

Friend Patience

Guy de Maupassant

What became of Leremy?"

"He is captain in the Sixth Dragoons."

"And Pinson?"

"He's a subprefect."

"And Racollet?"

"Dead."

We were searching for other names which would remind us of the youthful faces of our younger days. Once in a while we had met some of these old comrades, bearded, bald, married, fathers of several children, and the realization of these changes had given us an unpleasant shudder, reminding us how short life is, how everything passes away, how everything changes. My friend asked me:

"And Patience, fat Patience?"

I almost, howled:

"Oh! as for him, just listen to this. Four or five years ago I was in Limoges, on a tour of inspection, and I was waiting for dinner time. I was seated before the big cafe in the Place du Theatre, just bored to death. The tradespeople were coming by twos, threes or fours, to take their absinthe or vermouth, talking all the time of their own or other people's business, laughing loudly, or lowering their voices in order to impart some important or delicate piece of news.

"I was saying to myself: 'What shall I do after dinner?' And I thought of the long evening in this provincial town, of the slow, dreary walk through unknown streets, of the impression of deadly gloom which these provincial people produce on the lonely traveller, and of the whole oppressive atmosphere of the place.

"I was thinking of all these things as I watched the little jets of gas flare up, feeling my loneliness increase with the falling shadows.

"A big, fat man sat down at the next table and called in a stentorian voice:

"'Waiter, my bitters!'

"The 'my' came out like the report of a cannon. I immediately understood that everything was his in life, and not another's; that he had his nature, by Jove, his appetite, his trousers, his everything, his, more absolutely and more completely than anyone else's. Then he

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looked round him with a satisfied air. His bitters were brought, and he ordered:

"My newspaper!"

"I wondered: 'Which newspaper can his be?' The title would certainly reveal to me his opinions, his theories, his principles, his hobbies, his weaknesses.

"The waiter brought the Temps. I was surprised. Why the Temps, a serious, sombre, doctrinaire, impartial sheet? I thought:

"He must be a serious man with settled and regular habits; in short, a good bourgeois.'

"He put on his gold-rimmed spectacles, leaned back before beginning to read, and once more glanced about him. He noticed me, and immediately began to stare at me in an annoying manner. I was even going to ask the reason for this attention, when he exclaimed from his seat:

"Well, by all that's holy, if this isn't Gontran Lardois.'

"I answered:

"Yes, monsieur, you are not mistaken.'

"Then he quickly rose and came toward me with hands outstretched:

"Well, old man, how are you?"

"As I did not recognize him at all I was greatly embarrassed. I stammered:

"Why-very well-and-you?"

"He began to laugh "I bet you don't recognize me.'

"No, not exactly. It seems--however--'

"He slapped me on the back:

"Come on, no joking! I am Patience, Robert Patience, your friend, your chum.'

"I recognized him. Yes, Robert Patience, my old college chum. It was he. I took his outstretched hand:

"And how are you?"

"Fine!"

"His smile was like a paean of victory.

"He asked:

"What are you doing here?"

"I explained that I was government inspector of taxes.

"He continued, pointing to my red ribbon:

"Then you have-been a success?"

"I answered:

"Fairly so. And you?"

"I am doing well!"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm in business."

"Making money?"

"Heaps. I'm very rich. But come around to lunch, to-morrow noon, 17 Rue du Coq-qui-Chante; you will see my place."

"He seemed to hesitate a second, then continued:

"Are you still the good sport that you used to be?"

"I--I hope so."

"Not married?"

"No."

"Good. And do you still love a good time and potatoes?"

"I was beginning to find him hopelessly vulgar. Nevertheless, I answered "'Yes.'"

"And pretty girls?"

"Most assuredly."

"He began to laugh good-humoredly.

"Good, good! Do you remember our first escapade, in Bordeaux, after that dinner at Routie's? What a spree!"

"I did, indeed, remember that spree; and the recollection of it cheered me up. This called to mind other pranks. He would say:

"Say, do you remember the time when we locked the proctor up in old man Latoque's cellar?"

