

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO¹

by *Julien Levy*
from *Memoir of an Art Gallery*

The terrible-tempered Dr. Barnes no doubt had much to do with Giorgio de Chirico's first visit to the United States.² He probably paid for his passage and certainly intended to play a prominent part in the presentation of de Chirico's work at my gallery. He was called in our little circle terrible-tempered because of an incident recounted by Agnes Rindge, who taught art history at Vassar. One afternoon, provided with the special permission always required long in advance, she had brought a class of students to visit the Barnes Foundation collection in Philadelphia. She guided them to a large Matisse, *The Dance*. She told her students there were three versions and, in her opinion, the best was *not* this one, though it was almost as fine. There was a loud alarm. An attendant came in and politely requested Dr. Rindge to remove herself and her class from the museum at once.

"Why, for God's sake, should we do that?" asked Agnes.

The attendant explained that Dr. Barnes thought his pictures were being insulted. He knew this, as the attendant further explained, because the gallery rooms were all wired for sound. When it suited his mood the doctor would push a button in his study and listen to the conversations in anyone of his various galleries. He had taken offense at whatever it was Agnes had been telling her students – as a disparaging reference to one of his favorite paintings. Dr. Rindge with her class was, consequently, asked to leave.

I first encountered Dr. Barnes on one of my early trips to Europe. I had cocktails with him in the ship's lounge, together with George Keller, who at that time was working in the gallery of Etienne Bignou. Keller's major responsibility at that moment was to nurse the doctor, to suggest his menu, recommend wines, plan his itinerary, see to his amusements, and, possibly, in fact quite probably, even brush his teeth – such is the prerogative of a very rich and tyrannical old gentleman. Barnes had bought from Bignou many of the most expensive paintings to be found in his collection and consequently was a highly favored client. At the time I remember thinking that if this were the only method of selling pictures I didn't believe myself fit for the task. Now, with de Chirico, I found myself face to face with the issue, and toadying to his wishes for the success of my exhibition. The first command arrived in a letter which said, "I propose to write the preface for your catalogue. It will be eight or ten pages."

I turned to Giorgio helplessly. "I don't budget for that kind of printing job."

De Chirico said, "Please don't worry, I will speak to Dr. Barnes. I feel sure that he will arrange something." Indeed he did. Barnes said without question he would pay for the catalogue.

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² The 'de' of de Chirico, which was occasionally omitted in certain passages of the text in the original publication, has been added in this transcription.

The catalogue was printed. It was not to my taste. The text was pompous, but I supposed, in my situation, one shouldn't look a gift Barnes in the mouth.

Then one morning I arrived at the gallery at my usual hour of 10 o'clock. Pinned to the door was a note: "8 a.m. We have been here and the gallery is closed. – P.S. 8:30 a.m. We have come again, after some coffee. Still closed. What kind of gallery is this. How do you expect to do business if you are not open when an important client arrives?" It was signed not only by Barnes but also by the three elderly handmaidens who paddled behind him on almost all of his excursions, taking voluminous notes of his conversations – no doubt for a future biography.

Then came the drama of hanging the pictures. Giorgio and I had spent the better part of the previous night hanging the show to our satisfaction. The next morning Dr. Barnes arrived and insisted the whole show be rehung. Arranging an exhibition was one of the few opportunities I had for personal expression. The painter, of course, was the true creator, but my function as exhibitor was to make a presentation that showed each painting to best advantage. The art of gallery installation was one in which I took great pride, and only with the utmost reluctance did I allow Dr. Barnes to change my careful composition.

Giorgio and I worked and sweated like pigs, taking down the pictures, moving them around, holding them up for the doctor's inspection, down and up again, arranged and rearranged again and, finally, hung. To my intense amusement, they now hung in precisely the same order that Giorgio and I had originally placed them. Then came the matter of price. The evening before, Giorgio and I had determined on prices which satisfied Giorgio and I also felt to be in a salable range. Dr. Barnes hit the ceiling. "Impossible! Preposterous! Incredible! Why these low, measly prices undercut the value of my whole de Chirico collection. These are very, very valuable pictures. My dear gentlemen, I own many de Chiricos and I value them highly. I insist on raising all these prices tenfold. Ten times as much, ten times!" He took out a pencil and changed everyone.

