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in  
Waiting  
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ANDRÉ COUTEAUX

## GENTLEMAN IN WAITING

Antoine is a young man of great talents—and these, allied to his own actual inclinations, lead him to his chosen profession—idleness. Encouraged by the philosophising of a *bon viveur* grandfather, he comes to realise that there is a richer, more comfortable living to be made out of real idleness than out of some coronary-inducing executive post. His chosen profession takes him into the *beau monde* of France and thence, with increasingly bizarre adventures on the way, through most of civilised Europe.

This brilliant, wicked tale, though reminiscent of the best of Sacha Guitry, yet has qualities which suggest that the author may well carve for himself unaided a unique niche in the world of letters.



# GENTLEMAN IN WAITING

ANDRE COUTEAUX

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This is a work of fiction and any resemblance to  
persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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## I

My grandfather, a clever man, had buried his wife after six years of marriage; it never occurred to him to complain of this.

He had begotten two sons. One was killed in the war, the other in an aeroplane accident; the latter was my father.

My mother went into mourning, which became her to admiration, and two years later contrived to marry an exclusive gentleman who was not aware of my existence. I never saw her again.

But never was orphan happier than I under the tutelage of my grandfather. Retired from the Bar, where his talents, his connections and his ~~knack~~ of earning enormous fees had won him universal esteem, he still gave professional opinions from time to time, but for the most part he was occupied in administering his fortune or in doing nothing whatever. He lived in a country house with fifteen rooms, smoked Brazilian cigars, read detective stories, rode a horse, frequently bought a new car and came home late at night taking great care lest I hear him, for he believed in setting an example.

He slept little. Up very early in the morning, it was his custom to ride or walk for an hour, doing whatever he felt inclined to and then, if the morning was fine, to repair to the "temple" at the extreme end of the garden.

This "temple" was a bogus ruin in the form of a rotunda, raised to Aphrodite by an ancestor who was both a philosopher



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and a profligate. Built on a platform of earth against the outer wall of the estate and dominating the main road, it was a public monument to the misconduct of our ancestor who, because he had been cockolded under Louis XVI, had turned *sans-culotte* and so remained into the Restoration. It was there that my grandfather withdrew to savour the pristine serenity of morning. Above all things he loved the first faint glow of daylight and the tints, alternately melancholy and cheerful which first dawn then sunrise cast upon the world. As a rule he took a book with him and, as he read, ate a breakfast of fruit. Sometimes I would go and seek him there, especially when something was worrying me and I needed comforting. It happened that on one such occasion I found him deep in a law book; he was eating plums.

"You're up early," he said. "I presume you have something on your mind?"

"My baccalaureat examination which I have to sit for in a few days."

"A noble anxiety," my grandfather said. "For my part I had better things to think of at your age. Do as I did, and forget your uneasiness. I hope that you will pass your examination, but if you fail the world will not come to an end. You are now living through one of the best periods of your life. Take advantage of it. I recognise that such a course demands a good deal of money, but that is where I come in. Presently I shall give you a cheque which will enable you to sow whatever wild oats you fancy. Above all, no moderation, you have to learn how to live."

"Thank you," I said, "I will keep you informed of my exploits."

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"Capital! In that case I too shall get some fun out of it!"

And he added, hypocritically, "At my age that is always something to be thankful for."

"Why, how old are you then," I said, lightly.

"Sixty-two, but if anyone asks you, say I am fifty-five! What was I talking to you about?"

"Of the follies which, according to you, I am about to commit."

"That you should commit. For you commit hardly any and it is beginning to worry me. You will end by becoming an intellectual or a pedant, which will get you nowhere. It is charm that counts. For many years your golden hair and angelical look will be your best trumps. Desist, therefore, from tormenting yourself about your education, and turn your mind to being happy. An apprenticeship is necessary in that as in other fields, and the sooner it is served, the better. You know that we have ample means and that you are my heir. You need not, therefore, be uneasy about the future. To insure yourself against possible reverses, begin at once to develop your personal charm. Believe me, you will succeed everywhere and always if you become a charming man."