"And he laughed and banged the table with his fist, and then he continued:

"Yes-yes-yes-and do you remember the face of the geography teacher, M. Marin, the day we set off a firecracker in the globe, just as he was haranguing about the principal volcanoes of the earth?"

"Then suddenly I asked him:

"And you, are you married?"

"He exclaimed:

"Ten years, my boy, and I have four children, remarkable youngsters; but you'll see them and their mother."

"We were talking rather loud; the people around us looked at us in surprise.

"Suddenly my friend looked at his watch, a chronometer the size of a pumpkin, and he cried:

"Thunder! I'm sorry, but I'll have to leave you; I am never free at night."

"He rose, took both my hands, shook them as though he were trying to wrench my arms from their sockets, and exclaimed:

"So long, then; till to-morrow noon!"

"So long!"

"I spent the morning working in the office of the collector-general of the Department. The chief wished me to stay to luncheon, but I told him that I had an engagement with a friend. As he had to go out, he accompanied me.

"I asked him:

"Can you tell me how I can find the Rue du Coq-qui-Chante?"

"He answered:

"Yes, it's only five minutes' walk from here. As I have nothing special to do, I will take you there."

"We started out and soon found ourselves there. It was a wide, fine- looking street, on the outskirts of the town. I looked at the houses and I noticed No. 17. It was a large house with a garden behind it. The facade, decorated with frescoes, in the Italian style, appeared to me as being in bad taste. There were goddesses holding vases, others swathed in clouds. Two stone cupids supported the number of the house.

"I said to the treasurer:

"'Here is where I am going.'

"I held my hand out to him. He made a quick, strange gesture, said nothing and shook my hand.

"I rang. A maid appeared. I asked:

"'Monsieur Patience, if you please?'

"She answered:

"'Right here, sir. Is it to monsieur that you wish to speak?'

"'Yes.'

"The hall was decorated with paintings from the brush of some local artist. Pauls and Virginias were kissing each other under palm trees bathed in a pink light. A hideous Oriental lantern was ranging from the ceiling. Several doors were concealed by bright hangings.

"But what struck me especially was the odor. It was a sickening and perfumed odor, reminding one of rice powder and the mouldy smell of a cellar. An indefinable odor in a heavy atmosphere as oppressive as that of public baths. I followed the maid up a marble stairway, covered with a green, Oriental carpet, and was ushered into a sumptuous parlor.

"Left alone, I looked about me.

"The room was richly furnished, but in the pretentious taste of a parvenu. Rather fine engravings of the last century represented women with powdered hair dressed high surprised by gentlemen in interesting positions. Another lady, lying in a large bed, was teasing with her foot a little dog, lost in the sheets. One drawing showed four feet, bodies concealed behind a curtain. The large room, surrounded by soft couches, was entirely impregnated with that enervating and insipid odor which I had already noticed. There seemed to be something suspicious about the walls, the hangings, the exaggerated luxury, everything.

"I approached the window to look into the garden. It was very big, shady, beautiful. A wide path wound round a grass plot in the midst of which was a fountain, entered a shrubbery and came out farther away. And, suddenly, yonder, in the distance, between two clumps of bushes, three women appeared. They were walking slowly, arm in arm, clad in long, white tea-gowns covered with lace. Two were blondes and the other was dark-haired. Almost

immediately they disappeared again behind the trees. I stood there entranced, delighted with this short and charming apparition, which brought to my mind a whole world of poetry. They had scarcely allowed themselves to be seen, in just the proper light, in that frame of foliage, in the midst of that mysterious, delightful park. It seemed to me that I had suddenly seen before me the great ladies of the last century, who were depicted in the engravings on the wall. And I began to think of the happy, joyous, witty and amorous times when manners were so graceful and lips so approachable.

"A deep voice made me jump. Patience had come in, beaming, and held out his hands to me.

"He looked into my eyes with the sly look which one takes when divulging secrets of love, and, with a Napoleonic gesture, he showed me his sumptuous parlor, his park, the three women, who had reappeared in the back of it, then, in a triumphant voice, where the note of pride was prominent, he said:

"And to think that I began with nothing--my wife and my sister-in-law!"

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