De Chirico took hold of my arm; soothing me and whispering, "We can always change back later when the doctor isn't here, but, of course, you will have to tell your assistant that if the doctor runs in again he must be shown *his* revised prices, and *not* ours."

Sure enough, at the opening Dr. Barnes came again and said, "Before you sell a single picture I want, to reserve ... I want to buy, this one, and this, and this ... these five. How much are they?"

Very carefully I substituted the prices which Barnes had given us. He threw up his hands and shouted, "Absurd! Far too expensive. I'm taking quite a few, the least you could do is give me a fifty percent discount. I will pay only half that." I quickly agreed to his terms. We were all well satisfied.

Some time after this I told Giorgio how highly I prized his only published novel, *Hebdomeros*. My sincerity must have been apparent, for he was pleased and became even more docile and friendly. He offered to show me the manuscript of his new book, *Monsieur Dudron*, suggesting that perhaps I might arrange for its publication. A few days later de Chirico handed me the carefully folded manuscript with shaking fingers and indicated that I was the first to read it. I read:

MONSIEUR DUDRON
Giorgio de Chirico

“Mysterious Life!” thinks Monsieur Dudron. “Life that begins again every morning.” He gets up, yawns, lights the lamp which is always by the bed, glances toward the floor near the door to see if anyone has slipped a letter for him beneath the door, then lights his pipe and continues to think aloud: “I am returned by tortuous ways not free, alas, of brambles, stones, and thorns. I am returned to that study of Life which I had abandoned years ago. I had become interested in sandy shores, those beaches which give contour to the seas, because I believed their shapes suggest most numerous, varied and deeply interesting problems. Only, there it is, one must consider Life. So that you are not devoured, or at least that you are not annoyed, so that your thoughts remain natural, one should not employ too bright a light. Often the exigencies of Life are in opposition to those of the sphere in which one wishes to act, work, think, and create. One must take only a special and precise dose of the sources from which one derives inspiration. I have known the joy of discovery and also the bitterness of deceptions. And I remember very well that winter’s day, bright and distant; an immense lassitude weighed upon me; the horizon of an inconceivable purity gleamed with the radiance of eternity and in the harbor the shadows of masts and smokestacks were immeasurably prolonged upon the quay. Aboard the ship of my thoughts I set sail upon a chimeric voyage, following an ideal itinerary I had outlined for myself.”

So Monsieur Dudron talks to himself, and meanwhile that fear, accompanied by a slight feeling of stomach ache which had plagued him until now, disappears little by little, as a fog brewed in the night is dissipated by the golden warmth of a springtime sun. In place of the fear he feels rising within him a sense of complete security, the security of the well-shaved man, well-shod and well-dressed, who taps the buttoned inside pocket of his jacket where he feels the thickness of his pocketbook, well-furnished with bills of large denomination and negotiable cheques, his identification papers and passport all in order, who added to this, knows that in other pockets of his suit there is everything that is necessary for a prudent man of sound body and mind when he is about to leave his dwelling to adventure in that forest so mysterious and pregnant with surprises that is a big modern city, which is to say: fountain pen, address and note books, penknife, a wooden cylinder containing tincture of iodine, a small roll of sticking plaster, a box of at least six aspirin or pyramidon tablets, watch and compass, tobacco pouch, pipe and matches...

Giorgio de Chirico was of a soft, beautiful ugliness like the violet mole on the face of an Italian fishwife. His deep, purple-ringed eyes certainly had none of the confidence of one who possessed “bills of large denomination and negotiable cheques.” You might, however, detect a velvet longing for some sense of complete security, at least the identification papers, all in order, of the “prudent man of sound body and mind.” And I am sure his pockets contained double the recommended supplies of pyramidon and iodine. His anxiety to reenter life and fear of confronting reality were both obvious.

I helped him find lodging in New York, and suggested a list of restaurants: Barbetta’s, Lindy’s, Billy the Oysterman. To all these he preferred the Automat, like every other Italian painter I have known. I have never learned why, for it isn’t the machinery that they like. “It has excellent food,” they always say.

“Come out with me tonight,” I suggested one day, as he was quite evidently disposed to go exploring. Chick Austin was in town and we asked him to join us, for he had been wishing to meet

Giorgio. A native, I am fond of visiting New York with foreigners, as if the city were some adored mistress whose points acquired brilliance when noticed and praised by each new admirer.

