond what the wearer could create for themselves from a Victorian recipe, and therefore most deserving of its outrageous price tag. That shining Gibson Girl seal was the flourish to complete the sales pitch, an irresistible suggestion to women that they too could use scent to prolong their charms – the queen bee once more.

Le Trèfle Incarnat

BY L.T. PIVER, 1900



THE ARTIFICIAL PERFUME

‘NATURAL VERSUS SYNTHETIC’ IS A perennial argument in fragrance. It is fairly common to hear people say that they like only natural or organic perfumes, not ‘those nasty chemicals’ you get nowadays.

Three distinct concerns are at play here. The first relates to a preference for simplicity, for the reassurance of the one-note Verbena Cologne and its clean lemon-balm tang, instead of the muddle of a more complex list of ingredients.

The second comes from the joy of having a perfume that smells like a carbon copy of its counterpart in nature, whether that be the tea rose or the mandarin. Conversely, it is certainly true that some perfumes smell ‘chemical’ and nose-tingling, which does not necessarily mean they are more contrived than others, but that their aroma is interpreted as ‘fake’ rather than ‘natural’ because it is too redolent of cleaning products, cheap toilet sprays and other functional nasties which we might not like to associate with fine fragrance.

The third concern relates to synthetic materials and taps into equivalent anxieties in skincare, fabrics and food – that natural is authentic and gentle, whereas synthetic is harsh, toxic and irritating.

Truth be told, everything is a chemical, and in any case the situation is becoming even more nuanced; these days natural materials sometimes have parts of their molecular composition removed, taking potential allergens with them.

Back in 1900, most people didn't have a clue about synthetic molecules, even as they bought bottles containing coumarin or ionones. These new materials had only been incorporated into perfumery for fifteen or so years, and customers would never have dreamed that their fragrances contained anything other than extracts of flowers, fruits and woods. When *Le Trèfle Incarnat* ('The Crimson Clover') was launched at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 (having been created in 1896), only the trade discussed its composition, but they did so keenly as they were very impressed by its invention. For L.T. Piver's creation was absolutely the child of scientific progress, and it was bold of the perfume house to embrace these new possibilities rather than remain in the conservative past.

The base, a fougère (fern) – itself an imagined smell (not many ferns have an aroma) – was introduced using the brand-new isolate material called Amyl Salicylate to give a spicy, mowed-lawn scent. With an aroma that blended hay, bergamot and herbaceous lavender, *Le Trèfle Incarnat*, helped along by its lucky motif of the clover, became a smash. It offered a novel smell that was exciting but reassuringly couched in the language of the great outdoors – the grand Edwardian tradition of picnics in the meadows. Imagine, as a woman, having been stuck with the same scents for years, only to be suddenly offered a new choice; it must have been like an original dress style arriving out of the blue. Within just a few years the name '*Le Trèfle Incarnat*' entered common parlance, as though it had always been there. It had slipped into the canon beautifully.

Le Trèfle Incarnat was not, however, without controversy – precisely because it was so distinctive. In morally uptight circles it was viewed as deeply suspect. Its synthetic ingredients may have passed under the radar, but its not-quite-placeable smell, coupled with its popularity among good-time girls, gave the fragrance a reputation

as being ‘artificial’. In Berta Ruck’s popular novel of 1915, *Miss Million’s Maid*, a life-swap romp about a maid and her mistress, this unease is particularly well expressed by the more chaste of the two women, Beatrice, who is trying to rein in the newly discovered frivolity of her former servant, Million. As she follows Million into a frenetic restaurant, Beatrice is hit with ‘a waft of warmer air’ which carries a clash of aromas: ‘of coffee, of cigarettes, of hot food, and of those perfumes of which you catch a whiff if you pass down the Burlington Arcade’. Discerned in the melange is lilac, opoponax, ‘Russian violet’ and Phulnana – a famous perfume of the firm of Grossmith – together with the ‘most penetrating, most unmistakable of all the scents; the trèfle incarnat’. Bitingly, Beatrice notes that, actually, a *true* lady should need hardly any perfume to maintain her visage.

Several other popular English novels also incorporated the scent, especially to evoke the seedy vibes of Piccadilly nightlife. In Compton Mackenzie’s 1912 work *Carnival*, about a dancing girl in London, the down-at-heel venue that is the Orient Palace of Varieties reeks of it: ‘Above all the frangipani and patchouli and opoponax and trèfle incarnat steals the rank odor of goats.’

And in *Diamonds Cut Paste*, an otherwise forgettable 1909 tale from husband-and-wife team Egerton and Agnes Castle, *Le Trèfle Incarnat* is described as a pollutant taking possession of a room and ‘overpowering the breath of the wholesome flowers’. One upstanding woman remarks to her acquaintance, ‘You don’t know Trèfle Incarnat? It shows what high-class moral circles you frequent. My dear, it’s just the kind of thing that catches you by the throat at certain hotels and restaurants – it just floats down the river on Sunday afternoons.’

