



REEKING OF INDISCRETION: MADAME X's ALLERTON

By Patrick Thomas McCarthy

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*Reeking of Indiscretion:
Madame X's Allerton*

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Cast: 2 Men 1 Woman

Robert Henry Allerton/Bob/Bobby/Father – reads actual & imagined letters to Caroline Kirkland, Madame X, John Gregg & Roger Quilter

Madame X/Caroline Kirkland/Aunt Carrie – reads her imagined correspondence to Robert Allerton and actual news stories about him

John/John Wyatt Gregg/John G./Johnny G./Son – reads imagined correspondence to Robert Allerton & Caroline Kirkland/Aunt Carrie

Synopsis

The Chicago Tribune's Madame X, society doyenne Caroline Kirkland (1865-1930) declared Robert Allerton (1873–1964) Chicago's most eligible bachelor in 1906. His personal relationship with Caroline Kirkland, and his intimate relationship with John Wyatt Gregg Allerton (1899-1986), his longtime companion, and adopted-as-an-adult son, are best imagined by inventing what their correspondence might have been. Bridging two centuries, what words might have passed between these three brightly shining stars that helped shape the course of art, landscape architecture, the future of celebrity journalism and LGBTQ issues that were only imagined in the early 20th century. An epistolary intrigue of historical truth and fiction for two men and one woman.

Staging

Similar to A. R. Gurney's Love Letters, Madame X's Allerton can be staged very simply, with the three actors sitting at the same writing table where they simply read the script. Using projections of the titles, news stories, locations, and people in the stories would certainly enhance the storytelling but is not essential.

Running Time

Timed at 91 minutes in one act (47 pages spaced in written letter format)

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[The stage is set with a writing table with 3 chairs where the three actors will read their imagined correspondence to each other. A blank wall or large screen behind the table setting for projections of the feature stories, drawings and photos that could accompany the play. Allerton sits at stage right end of table, Madame X / Caroline Kirkland sits at stage left end of table, and John Gregg will sit center between them when he appears in 1922 in the storyline]

[Madame X and Robert sit at table writing letters while the audience enters as projection of the 1906 Chicago Tribune special feature on Allerton's bachelorhood shows behind them. She begins to read...]

MADAME X

"He never goes to a manicure shop to have a rosy polish put on his fingernails; he never leads a cotillion; he never smokes monogram cigarets; he does not wear corsets. He is a plain American citizen; he leads a wholesome life; he measures up to the highest standards of vigorous, rugged manhood; he has not allowed wealth to crucify his ideals nor permitted luxury to dissipate him"

[Allerton following the Madame X article as he sits reading]

"His features are cleanly cut and his head is set firmly above muscular shoulders. He is a man of medium height, active robust, well proportioned. The qualities that combine in the makeup of his personality are qualities that go to make a man loveable – a strong character, personal fearlessness, the gentleness of strength, optimism, and just enough ideality to guide impulse, ***[He takes up fountain pen to begin writing on impulse]*** a strong sense of justice, humanity, generosity almost to a fault. He is democratic and reserved" and he loves dogs.

ROBERT

[He writes with fountain pen as he reads from the letter] Dear Caroline, or should I address you as the infamous Madame X? Really, why don't you lead your story with 'he loves dogs' then all the debutantes might think they still have a chance with me. Is it my father who has put you up to this? Trying to marry me off? Trying to make me eligible when I am a confirmed bachelor who prefers the company of men? And Madame Caroline, you don't mention at all my handicaps, how they might devalue my net worth. How ill at ease I am in most social situations when I cannot follow conversations. When others must yell at me to get my attention. How romantic that would be for some young woman to Edgar Rice Borroughs me in a quiet restaurant. Caroline, or shall I call you X from this day forward, you know you are a best of friends. I have relied on you often to be my voice at table. You could often be my hostess with

the mostest for my small, and I emphasize small, gatherings of mutual friends and artists who are well aware of my afflictions. Please refrain from this public nonsense of selling me off to the highest bidder. You know you might have married me yourself, despite our difference of age, but then you would have been accused of robbing the cradle as it were. But, in the end, you had also insisted on your confirmed solitude. Come visit the farms as soon as you are able. Perhaps Ellen Emmet, my dear old Bay, will be here and you might matchmake to your heart's content. Or the weekend next, celebrated artist Glyn Philpot might be in residence. You could make his exoticism the center of your stories rather than my reticence to, as it were, engage. Please answer by post rather than the infernal telephone machine that flashes angry red at me, that I must have a servant answer & translate as best they can. Yes, the epistolary arts are best for communication even in this modern day and age. Put pen to paper, or cable if you must, and fill my heart with the joy that only our old and continued friendship can muster.