Dalí in particular was always gratifying. He inevitably saw more than one thought there was to be seen. He would flay my city alive, rearrange her limbs, serve her up to me with new sauce and relish, whereas Fernand Leger was the only visitor who ever really disconcerted me, because he liked *everything*. I would point out for Leger the lights of Broadway, “but we won’t stop because there is no show that we want to see tonight.” “That’s Radio City,” I would say. “Fifth Avenue.” “Central Park.” He liked them all along with, I suppose, the Brooklyn Bridge and Grant’s Tomb. He was delighted with any skyscraper, or an automobile salesroom with a motor in a glass case, any bathroom display or central heating system, electric, construction, chemistry, or aviation exhibit, any advertising billboard. I think he believed all the advertisements.

That night with de Chirico, Chick had his car and I wished to drive to a certain spot where there was a curious juxtaposition of electricity and moonlight. The moon was throwing shadows more ambiguous than those poignant and unnatural shadows in de Chirico’s own canvases, his empty arcades with the haunting shadows which seem to fall toward the light. We drove to the ghetto of New York, under the elevated trestles on Third Avenue near Grand Central Station, past those tiers of composite housing which remind one of excavated levels from past civilizations that, in other countries, are fanned out along the hillsides like cards in a conjuror’s hand. In New York, the fan is pressed together into vertical packs of which only the edges show. I wondered aloud with Chick why rich Jews did not move into this quarter, so picturesque and attractive and it could be comfortable if provided with those modern utilities that the Strausses and Warburgs could so well afford. I chanced to notice the sudden, sharp contraction of Giorgio’s eyes, and as we went over some rough asphalt, the trembling of his jowls, which were now melancholy and loose. I did not at that time realize how closely our conversation had approached one of what might be called Giorgio’s ‘brushwood piles’.

I remember in Kipling’s story that all Georgie’s dreams began in the same way: “There was the same starting-off-place—a pile of brushwood stacked somewhere near a beach... to the right lay the sea, sometimes at full tide, sometimes withdrawn to the very horizon; but he, knew it for the same sea. By that road he would travel over a swell of rising ground covered with short, withered grass, into valleys of wonder and unreason.” Kipling’s Georgie could always find his way back to the lamp-post which marked the end of his dream and led him into day. But our Giorgio was never sure of his return; as I was to discover with detailed proof. The sign of the entrance to his special dreams, not just his nightly dreams but that landscape which began with the brushwood pile, had become a symbol to him of terror and remorse. So far he had always come back, but only by accident and after dreams that were of more than usual length. Someday he might not return. The brushwood pile was a sign of an unpredictable adventure and of such he was wary, if not frightened.

He was clutching Chick’s arm, asking him to turn back, for he realized we had inexplicably lost our way. We were now headed uptown while we wished to continue downtown. In the middle of traffic Chick reversed direction to please de Chirico. It seemed to me that the word ‘Jew’ had triggered his brushwood pile. I had a fantasy that Giorgio once wondered if he were a Jew and imagined what *might* his life be like in such circumstances. Thereafter, thinking himself persecuted, he

might have protested that he was *not* a Jew and did not deserve persecution. But he would likely have then reproached himself to the effect that it was undignified to deny one's race in adversity and persecution, so bravely *admit* his Judaism and to resolve to suffer if necessary. But secretly he would begin to wish he had *never* been born a Jew. It would be only by the greatest good luck that, one day, he might be reminded that he had *not* been born a Jew, nor had any of his forebears.

The car was stopped by a traffic policeman near Brooklyn Bridge, and Chick was asked to dim his headlights. De Chirico begged us to be submissive and polite to 'the official'. He recalled for us how he had once submitted to an enforced vaccination and how at first he had objected, but later he decided to be discreet, and that the officials then reacted favorably and mitigated their brutality. They allowed him to undergo the operation in a friendly house where he could be sure the instruments were clean and where other friends of his were always nearby, downstairs drinking cocktails. It was possible that the authorities might use a large, old-fashioned, and rusty syringe, and press the needle of it sharply into the corner of his eye. This time, fortunately, they chose a small and gleaming modern needle, asked him only to roll up the sleeve of his left arm and inoculated him. "It was better that way," asserted de Chirico. "It might have been so much worse," he explained, "careless and ruthless!"

