

Cercle Hermaphrodites

By

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Based on true events

Synopsis: In 1895 New York, trans man Ambrose Carlton has a plan to beat the restrictive system around him and live as himself as much as possible - to find a bride at Roland "Laureline" Reeves' infamous Cercle Hermaphroditos, a social club for "androgynes" (aka, trans women). Ambrose hopes to find a lady at the club he can legally marry, then live the life expected of them in public while pursuing the life they want in private. But finding the proper match becomes more difficult than he expected, especially after the club is raided by police and the fragile safe place Laureline has created threatens to break apart for good.

Cast:

Laureline Reeves - trans female, 38, mastermind and ringleader of the Cercle Hermaphroditos

Ambrose Carlton - trans male, mid 20s, looking to marry on his own terms

Bertram Templeton - cis male, 30s, Ambrose's brother, active mover in the banking world

Jennie June - trans female, 22, college student and aspiring author

Phyllis Angevine - trans female, 33, queen of the Rialto "androgynes"

Plum Gardner - trans female, 23, clerk by day, ingenue by night

Officer Leahy - cis male, 30's, an old hand at the beat

Officer Clark - cis male, late 20's, straight laced and by the book

A Gentleman and a Man, played by the actors playing Leahy and Clark

Setting: Rooms of the Cercle Hermaphroditos, an apartment on the upper floors of Columbia Hall, 32 Cooper Square, New York City; the ballroom below; a park bench on the Rialto
Time: Fall of 1895

Act One

SCENE ONE

The rooms of the Cercle Hermaphrodites. Stage left and center, the main parlor. Stylish, tastefully decorated, with the occasional flamboyant touch. Stage right, the kitchen. Bright and cheerful. In the parlor, LAURELINE REEVES, in an elegant yet sensible dress, arranges a table for tea, taking pleasure in precision. A knock at the door.

LAURELINE

(to the door)

Yes?

VOICE

Carlton to see Mr. Roland Reeves?

LAURELINE

Alone?

VOICE

As we'd discussed.

Laureline looks through the door's peephole, is satisfied. She opens the door to reveal AMBROSE CARLTON, wearing a bulky coat over a plain woman's dress with curls down his shoulders. Laureline ushers him into the room, and closes the door behind him.

LAURELINE

You'll pardon the excessive discretion? With a project such as this -

AMBROSE

I understand completely, Roland.

LAURELINE

Come now, (gestures to her female attire) I'm already dressed.

AMBROSE

Yes, I beg your pardon. Laureline.

He takes her hand, kisses it.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, dear. Lovely to see you.

AMBROSE

You won't mind if I (gestures to his clothing) make myself comfortable as well?

LAURELINE

The door is closed, so anything goes! One of far too many mottos here. We ought to edit more thoroughly.

Ambrose hands Laureline his coat, then quickly unbuttons his dress.

AMBROSE

I don't know. I carry several mottos myself. For instance -

He pulls down his dress and petticoats in one fluid motion - revealing a man's shirt, trousers and waistcoat underneath - then proudly steps out of the pile.

AMBROSE

Always come prepared.

He takes out a morning jacket from inside his coat, detaches the curled long hair with a flourish and is fully himself. Laureline is delighted.

LAURELINE

Marvellous! May I take your things?

AMBROSE

Will I get them back?

LAURELINE

With your taste in women's apparel, absolutely.

She hangs his clothes in the closet, bursting with dresses.

LAURELINE

Your flair for suits, however, is impeccable. Though a touch casual for later on. There's to be a masked ball downstairs, if you care to join us?

AMBROSE

A masked ball in a brothel. Sounds like hell for the billing department.

LAURELINE

They'll gladly accept cash from whatever name you choose to give them. How do you think I rent these rooms at all?

AMBROSE

Tricky business, dealing with gangsters like that.

LAURELINE

Yes. But as the scripture says, woman cannot live by fellatio alone.

AMBROSE

Well, I've clearly been going to the wrong church.

Laureline gestures him over to the table, where they sit.

LAURELINE

By which I mean that the Underworld tolerates androgynes because of what we do for men. Downstairs, we're an exotic sexual delicacy, which is all well and good so far as it goes. In certain well-endowed cases, it goes quite far indeed. But it leaves precious few moments to explore one's feminine nature in the flow of the everyday - just reading a book, or having tea -(gestures with the teapot) May I?

Ambrose nods. She pours him tea.

LAURELINE

If we are to know ourselves as whole people, we need room to do it in. And if we're ever going to be accepted by the world at large, we must show them we're whole.

AMBROSE

So this place is your solution.

LAURELINE

Yes. The Cercle Hermaphroditos. Room for us to just be.