Your devoted Robert

MADAME X

[Putting pen to paper and reading as she writes] Dearest Robert, Your father might have paid me handsomely to nudge you in the direction of producing heirs to his pork belly fortunes, if, my own father hadn't already assigned me the duties of stirring the eligible bachelor pot at the Sunday Tribune. My father really seems to understand the exigencies of selling processed wood pulp stained with purple ink. But Robert, you must know that I have only your best interests at heart. And you are a perfect man that has escaped the stockyards of contempt that surround the meatpackers, and hog butchers of the world from which you descend. Your love of the arts, gentle yet firm masculinity, and dashing figure make you the perfect catch for whomever might be catching. I will come to the Farms as soon as Labor Day weekend passes, and the social season leans into temporary stupor before opera season commences. Will you be attending in your front row seats again this season? I know you sit there for your particular reasons but really Robert, you should be seen in the boxes where people are there to be seen not so that the singers might be heard.

Yours dearly, Caroline

X-X-X-X-X

MADAME X

1907 Chicago Tribune "Matrimonial Chances"?

ROBERT

My Dearest Caroline, I know "Matrimonial Chances for Chicago Women" in the society section is not your doing this time but can you believe what they've written about me and Chicago's 1907 matrimonial holding tank in the Sunday Tribune?

Yours Aghast, Robert

P.S. Do you think the bachelor they list as 'One fellow does not care much for girls, but probably could be coaxed' is me?

MADAME X

My Poorest Robert, How could you ever think the uncoaxable was you? Everyone in Chicago knows the one fellow that does not care much for girls, and certainly could not be coaxed, is Rory Pimpleton of the Roquefort Pimpletons. Robert, at 34 years of age, you are a stockbroker, gentleman farmer, the son of a millionaire and one of the finest fellows in town, as well as probably the wealthiest. And, you are not an invalid despite your hearing loss. So naturally, in a full page spread with Gibson girls hovering with fishing poles, reeling in men from an immense birdbath, you will always be seen as the greatest catch. Robert, you are simply the best bet among the lot. One must get over one's poor self to get on. And where stands Ellen Emmet in all this? Pursue her, so the society columns do not pursue you.

Yours Earnestly, Caroline X

ROBERT

Dearest Earnest Caroline, I shall take your advice and continue my pursuit of Old Bay, our dear Ellen Emmett, by visiting her family in London on my winter excursions abroad. I'm also told, I'll be able to meet with Wilfred von Glehn for a commission at the farms, and I'm sure Henry James will be there along with John Singer Sargent, who would be my heart's delight to meet. His Madame X certainly caused a stir when it appeared, and I hope you, Miss Caroline X, live up to the legend of madams everywhere.

Yours in Duration, Robert

MADAME X

Dearest Durable Robert, Word from England has it, Henry James has taken a liking to you and was quoted as saying he 'likes Robert Allerton very much and thinks Bay is going to marry him someday'. But on the sinister side of that coin, one hears that Ellen's mother, even older Bay, is doing all in her power to prevent her from marrying you. Have you done something untoward that has poisoned the well?

Your Sinister, X

ROBERT

Dear Sinister Caroline, Perhaps, simply, she is reluctant to burden her daughter with a near deaf husband.

Your reluctant, Robert

X-X-X-X-X

ROBERT

1910 Confessions of Madame X?

MADAME X

Dearest Robert, When I joined the Tribune staff to edit a column, Medill McCormick offered me a sum that I thought was for a month. When I found out it was for the week, I knew I could never earn it, I accepted nonetheless. It caused quite a sniff when my stuff, reeking with indiscretion, appeared. A friend said: 'You'll never be invited to dinner if you go on writing for The Sunday Tribune.' I replied, 'Then I'll have to eat at home'... the dining is usually much better there.

Yours Reeking of Indiscretion, Madame X

ROBERT

Dearest X, If, no one else will feed you, I certainly shall. Come to the Farms and we can both indiscriminately reek of indiscretion together. I can't imagine a better past time for either of us.