Several clouds passed across the moon and the stars reddened for a moment as if the evening were smoldering. We began to feel festive, and when we passed a burlesque theater on the Bowery, we parked and went in. We heard that burlesque might be forbidden soon, and were glad of the opportunity to see one more show. With a burst of music the girls filed on stage in all their brazen diseases, and de Chirico, in a flash, disappeared. We waited for him awhile, and watched, then I began to think that I should look for him. I found him outside, and he refused to return inside. We went on toward Sands Street near the Brooklyn Bridge. I hate the Brooklyn Bridge. Like the Statue of Liberty, it has been degraded, lost its dignity, seems like a plastic souvenir. In Sands Street there is a bar, or was a bar, with murals by a primitive Sunday painter of Italianate name and mysterious de Chirico technique. We ordered beer and drank it while the belligerent barman told us that if we didn't remove our madman friend (Giorgio) who was staring furiously at the murals, he would have to remove one or the other himself. I wanted to buy those murals, would have bought them, or at least have learned the painter's name had I been sober. He was my candidate for the laurels of Customs Inspector Rousseau. When next I visited Sands Street, the murals were gone, and in their place was a creamed stucco wall pallid as disagreeable cheese. That night I was confused (too much beer) concerning everyone's actions and reactions. What de Chirico was really like became clear later at one of the sailor's dance halls where we wound up the evening. The lights were painful, the music was tortured, and the dancers threw themselves about in a kind of agony that was neither pleasurable nor simulated. Giorgio was really frightened. Chick and I were having fun; de Chirico, for a moment I understood, really saw *things as they were*. Dalí used to say that the only difference between himself and a madman was that he was not mad. De Chirico might well say that the only difference between himself and a sane man was that he was not sane.

We brought de Chirico back home. I think that is what he always really wanted, someone to bring him home. I doubt that he ever found that someone. After that adventurous evening, we were fond of

each other. He was no longer simply a member of my gallery, an artist and sometime antagonist, but a lovable man walking in destruction and tinged with grandeur, commanding at once both sympathy and admiration. We agreed to respect each other in the affectionate equilibrium of a shared experience.

He asked to borrow my copy of *Hebdomeros* overnight, and returned it with a dedication and a drawing on the end paper. I wish I could feel that the drawing matched the quality of the book in my eyes. The de Chirico of 1936 was a different man from the author of *Hebdomeros*, and the painter of 1936 also drastically altered from the de Chirico who had conceived his earlier work, terminated some time before the writing of his book. My drawing showed four men in classic robes seated on fragments of a column engaged in some discussion. In the background is a Grecian temple, drawn in grayish ink – nothing more.

I dream of countless passages in the book which have remained with me:

The pure heavens of autumn were being crossed by large white clouds of sculptural shape and in the midst of the clouds, in poses of sublime majesty, the apteral spirits were lying; and it was at this moment that the Explorer came out on the balcony of his suburban cottage, leaving his room with its walls covered with furs and photographs representing ships black as ink against the white of the ice-floes, the explorer looked pensively at the great apteral spirits, lying on the clouds; and he thought of unhappy white bears, bewildered, clinging to drifting icebergs and his eyes filled with tears, it reminded him of his travels, camping in the snow, and the slow and painful navigation over the cold seas of the North. "Give to me thy cold seas and I will warm them in mine."

In the skies of my drawing were clouds, but of cotton wool, not sculptural. The story of de Chirico must always be quite strange, as it must be the story of whatever went on in his interior self. The process of dreaming seems to me to have a great deal to do with de Chirico and his imagery. His influence upon younger painters has been frankly admitted by both the Surrealists and the new Romantics. As early as 1914, he had written, "What I hear is worth nothing to me; there is only what my eyes see when they are open and more often when they are closed." But he had been painting his reports of a land of accurate dream since 1911. The dates of his explorations coincide significantly with those of Freud, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1913. I like to consider the domain of Dream as a new continent discovered only recently, to which Sigmund Freud and the psychologists conducted their expedition as a well-patterned scientific junket, bringing back to us, as scientists will, those irrefutable, efficiently classified geological and botanical specimens which gave to other scientists the basis for further research. But to us, the public, it gave a very dissected, dictionary impression of what the country really is like. Whereas de Chirico, on the expedition uninvited, a stowaway perhaps, was the painter and the reporter, the cameraman who popularized for us some idea, for the first time, of the mystery, the grotesque, astonishing, and enthralling atmosphere of the new continent.

