

Fascination

Guy de Maupassant

I can tell you neither the name of the country, nor the name of the man. It was a long, long way from here on a fertile and burning shore. We had been walking since the morning along the coast, with the blue sea bathed in sunlight on one side of us, and the shore covered with crops on the other. Flowers were growing quite close to the waves, those light, gentle, lulling waves. It was very warm, a soft warmth permeated with the odor of the rich, damp, fertile soil. One fancied one was inhaling germs.

I had been told, that evening, that I should meet with hospitality at the house of a Frenchman who lived in an orange grove at the end of a promontory. Who was he? I did not know. He had come there one morning ten years before, and had bought land which he planted with vines and sowed with grain. He had worked, this man, with passionate energy, with fury. Then as he went on from month to month, year to year, enlarging his boundaries, cultivating incessantly the strong virgin soil, he accumulated a fortune by his indefatigable labor.

But he kept on working, they said. Rising at daybreak, he would remain in the fields till evening, superintending everything without ceasing, tormented by one fixed idea, the insatiable desire for money, which nothing can quiet, nothing satisfy. He now appeared to be very rich. The sun was setting as I reached his house. It was situated as described, at the end of a promontory in the midst of a grove of orange trees. It was a large square house, quite plain, and overlooked the sea. As I approached, a man wearing a long beard appeared in the doorway. Having greeted him, I asked if he would give me shelter for the night. He held out his hand and said, smiling:

"Come in, monsieur, consider yourself at home."

He led me into a room, and put a man servant at my disposal with the perfect ease and familiar graciousness of a man-of-the-world. Then he left me saying:

"We will dine as soon as you are ready to come downstairs."

We took dinner, sitting opposite each other, on a terrace facing the sea. I began to talk about this rich, distant, unknown land. He smiled, as he replied carelessly:

"Yes, this country is beautiful. But no country satisfies one when they are far from the one they love."

"You regret France?"

"I regret Paris."

"Why do you not go back?"

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"Oh, I will return there."

And gradually we began to talk of French society, of the boulevards, and things Parisian. He asked me questions that showed he knew all about these things, mentioned names, all the familiar names in vaudeville known on the sidewalks.

"Whom does one see at Tortoni's now?"

"Always the same crowd, except those who died." I looked at him attentively, haunted by a vague recollection. I certainly had seen that head somewhere. But where? And when? He seemed tired, although he was vigorous; and sad, although he was determined. His long, fair beard fell on his chest. He was somewhat bald and had heavy eyebrows and a thick mustache.

The sun was sinking into the sea, turning the vapor from the earth into a fiery mist. The orange blossoms exhaled their powerful, delicious fragrance. He seemed to see nothing besides me, and gazing steadfastly he appeared to discover in the depths of my mind the far-away, beloved and well-known image of the wide, shady pavement leading from the Madeleine to the Rue Drouot.

"Do you know Boutrelle?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Has he changed much?"

"Yes, his hair is quite white."

"And La Ridamie?"

"The same as ever."

"And the women? Tell me about the women. Let's see. Do you know Suzanne Verner?"

"Yes, very much. But that is over."

"Ah! And Sophie Astier?"

"Dead."

"Poor girl. Did you--did you know--"

But he ceased abruptly: And then, in a changed voice, his face suddenly turning pale, he continued:

"No, it is best that I should not speak of that any more, it breaks my heart."

Then, as if to change the current of his thoughts he rose.

"Would you like to go in?" he said.

"Yes, I think so."

And he preceded me into the house. The downstairs rooms were enormous, bare and mournful, and had a deserted look. Plates and glasses were scattered on the tables, left there by the dark-skinned servants who wandered incessantly about this spacious dwelling.

Two rifles were banging from two nails, on the wall; and in the corners of the rooms were spades, fishing poles, dried palm leaves, every imaginable thing set down at random when people came home in the evening and ready to hand when they went out at any time, or went to work.

My host smiled as he said:

"This is the dwelling, or rather the kennel, of an exile, but my own room is cleaner. Let us go there."

As I entered I thought I was in a second-hand store, it was so full of things of all descriptions, strange things of various kinds that one felt must be souvenirs. On the walls were two pretty paintings by well-known artists, draperies, weapons, swords and pistols, and exactly in the middle, on the principal panel, a square of white satin in a gold frame.

Somewhat surprised, I approached to look at it, and perceived a hairpin fastened in the centre of the glossy satin. My host placed his hand on my shoulder.