My grandfather took one of the cigars which he carried in his waistcoat pockets both right and left, like a Cossack his cartridges. He cut off the end with a small silver penknife. A bird sang. I looked at this man who had been at once my father and mother, brother and best friend, and it seemed to me impossible that he would ever die. He had a clear complexion and his face was scarcely lined, his eyes were blue and his well-shaped mouth was firm. For me, to become a charming man meant trying to resemble him.

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"And how," I asked him, "does one become a charming man?"

He thought for a moment.

"There is no rule," he said, "unless, perhaps, just one; one should not work too much. Stop thinking of idleness as a fault; for it is the mother of all the virtues and not, as is sometimes claimed, of the vices. Laziness, constraining us to nothing, allows our natural virtues to burgeon and grow in a divine freedom. It is by its means, and not otherwise, that great things are accomplished. 'All that is divine is effortless'—Aeschylus was the first to say it. Yes, laziness is, in its essence, divine. It was, was it not, original sin which condemned man to get his bread in the sweat of his face? I deduce from that, firstly that man's condition before sin was idleness, and secondly that a conscientious persistence in idleness cannot but bring us closer to our original state of perfection. So true is this that the most venerable religions forbid all work on the day sacred to God. A pious Moslem abstains from work on Fridays, a Jew on Saturdays, a Christian on Sundays. It would, therefore, seem that a man can offer nothing more pleasing to the divine majesty than his own rest. And therein, unquestionably, we should seek the deepest explanation for that strange peace which we are aware of on Sunday, the only day on which the creature is conscious of doing exactly what the Creator requires of him, to wit, nothing."

This kind of discourse never failed to bewitch me. I should have liked my grandfather to continue with his dissertation, but he said no more. He had finished trimming his cigar; he replaced it in his pocket and took out another to repeat the operation. In the course of a morning he would thus prepare

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half a dozen which he would smoke in the afternoon. His blue eyes were bright with a soft and kindly light. He was meditating in silence and he seemed to be enjoying himself. I tried to lead him back to his subject.

"I understand you imperfectly," I said. "Do you not believe, then, that God is one, the same for all, and that we are all, by the same token, his children?"

"Of course—but I do not see the connection. What are you getting at?"

"At this, that by resting only on Sundays, we are making a distinction between the several faiths which God, doubtless, does not make. It seems to me that we should also honour Him on Fridays by resting with the Moslems, and on Saturdays by resting with the Jews. We should thus and at least demonstrate a universality of mind which could properly be called catholic."

My grandfather gave me a look which albeit amused was not without a gleam of admiration, of which I was very proud. Thus must the master magician have glanced, from time to time, at the sorcerer's apprentice.

"My child!" he exclaimed, joyously, "you are indeed of my blood! It now remains only for you to put these excellent theories into practice. It goes without saying that you will fail your exam., but at least your conscience will be clear. As for me, I shall this very evening write to the Pope suggesting that he require us to down tools with Islam and Israel. It will be a great step towards a unification of the faiths, the constant object, I am told, of the Holy Father's concern."

He said this in all seriousness. To hear him you might have thought that he really would write to the Pope. But I knew him well enough to realise that his seriousness was contrived.

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He had long ceased to believe in the virtues of intelligence and found his pleasure in the manipulation of paradox perhaps in the secret hope of discovering new truths by this means. He applied himself to his game with the gravity of a boy playing with a model railway.

"And who knows," he went on, "if we may not yet see idleness removed from the list of deadly sins in which, by the by, it is already placed last? Humanity will sooner or later realise that there is no happiness but in loafing. For how do you suppose a man can enjoy life if he be absorbed in work? How can he find the time to be happy, and the time to get to know and understand others, which is one of the noblest pleasures life offers us—and the first condition of intelligent charity? Take it from me, never work!"