I would like to believe this, but I am forced to remind myself that, unlike the New World of Columbus, this continent of Dream has always been available to mankind. Men and women have always known dreams. So what are we to say of the ancient reports of dreams that do not coin-

cide with our own? True, no critical attention had been directed to dreams until the expedition of Freud, but what is one to think of the reports of the casual traveler who has recorded his memories from time to time in literature, and whose descriptions do not at all match our own dreams? Was he, until 1911, always a colossal liar? The memory for dreams must be carefully cultivated or all details will escape, but that is not enough to explain the extraordinary discrepancy between the accounts of dreams found scattered in our literature, and the dreams we actually enjoy, every one of us, today. I think we are forced to conclude, and even Freud did not consider this enigma, that *the domain of Dream itself changes with time and an interior development which can only hold the most stimulating promise for our future vision.*

Here are three typical dreams, widely separated in time, one from the Bible, one from the nineteenth century, one from the notebooks of Dr. Freud:

...behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of

Abraham thy father...

- JACOB

Bottomless vales and boundless floods, and chasms, and caves, and Titan woods, with forms that no man can discover for the dews that drip all over; mountains toppling evermore into seas without a shore; seas that restlessly aspire, surging, unto skies of fire...

- EDGAR ALLAN POE

A great hall – many guests whom we are receiving – among them Irma, whom I immediately take aside, as though to answer her letter, to reproach her for not yet accepting the ‘solution’. I say to her: “If you still have pains, it is really only your own fault.” She answers: “If you only knew what pains I now have in the neck and abdomen; I am drawn together.” I am frightened and look at her. She looks pale and bloated; I think that after all I must be overlooking some organic affection. I take her to the window and look into her throat. She shows some resistance to this, like a woman who has a false set of teeth. I think anyway she doesn’t need them. The mouth opens then really without difficulty and I find a large white spot to the right, and at another place I see extended grayish-white scabs attached to curious curling formations...

- SIGMUND FREUD

To the dream of Freud I would add any passage from de Chirico’s *Hebdomeros*. I like to believe both men’s minds demonstrate the qualitative difference in Dream over a period of time. I will not attempt to prove the point either with logic or research. By now the reader is surely aware of my abhorrence of the murderously selective scalpel that is logic and my fondness for the qualitative array of potential that is intuition. There is only one correct ugly answer to a sum; there is an infinity of beautiful possible mistakes. And to the dreams of Freud and de Chirico, one might also add the visions of Franz Kafka.

From these few examples, I hope it is evident that dream content has gone through an appreciable evolution since the nights of Jacob’s dream and that this is not merely a difference of descriptive

idioms. If we except the visions of the Apocalypse which are, even today, incredible as dreams, and nearer if not to the realm of revelation, at least to that of sheer invention, then the ancient dreams were conspicuously arid and inhuman. They were astronomical and oracular like the landscape of some lunar volcano peopled by prehistoric creatures. Dreams were wild and savage in the nights of Poe with natives of a different pigmentation than ours, except for wraiths of occasional white maidens who seemed elusive, unconvincing, and completely ephemeral. Today, for the first time the landscape is detailed with vegetation, there are cities and plains and a massive population in close communication with us. Freud, de Chirico, and Kafka are teaching us the intrinsic topography of this country, and we had better familiarize ourselves with as many landmarks as possible because soon those travelers may not be the only adventurers of Dream. We may *all* be living there.

The enigma of Dream is intimately related to that of death. The anguish of conflict between life and death, and between activity and contemplation, has only been assuaged in our time by intimations by Freud of the resolution of these antitheses in dream. If I could not see these stirrings of my dreams, I believe I could not see this soul of mine. We live to prepare our own subconscious for better dreams, that we may truly *rest in peace*. We grow by a series of small deaths and little slumbers that we may fully comprehend our integrations, and if a man be violently cut off either in his day or in his slumber I can suppose he will be reborn again until the pattern of his life and death be just. And there is evidence that de Chirico was gently slaughtered in a premature sleep.