Floating down the river in a boat for some naughtiness? Where do we sign up?

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Climax

BY SEARS, C. 1900



THE MAIL-ORDER PERFUME

IT IS NATURAL TO ASSUME, given that nearly all the famous and surviving fragrances of the early twentieth century came from luxurious French houses, that perfume circa 1900 was a rich person's game, neither affordable for nor desired by the hard-working man or woman.

But no. The mass market in 'fancy goods' was thriving, particularly in America. It is just that, because the products were rather run-of-the-mill, they have been all but forgotten. It is quite astonishing to think that in the early twentieth century the firm of Colgate sold hundreds of varieties of toilet water (and we complain that there are too many perfume launches today). Richard Hudnut, the first major cosmetics manufacturer in the US, had been selling scents to the middle classes since 1880 in pharmacies and general stores, his offerings including Queen Anne Cologne and Violet Sec. There was also the well-known Frederick Stearns & Co. from Detroit and the California Perfume Company, later to become Avon.

The retailer that arguably did more than anyone to popularise perfume at the beginning of the twentieth century was Sears (later Sears, Roebuck). Richard Sears launched his mail-order catalogue in

Chicago in 1888 at the perfect moment. New railroad infrastructure now connected the huge terrain that was North America, turning the national distribution of goods, formerly a logistical nightmare, into an entrepreneur's dream. Initially he offered watches by mail with the promise to bring quality goods to all parts of the Union, a money-back guarantee and, from 1896, free rural delivery. Very quickly he developed his business into a twice-yearly publication selling much more than timepieces. Sears expanded into spices, utensils, clothes, baths, farm machinery, curtains, even house-building kits. It was more a case of what wasn't in the catalogue than what was, which meant that Sears acted as a huge leveller. The company were able to convey the same commodities to customers no matter where they lived. From East Coast to West Coast, families were ordering the season's fashionable dress materials or the newest patterned wallpaper, sold to them through textured sample inserts. Or indeed, procuring Sears' Tea Rose perfume.

Sears' success was as much down to their tone as their product range. Instead of an army of sales agents, each with their own style of selling (as was the case with the California Perfume Company), the Sears catalogue spoke with a single unifying voice. It was passionately on the side of the consumer, bringing them the keenest prices possible and importing directly, with no superfluous middle-men. Sears demonstrated their dedicated fervour through a reckless use of shouty upper case: 'THERE IS NOT A TOWN IN THE UNITED STATES WHERE WE HAVE NOT SOLD GOODS . . . DISTANCE CUTS NO FIGURE.' They even employed an illustration of Lady Justice blindfolded, to bring credence to the 'Policy of Our House', as though the catalogue was actually a redraft of the Bill of Rights.

Crucially, Sears the shopkeeper was figuratively blind. Customers too embarrassed to buy particular products in a local store, where the town gossip might be listening in, could be assured that Sears' service was anonymous and discreet. This, arguably, meant that any woman who did not want to be seen to be interested in perfumes and beauty products could secretly indulge her private fantasies and order as

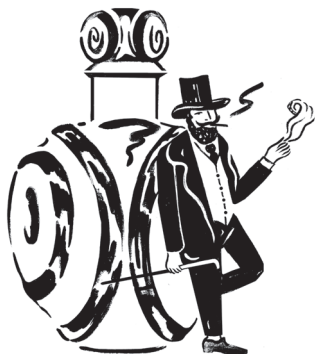
many as she desired from the pages of the latest catalogue. The pagination of early editions bears this out: in 1897, for example, the perfumes appeared next to the blush-inducing, hush-hush contraceptive aids. Two years later they were to be found next to cosmetic preparations such as the Secret de Ninon freckle treatment and arsenic complexion wafers. And in 1900, they were given their own ‘department’ within the catalogue, earning additional column inches as demand boomed.

So familiar must readers have been with the kinds of perfumes on offer that Sears often listed a few varieties, such as New Mown Hay and Lilac Blossom, followed by an ‘etc. etc.’, as though saying, ‘You know the drill.’ Prices started at just 25 cents for a small bottle (\$7 in today’s money), but Sears’ offerings were ‘the usuals’, no different from what Hudnut or Colgate were peddling. Yet Sears made the most of their standard range by offering a bewildering hierarchy of enticing packaging grades to create a point of difference. Instead of eau de toilette versus parfum, it was ‘Triple Extract’ in the simple, pourer bottle, through to ‘Seroco’ (which sounded Italianate, but was an acronym derived from Sears, Roebuck and Company), the priciest and most prestigious. In the middle sat the ‘Climax’ option. Was this why the perfumes were next to the sex aids? Was Sears’ Climax Ylang Ylang an elixir of love, an aphrodisiac? Well, potentially, and we have to see this titillating language as another instance of Sears deploying hyperbole to stir excitement among readers. However, on perusing the catalogue more closely, it soon becomes clear that the word ‘Climax’ was applied all too freely to products in and outside the bedroom. There were bamboo rods called Climax. There were buggies called Climax. And, yes, there was a loo roll variety called Climax.