AMBROSE

I'm on a similar quest myself. But fellows like me offer men nothing, so there's nowhere for us to go. This year, I've had two acquaintances forced into marriages so dreadful they decided ending it all was the only way out.

LAURELINE

I'm so sorry.

AMBROSE

I don't intend to end up that way. So I've devised a plan. Laureline, I've come to your wonderful club in search of a bride.

LAURELINE

From our constituency?

AMBROSE

Yes! All the clergy wants is to see a man and a woman standing in front them. Which one decides to be which behind closed doors is rather out of their jurisdiction.

LAURELINE

So in public, you'd be happy man and wife-

AMBROSE

And in private, we would be the same, but to our specifications, not theirs.

LAURELINE

And this arrangement would leave you satisfied in ... more intimate matters?

AMBROSE

When it comes to the bedroom, I'm strictly a Free Trade man. Whatever you happen to be supplied with, I have a demand for it. The ladies here, are physical men always their preferred partners?

LAURELINE

Most of us keep hunting for our own personal Adonis, but I know a few who are more flexible. Which is where I come into your plan, I suppose?

AMBROSE

What do you think of it?

LAURELINE

It's brilliant! Mathematically elegant. (pause) But not much poetry in it, is there?

AMBROSE

It's all poetry. Or do you think it would be better if Shakespeare wrote, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day AND an autumn morning AND a winter's evening AND a spring afternoon?" No, he had room in the line for ten syllables and one metaphor, and he damn well stuck with them. Poetry is great passion rendered precisely, within a particular form. And that, my dear Laureline, is exactly what I am proposing.

LAURELINE

I like that immensely. And I'll gladly introduce you to our merry band. It's the weekend, so we're guaranteed Jennie June. And Phyllis seldom misses a chance to- what do you tend to fancy in a girl, Ambrose?

AMBROSE

Ah - vivacious, yet delicate. And beauty never hurts.

LAURELINE

When you meet Phyllis, just remember: the vivacious ones don't always have settling down as their first priority. It might not even make it into the top three.

A coded knock at the door. Laureline gets up to open it.

AMBROSE

Laureline, wait. I have -

LAURELINE

We don't keep people waiting in the hall here. The less time seen by prying eyes, the better.

Ambrose sighs as Laureline opens the door to reveal JENNIE JUNE, looking quite serious in fastidious men's attire.

JENNIE

Have you read it yet?

LAURELINE

I'm quite well, thanks. And you?

JENNIE

If the dialogue you expect from me is that dull, I don't know why I want your thoughts on the book in the first place.

LAURELINE

Well, if you'd rather I keep them to myself-

Ambrose gets up to introduce himself just as Jennie whirls back around to Laureline.

JENNIE

(overacting excitement)

Dearest Laureline, so divine to see you! (embraces her with exaggerated enthusiasm and kisses her on the cheek) You don't know how dreadful it's been without you! How are you? How's the family? How's life? You look lovely. Have you done something new with your hair? I so adore your dress! You must tell me all about it! (catches her breath and reverts to her previous serious manner) Is that better?

LAURELINE

Quite. Thank you.

Jennie takes off her hat and jacket. Ambrose steps forward to assert himself. Jennie hands the hat and jacket to him, attention still riveted to Laureline.

JENNIE

(to Laureline) So what did you think?

LAURELINE

I'll collect my thoughts while you get dressed.

JENNIE

You have to collect them? Is it because my prose whisked them off to new worlds, or sent them fleeing in terror?

Laureline pushes Jennie toward the other rooms with a laugh.

LAURELINE

Go!

JENNIE

(as she exits)

All right, but I expect in-depth analysis on my return!

Laureline notices Ambrose staring at the clothes in his hands. She takes them and hangs them in the closet.

LAURELINE

I should have explained. We wait to introduce our members as their true selves here.

AMBROSE

Of course. How many do you have?

LAURELINE

About twenty, but you'll rarely see them all together. A score of ladies trying to stuff their real lives into the margins makes for odd hours.

The coded knock again. Laureline answers and ushers in PHYLLIS ANGEVINE, stunning beauty even when tamped down in male drag, which still manages to be bright and fanciful. She carries some large hat boxes.

PHYLLIS

Laureline, darling, such a joy to see your smiling face again.

LAURELINE

There are few who make me smile quite like you.

They kiss each others' cheeks.

LAURELINE

Can I help with some of those?

PHYLLIS

Hoping to sneak a peek? You'll see in good time. You're going to love them! (to Ambrose, on her way out) And I'm not sure who you are yet, but you'll love them too.

Phyllis disappears into the changing room. Laureline joins Ambrose at the table again.

AMBROSE

Something to look forward to.

LAURELINE

You're quite certain about this? There's still time to retreat while they lace their corsets.

AMBROSE

Is there a reason why I should?