"That," said he, "is the only thing that I look at here, and the only thing that I have seen for ten years. M. Prudhomme said: 'This sword is the most memorable day of my life.' I can say: 'This hairpin is all my life.'"

I sought for some commonplace remark, and ended by saying:

"You have suffered on account of some woman?"

He replied abruptly:

"Say, rather, that I am suffering like a wretch.

But come out on my balcony. A name rose to my lips just now which I dared not utter; for if you had said 'Dead' as you did of Sophie Astier, I should have fired a bullet into my brain, this very day."

We had gone out on the wide balcony from whence we could see two gulfs, one to the right and the other to the left, enclosed by high gray mountains. It was just twilight and the reflection of the sunset still lingered in the sky.

He continued:

"Is Jeanne de Limours still alive?"

His eyes were fastened on mine and were full of a trembling anxiety. I smiled.

"Parbleu--she is prettier than ever."

"Do you know her?" Yes."

He hesitated and then said:

"Very well?"

"No."

He took my hand.

"Tell me about her," he said.

"Why, I have nothing to tell. She is one of the most charming women, or, rather, girls, and the most admired in Paris. She leads a delightful existence and lives like a princess, that is all."

"I love her," he murmured in a tone in which he might have said "I am going to die." Then suddenly he continued:

"Ah! For three years we lived in a state of terror and delight. I almost killed her five or six times. She tried to pierce my eyes with that hairpin that you saw just now. Look, do you see that little white spot beneath my left eye? We loved each other. How can I explain that infatuation? You would not understand it."

"There must be a simple form of love, the result of the mutual impulse of two hearts and two souls. But there is also assuredly an atrocious form, that tortures one cruelly, the result of the occult blending of two unlike personalities who detest each other at the same time that they adore one another."

"In three years this woman had ruined me. I had four million francs which she squandered in her calm manner, quietly, eat them up with a gentle smile that seemed to fall from her eyes on to her lips."

"You know her? There is something irresistible about her. What is it? I do not know. Is it those gray eyes whose glance penetrates you like a gimlet and remains there like the point of an arrow? It is more likely the gentle, indifferent and fascinating smile that she wears like a mask. Her slow grace pervades you little by little; exhales from her like a perfume, from her slim figure that scarcely sways as she passes you, for she seems to glide rather than walk; from her pretty voice with its slight drawl that would seem to be the music of her smile; from her gestures, also, which are never exaggerated, but always appropriate, and intoxicate your vision with their harmony. For three years she was the only being that existed for me on the earth! How I suffered; for she deceived me as she deceived everyone! Why? For no reason; just for the pleasure of deceiving. And when I found it out, when I treated her as a common girl and a beggar, she said quietly: 'Are we married?'

"Since I have been here I have thought so much about her that at last I understand her. She is Manon Lescaut come back to life. It is Manon, who could not love without deceiving; Marion for whom love, amusement, money, are all one."

He was silent. After a few minutes he resumed:

"When I had spent my last sou on her she said simply:

"You understand, my dear boy, that I cannot live on air and weather. I love you very much, better than anyone, but I must live. Poverty and I could not keep house together."

"And if I should tell you what a horrible life I led with her! When I looked at her I would just as soon have killed her as kissed her. When I looked at her . . . I felt a furious desire to open my arms to embrace and strangle her. She had, back of her eyes, something false and intangible that made me execrate her; and that was, perhaps, the reason I loved her so well. The eternal feminine, the odious and seductive feminine, was stronger in her than in any other woman. She was full of it, overcharged, as with a venomous and intoxicating fluid. She was a woman to a greater extent than any one has ever been."

"And when I went out with her she would look at all men in such a manner that she seemed to offer herself to each in a single glance. This exasperated me, and still it attached me to her all the more. This creature in just walking along the street belonged to everyone, in spite of me, in spite of herself, by the very fact of her nature, although she had a modest, gentle carriage. Do you understand?"

"And what torture! At the theatre, at the restaurant she seemed to belong to others under my very eyes. And as soon as I left her she did belong to others."

"It is now ten years since I saw her and I love her better than ever."

Night spread over the earth. A strong perfume of orange blossoms pervaded the air. I said:

"Will you see her again?"

"Parbleu! I now have here, in land and money, seven to eight thousand francs. When I reach a million I shall sell out and go away. I shall have enough to live on with her for a year--one whole year. And then, good-bye, my life will be finished."

"But after that?" I asked.

"After that, I do not know. That will be all, I may possibly ask her to take me as a valet de chambre."

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