Perfume was becoming bog standard, and for that we have to thank Sears.

Mouchoir de Monsieur

BY GUERLAIN, 1904



THE FLÂNEUR'S PERFUME

WITH MY IMPECCABLE FRENCH, I used to assume that Mouchoir de Monsieur translated into English as 'Mister Moustache', which would be a fabulous name for a cologne, and which is offered now to enterprising readers wishing to launch a new brand. The correct nomenclature is, instead, 'Gentleman's Handkerchief', which spawns its own flights of fancy, as though our man is going to throw down his square in the warm-up to a duel, or might wave it in a lady's face to seduce her. Where he might keep said hanky about his person is not for us to speculate.

The name, alas, is actually quite prosaic: many liquid perfumes of the nineteenth century were handkerchief scents. For Regency men and their successors, perfume was normally destined to be dabbed onto a piece of material which could then be brought close to the nose in circumstances of noxious airs and pollutions (that, or lots of men were still clutching their childhood blankies).

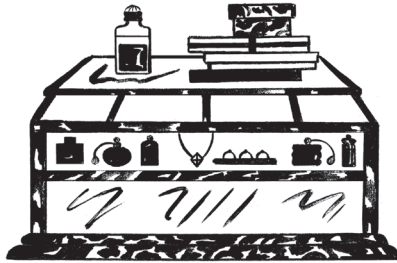
Of course, the fragrance was pleasurable in its own right, not just a high-class version of Dettol. By the early 1800s, the perfumed hanky was a ubiquitous accessory among gentlemen concerned with

immaculate self-presentation, and was occasionally mocked by social commentators. One satirical cartoon of around 1819 shows a beanpole of a dandy in distress who has dropped his perfumed kerchief onto the pavement. Because of his ridiculously tight clothing, he struggles to bend over and retrieve it, contorting his body so that he is almost doing the splits, and becoming the laughing stock of bystanders.

Mouchoir de Monsieur was produced in 1904, in the twilight of the handkerchief era. Rather than promising an exciting new concept, Guerlain were making a nod to the English fragrance tradition, creating their own French version of a classic whilst referencing their earlier output, Jicky. By the belle époque, that leisurely class of men about town – Guerlain’s ideal customer – were more commonly identified as *flâneurs*, which translates as ‘strollers’ (if you’re feeling kind) or ‘loafers’ (if you’re not). They had a hard life, seeking out the passing pleasures of the boulevards, wandering into a show, then a café, then witnessing some street scenes that they would keenly convey to the world in their journals and letters. *Flâneurs* strove to maintain their separateness from the raw life they observed before them, so as to more fully experience that strange feeling of alienation. Mouchoir de Monsieur made an ideal accomplice on these dawdlings around Paris. Like *Le Trèfle Incarnat*, it was based on the *fougère* fragrance, that approximation of what a fern might smell like, created through a balance of creamy-smelling coumarin and campherous lavender. Yet it also had a typical animalic dirtiness beneath (‘animalic’ scents being derived from animals, or plant materials like the musky ambrette seed, which have animalic characteristics). In forging a connection with the filth of urban living, as with other fragrances of its era, Mouchoir de Monsieur parallels the *flâneur*’s dalliance with the experiences of the masses, while always reminding the wearer that they had pots of money and could escape to their nice rooms any time they pleased.

L'Origan

BY COTY, 1905



THE BEAUTY-HALL PERFUME

BUILDINGS THE SIZE OF A city block. Mannequins, dressed in the latest finery and furs, beckoning passers-by from behind gleaming glass. Space, mirrors, steel. Afternoon tea accompanied by string quartets. Cooking demonstrations. Fashion shows and tableaux vivants of exotic Eastern scenes. More, more, more.

By the first years of the twentieth century, retail was riding high on the coat-tails of department stores, which were mushrooming in major cities and turning shopping into a leisure activity, to the vexation of traditional small-scale shopkeepers. With products now zoned by category, perfumes were given dedicated, roomy sanctums of their own. One of the most famous of the grand emporiums – Selfridges in London – strategically placed perfumes on the ground floor in 1910, where they remain to this day, capitalising on the way a good smell can lure customers inside. In Zola's novel of 1883, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*), store manager Octave Mouret cleverly has a fountain of violet-scented water installed on the shop floor to coincide with his linen sale, in an early example of scent marketing.

