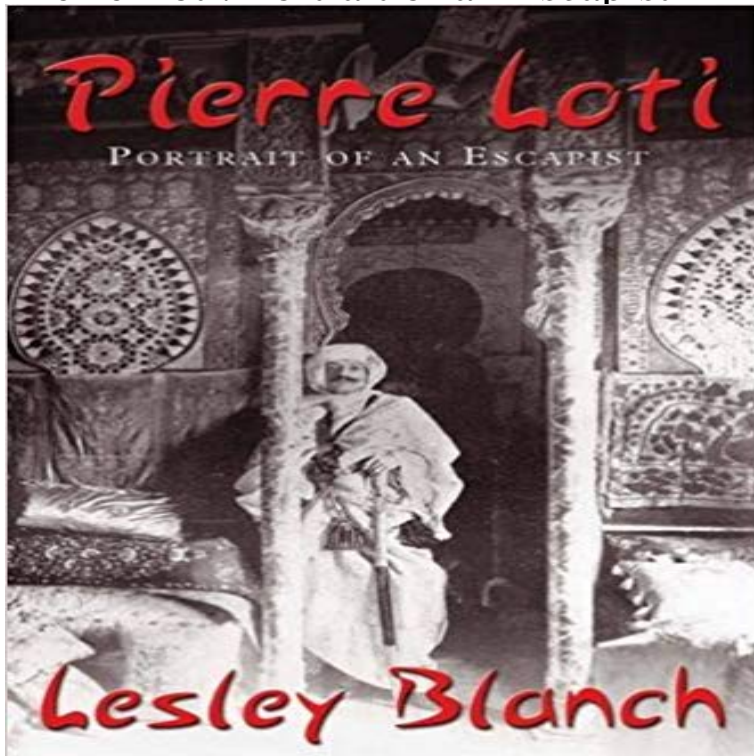


Pierre Loti: Portrait of an Escapist



Dramatic travel writer, French naval officer who wore rouge and liked to disguise himself as a Turk or a Bedu, amateur acrobat, ebullient self-dramatist and romantic: Pierre Loti was a global celebrity before the concept was even thought of. When he died in 1923, he was given a state funeral, the only French writer to have received such an honour other than Victor Hugo. An unorthodox writer, Loti's most outstanding creation was himself. His Protestant family living in Rochefort on the Atlantic Ocean fell into poverty, but his writing got them out of it. He married, but also had a second Basque family. He loved women and men with intense passion and freedom wherever he went, and immortalized Aziyade who left her harem at night to see him when he was stationed in Istanbul. As Lesley Blanch said: Its awfully easy to say of someone who wears high heels and a painted face that he was a pederast. I think Pierre Loti was everything. He loved men and he loved women and if there had been a third sex he would have loved that one too. Adored and scorned by French society in equal measure, Loti spent his life escaping the constraints of bourgeois France and in so doing redefined his age. He travelled the South Seas, Asia and the Middle East (his great obsession). Although loyal to France, by the end of his life, Loti's opposition to Imperialism was despairingly vociferous. His writings were coloured by an Eastern glow as was his whole life. NOEL PERRIN, WASHINGTON POST: Lesley Blanch has written an exceptionally good biography of an exceptionally interesting man. PHILIP MANSEL: In this haunting biography Lesley Blanch shows herself a sympathetic historian, consulting manuscript letters and diaries as well as Loti's innumerable publications. Her book is a labour of love, an enquiry into a very complex man, as well as one brilliant escapist writing about another.

GABRIELLE ANNAN, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS: What makes Loti so extraordinary and this book so enthralling is not that he was an escapist, but that he was an escapologist, getting out of scrapes and away with behaviour that would normally lead to disaster, disgrace, even death. Lesley Blanch is a most congenial biographer for this eccentric man ... She has a natural sympathy with people who live out their fantasies ... She also has the sense of humour her subject lacks, and is very funny without ever being unkind.

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