Voyages into the continent of Dream during a decade, 1910-1920, monopolized more and more of de Chirico's time, by day and finally, by night as well. I believe that night made thorough encroachments upon his day, and the reason his shadows fell toward the sun was that the moon began to cast the stronger light. He became quite lost in the land of his explorations, wishing to return to diurnal reality and not infrequently missing his way. And his existence was at last precariously misestablished on an insecure basis of unreality by his first romance in Rome, the first intrusion of those ubiquitous, formidable women. De Chirico was then a Greek boy with black hair, a large nose, and smoldering eyes, trying to get on in the Bohemia of prewar Rome, where the Modernists, the Futurists under the banner of F.T. Marinetti, and the academy alike despised him. The woman who was to become his wife was in Rome, too, determined to marry the greatest artist she could find. If de Chirico was not an admired painter or even a respected painter, his virginal eyes were the first to kindle to her wiles. Then, unwilling to confess that she was wife to less than one of the greatest artists of the age, she stubbornly asserted that he was a genius. The irony was that she did not, perhaps, believe it, though in actual fact she was right.

It would seem that no one has ever been so cruelly betrayed into early greatness. In 1914, from fear of war and anxiety to avoid the draft, he hit upon a plan, so I have been told, to establish his madness and so his ineptitude at warfare by painting deliberately irrational canvases, now called his 'metaphysical' paintings and considered the best he ever made. They were the paintings which first impressed the Surrealists and left de Chirico inextricably involved with the cities and the plains of Dream. When he would return to reality later for short visits, he walked with the faltering step of a hermit who comes to town, innocent and vulnerable, once each year, to purchase some supplies. Reports began to filter in to us of these infrequent reappearances, of the empty and irrelevant self-

copies, of the 'Greek Seacoasts' and the splendid 'Percherons' turned out wholesale, like the notorious Barbizon landscapes of Corot. At first making a sign against the evil eye whenever he passed a Surrealist on the street, there came a time when de Chirico decided to reedit, in a thin and rapid technique, his earlier metaphysical masterpieces.

Then came reports of de Chirico canvases painted in the manner of Renoir, luscious women and fleshy fruits. In the *manner* of Renoir? But they were not comparable to Renoir! In a melancholic and unaggressive fashion, de Chirico was fond of his new work, and a friend who continued faithfully to call him "Maestro" impressed me deeply by remarking that even the decline of a great man is of greater interest than the mediocre successes of most people. I began to look at the 'in the manner of Renoir' canvases by Giorgio with a new eye, and exhibited several. They were then ten years old, and had gained some individuality with age. Hitherto unnoticed qualities acquire significance which observers with an unprejudiced glance are able to discern. They are provocative pictures and do not resemble anything by Renoir. When someone made the expected comment, "Why do you show those pathetic Renoir-de Chiricos?" he simply sounded, to my ears, suddenly and evidently out of touch.

Is it thinkable that there is a decay, a mysterious blight which has affected all our great during the period between two wars? The apparent defeat or the retreat of Stravinsky after the *Sacre du printemps*, or Joyce after *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot after *The Waste Land*, or, in my opinion, of Picasso after the 'Blue' and the first Cubist periods – for there are even those blasphemous ones who find in many of the later paintings of Picasso evidence of a progressive deterioration. To call this decadence is to use an epithet thoughtlessly and destructively. What are the real qualities and dangers of decay, when nature gives us such splendid annual pageants of it, with such appealing overtures as autumn foliage? Or, if in the judgment of time we are forced to say these de Chirico paintings are dead, then we must add, "Death has this also; that it openeth the gate to good fame, and extinguisheth envy."

I am describing here men of greater stature than the people who attempt to proscribe them. If de Chirico the painter is indeed dead I am content that his tormented image should haunt me and that endlessly we should visit Sands Street and I should exhibit his paintings. His tragedy is that of a man tormented by something too powerful, for there are stronger things than drink or bankruptcy or disease. There is, for example, excessive dreaming. Not every man can sustain such rapid fire alone. And what have we done, these many years, to help him? He is slaughtered in his sleep, the beautiful adolescent!