François Coty, a pugnacious entrepreneur from Corsica with a

keen nose, was the man who established the blueprint for perfume brands in the department-store era. His interest was first piqued at the 1900 Paris Exposition, where, gazing at the latest glassware designs from Lalique and Baccarat, he understood the appeal and power of a beautifully tailored bottle. He also spotted the opportunity to craft olfactory effects from a much wider range of scents by playing with some of the whizzy new synthetic materials and bases made by the larger manufacturers. Coty's intuition was about to make him a lot of money – the equivalent of billions of pounds – and turn him into one of the richest and most high-profile men in France. With a chemist in tow and serious pitching skills, he managed to get Lalique on board to create his flacons and one of the big chemical companies to help him with his formulations. Then there was his wife Marie, who was put to work designing the finishing touches and trimmings. Coty succeeded where others had failed because of his ability to create scale, to turn his precious jewels into products that could be replicated and shipped worldwide. The opening of his own vast manufacturing plant, known as la Cité des Parfums, was the sign that an empire had been made.

Legend has it that, in order to get an audience with the management at the prestigious Les Grands Magasins du Louvre, Coty staged his own theatrical intervention, smashing a bottle of La Rose Jacqueminot on the shop floor, whereupon women came over like bees to honey, demanding to know what it was and how they could get hold of it. Some accounts say that Coty planted the women on the shop floor or that he fabricated the whole tale. Others say that his wife, who had a floristry concession in the shop, dropped the bottle by accident or on his behalf. Maybe this story has become so over-baked because it helps us to point to a moment in which modernity 'happened', as opposed to the slow, indefinable transition that really brought it about. Even if true, Coty's origin story doesn't really tally with the brand's early trade in America. One of the first retailers to promote their perfumes was Schramm's prescription drugstore in Salt Lake City in 1905, which was as far from the glitzy department-store world as it was possible to get.

La Rose Jacqueminot itself was a triumph; a rich, resonant take on the scent of rose – paired with violet – that must have played as if coming out of a shiny new gramophone. The house of Coty quickly made a reputation for themselves worldwide and were soon being listed alongside products from much more established houses such as Roger & Gallet and Houbigant.

Coty's all-star line-up, his perfumes of 1905 to 1925, have a deserved reputation as the jazz standards with which, according to perfume historian Denyse Beaulieu, other perfumers could riff to produce their own great works, notably Jacques Guerlain. Coty's Chypre enabled Guerlain to create Mitsouko; his *Emeraude* of 1921 was the bedrock on which *Shalimar* was built, and *L'Origan* became the godmother of *L'Heure Bleue*, also by Guerlain.

L'Origan pretty much began the category of the 'floral oriental', a binge of polleny orange flower, nutmeg, cloves, vanilla and incense. A laden, prima donna of a scent, it speaks of night-time bewitchment and assignations in the back of a carriage. Once out on the market, Coty's perfume just kept on selling: by 1919 it was making the equivalent of \$6.7 million per year. And *L'Origan* was such a hallmark because, as well as being available as an extract and eau de toilette, it was used to fragrance numerous other products, becoming the smell of the pursuit of beauty itself. In particular *L'Origan* went into an early deodorant powder – the aroma of dusted armpits – and, later on, Coty's famous *Air Spun* face powder, bought by millions more women to keep the pesky midday shine away. Which raises the question: if we were to encounter *L'Origan* today, in its original glory, would it smell of powder through our reading of the fragrance on its own terms – dusty and soft – or because, well, face powder smells just like *L'Origan*?

Shem-el-Nessim

BY GROSSMITH, 1906



THE ARABIAN NIGHTS PERFUME

OPEN UP A WOMEN'S MAGAZINE during the belle époque and, somewhere in the classified section, readers would find a small, enticing advert for the predecessors of L'Origan: 'oriental' perfumes. This was a term so overused that it was deployed to flog half the goods in the shops. You think department stores today go crazy with their merchandising? Try 'Gardens of Allah' fashion shows for size, or floors transformed into ancient Eastern temples.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 'oriental' described pretty much any scent that promised to make you swoon with its intensity, typically incorporating rich, ambrosial materials. With their mysterious, dense formulae, they were sometimes touted as being for 'complex' women (as opposed to 'fastidious' women, who would get on better with a single-note floral). They were often employed in one's living quarters to produce an intangible sweetness that could not quite be traced and so were also bought as silk sachets to be hidden in upholstery or dropped into the bottom of a vase, no doubt to be forgotten.

'Many women love sweetness not because they think it is the