Your Old Reeker, Robert

X-X-X-X-X

ROBERT

1910 Chicago Tribune – Cigaret No Longer "the Thing" by Madame X

MADAME X

(As if reading from her article) "It is no longer 'the thing' among the leaders of Chicago's smart set to smoke cigarets. Many of these leaders, who did it for years, have quite given it up, as they have renounced cocktails and late hours and other pleasant but harmful practices. This renunciation springs from no high moral motives. no desire to set an example, but from simple common sense, because things found bad for the health, are bad for the looks. It is not any real love for it which prompts most women to use the weed, but its association with dashing, gay society. You will not see any of

Chicago's social leaders, pulling at even the smallest, daintiest cigaret. In fact, abstemiousness in all directions is the order of the day among Chicago fashionables.

ROBERT

Dear X Marks the Spot, Next, you'll be agitating for prohibition of demon rum. Shall I lock up the wine cellar and permit no tipping amongst my guests? Shall I make my guests smoke only in the great outdoors? I think the very foundations of civilization might be shaken if it were ever to come to that. Could you even imagine asking guests not to smoke at table? In another world, possibly, and then at a distance from our now very modern times. But while we both ponder the unponderable, I present to you, dear Caroline, an ancient rhyme much in favor with anti-tobacconists; Tobacco is an Indian weed; It was the devil sowed the seed. It drains your pockets, scents your clothes, and makes a chimney of your nose. Smoke on your pipe and put that in.

Your Old Seed Sower, Robert

X-X-X-X-X

ROBERT

1910 Madame X Embarrasses Me Yet Again

MADAME X

Having just returned from my weekend at Monticello's Allerton Farms and Mr. Allerton's succulent estate, I am flooded with constant reminders that one Robert Henry Allerton is first among gentlemen farmers in making lots of money. The Farms provide him with an income sufficient to gratify his artistic and expensive tastes and a theatrical space to stage his opulent yet intimate costume masquerades. He stores an armada of costumes he has collected during his worldwide journeys. When guests arrive at the estate, Mr. Allerton invites his road weary travelers to choose a costume they may wear for the weekend. From mandarins, matadors, Japanese brides, harem girls, from togas to kimonos, from German officer uniforms to wrestling singlets, the guests are freed of their starched shirts, stiff collars and corsets. The women seem to put on more clothes and the men put on much less. I chose a Chinese bridal outfit decorated with Kingfish feathers. I was treated regally the entire weekend. My name shall always proudly be there in Robert Allerton's guestbooks. Mr. Allerton commented on my departure...

ROBERT

... 'these are a record of my life'. I have instructed the staff if the house ever catches on fire, the first thing to save are the guest books."

MADAME X

And well they should, my name is there.

ROBERT

Dearest Caroline, Aside, from the commentary on 'first among gentlemen farmers in making lots of money' this is the kind of story that more truly provides a glimpse into my life at the Farms. I live to make other people happy for the brief time they are with me. In my solitude as a gentleman farmer, art collector, landscape architect, philanthropist, patron of the arts, art lover, lover of artists, and world traveler, I need to share what I have been granted in this world. If there were only a single person with which I could share it all, I would be the world's happiest man.

Yours in solitude, Robert

X-X-X-X-X

ROBERT

1911 January 15th

MADAME X

Dear Robert, I know you are traveling abroad after your cousin Henrietta's wedding in New York, therefore I wanted to inform you if you have not seen the papers that Ellen Emmett intends to marry William Blanchard Rand at a ceremony limited to family only in May of this year. I can only imagine your disappointment in losing that which was your heart's pursuit these many years. Come back to us and begin again with those that will always love you.

Your Steadfast Caroline

ROBERT

Dear Steadfast Caroline, I did not receive your letter until I returned to the Farms in April. It was my chauffeur who broached the subject when he picked me up at the rail station. When we arrived at the Farms, he solemnly announced to the staff that it was a 'dark day' and no mention of the impending nuptials was to be made ever again. And in that spirit, I begin again, I assure you I am adjusting well, and that I am still reluctant to burden any woman with a near deaf husband.

Yours in Devastation, Robert

MADAME X

Dearly Devastated, We shall all make space for you to adjust as best you can and as best, we can. Do come to Chicago for the gaiety you can only find here, as a solace to the solitude you must endure at the faraway Farms. We shall do all in our power to make you whole again.

Your Solace, Caroline