LAURELINE

Gynanders and androgynes may share a common goal, but that doesn't make us natural bedfellows.

AMBROSE

Which is why I'd prefer you not mention my ... physical disposition to your friends. Not just yet.

LAURELINE

I established the Cercle as a place where the whole truth is spoken. Hiding who you are goes against -

AMBROSE

Not hiding, Laureline. Saving that information for when it is pertinent.

LAURELINE

Ambrose, really-

AMBROSE

I'm merely asking to go about my search without all the baggage of what your ladies expect gynanders to do or not do. That's all.

LAURELINE

And you'll tell them before you engage in a relationship of any kind?

AMBROSE

Of course. How else could I hope to make it permanent?

LAURELINE

All right. I'll introduce you as my friend, which you are, and let them make of you what they will. But if asked outright, I'm not going to lie for you.

AMBROSE

That's more than fair.

He holds out his hand. Laureline shakes it.

LAURELINE

When do you plan to begin?

AMBROSE

Immediately. There's someone in pursuit of me who's a good match so far as my family's concerned, which makes a small window of opportunity to secure the life I want. And I'll be damned if it closes before I've made a go of it.

LAURELINE

Well then - a toast!

Laureline grabs a small flask out of her handbag, pours into each of their teacups.

LAURELINE

To jumping through open windows.

AMBROSE

To graceful landings on the other side.

They clink their teacups together and drink. Jennie enters in a fashionable dress, a good deal less serious in her manner. Laureline and Ambrose stand up.

LAURELINE

Ah, Jennie, allow me to introduce my good friend, Ambrose Carlton. Ambrose, this is Jennie June.

Jennie offers her hand, which Ambrose takes with a small bow.

JENNIE

Bon soir, monsieur.

AMBROSE

Bon soir, mademoiselle.

JENNIE

(a nod of approval)

French. Meine sehr geliebten junge Herr, wie geht's bei Ihnen?

AMBROSE

Ganz gut.

JENNIE

German. I mio amico, siete amati da me.

AMBROSE

I'm afraid you've got me there. I never quite took to Italian.

LAURELINE

(to Jennie)

Tea? Or do you plan to test him on state capitals first?

JENNIE

Being introduced to a charming young man is always a test of some kind. Don't you agree, Mr. Carlton?

AMBROSE

Please, call me Ambrose. And I'm not certain that I do, Miss June.

JENNIE

Jennie. And you can romanticize all you like, but flirtation resembles nothing so much as a college exam, just with a more sensual session of grading at the end.

LAURELINE

I think your method of flirtation rather differs from mine.

JENNIE

Oh, it's the same for everyone. (to Ambrose, quick and matter-of-fact) Your evaluation began as soon as I came into the room. First question: Does he have manners? You stood and bowed when I entered. Two: Is he considering me as a potential beau? You subtly looked me over, then made eye contact that sparkled with expectation. Grip? Firm, yet gentle. Comparable schooling in languages? Two out of three. With extra credit for admitting what you don't know instead of bluffing. Not a bad start, though there are several subjects to go before my final determination.

LAURELINE

If there's one thing our Jennie is known for, it's the thoroughness of her oral examinations.

AMBROSE

But that makes you the teacher and me the student? I didn't enjoy that role the first time so I'd rather not try again.

JENNIE

Then what is it that you do enjoy?

AMBROSE

Dancing. I'm an absolute artist with a waltz. Which is a much better simile for flirting. Not so damned lopsided. We're in it together (takes her hand again) from the moment I take your hand into my "firm, yet gentle" grip. (pulls her into a waltz stance) Oh, we may jockey for position, but the steps are for both of us. (takes her through a few dance steps) You learn my moves, I learn yours. We respond to each other's rhythms. Or we don't.

And even if that's the case, no one's failed anything. (comes to a stop) We simply smile, bow, spot a new partner, and move on.

JENNIE

That is an excellent simile. Perhaps you should look at my manuscript as well.

AMBROSE

Yes, your book. What is it? Novel? Poetry?

JENNIE

Memoir. Of my life among the fairies.

AMBROSE

To be open about such a thing in print? It's unheard of.

JENNIE

I know. I'm quite an exceptional person.

LAURELINE

And if you don't believe her the first time, she mentions it again on page eight, and nine, and twenty-two, and -

JENNIE

So what am I supposed to do when the world paints us all as imbeciles? If it admits we exist at all?

AMBROSE

Your goal is to publish and set the world straight, then?

JENNIE

Are you mad? Even anonymously, the publisher and editor would know it's me. Perhaps I should get cards printed. "You are cordially invited to blackmail me for all I'm worth from now until I fall down and die." Does that sound like a good idea to you?

LAURELINE

That depends. What color are the invitations?