He laughed and rose, pocketing the cigar. "Allons!" he said, "I shall walk a little before the sun gets too high. It is going to be a hot day. I hope to see you at luncheon and afterwards we might have a game of chess, if you like. Later, I have to go into town 'on business'. I shall not be in to dinner——"

With that he left me.

A few days later I failed my examination and, to console me, my grandfather took me with him to Scotland where he was going to visit a cousin, a young woman to whom we were related by our common descent from Adam. But she was ravishing, and Scotland itself so romantic that I lost no time in finding an equally agreeable kinswoman for myself.

Upon our return home, I had considerably improved my English, sat for the baccalaureat again in September, and was again ploughed. To console me, once again, my grandfather



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took me, two months later, to the winter sports in Austria, where we met more cousins. Our winter sports with them lasted until March. It was thus that my grandfather put me through my apprenticeship in happiness.

It was not until the following year that I passed my exam. Whereupon the war broke out!

Defeat followed swiftly. We were Occupied, in our case the occupation was domiciliary. Our particular Occupying Force consisted of a Prussian Lieutenant-Colonel, a distinguished jurist who enchanted my grandfather and was enchanted by him. Together, in the spirit of a game of chess, they contrived some notable strokes of jurisprudence and thereby succeeded in saving several lives. Then the Lieutenant-Colonel was sent to Dachau for having "collaborated"—probably a unique case in the whole history of that war. But he had collaborated with Frenchmen.

For his part my grandfather, having collaborated with a German, was accused of collaboration and arrested. He got himself off relatively lightly, conducting his own defence. In his plea, which became famous, he proved that he had collaborated with a collaborator, and the judges, being good friends to clarity, let him go after inflicting, for patriotic reasons, an enormous fine. This ordeal affected him deeply and he never recovered. Our estate, moreover, happened to be on the invasion route. Bombarded by accident, plundered by the Occupants, the Liberators, and the Liberated, stricken by the fine and exhausted by devaluations, we were ruined. The last time I saw our house it was nothing but a heap of masonry among a few stubs of blackened walls. At the far end of the garden the little temple to Aphrodite had been transformed at last from a bogus to a genuine ruin.

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A university don, being most opportunely appointed to a post in Peru, lent us his apartment in Paris.' No sooner were we installed in it than my grandfather, worn out, took to his bed. The little money which remained to him was used in enabling me to complete my education and in importing from Switzerland his favourite Brazilian cigars.

One morning at dawn when I took in his breakfast, he seemed to me more exhausted than usual.

"I greatly fear," he told me, "that you may be obliged to work."

I assured him that there was no question of that. He smiled; I believe he died content.

As soon as I had dried my tears I discovered that I was practically penniless. My grandfather had left me a great many good books but very little in the way of legal tender, hardly enough to last me a few months. The university professor, having returned from Peru, firmly insisted on re-occupying his apartment. I had moved into a small hotel in the rue de Vangirard, where my books occupied one half of an attic and myself the other half. I spent the greater part of my time walking about, and thus gained a knowledge of Paris and its environs—Versailles, Fontainebleau, Chartres, etc. Every day I congratulated myself on a total want of obligations which enabled me to take full advantage of everything and of nothing, of cathedrals, parks, scenery and the behaviour of people in the streets. When it rained I took to my bed and, plunged in a book, modestly expended my time in perfecting a culture which was already extensive.

Sometimes, of an evening, I would drink a glass of something at one of the fashionable cafés. There I was not long in making several acquaintances, young men and women without regular occupations and who seemed, like me, to have a taste for doing nothing. To begin with I felt very much at ease in their company. There was something so profoundly human in their refusal of all rational activity, that no man of feeling could have remained unmoved by it. And I was all the more

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touched by it in that I long believed myself to resemble them: they, too, lived in a state of, as it were, incredulous surprise. Was it possible that, in this perilous world into which they had not asked to be born, nothing had been prearranged to ensure their subsistence? Finding in themselves no taste for the world in question, they could not conceive of having to pay, in effort, for the doubtful privilege of living in it. I was in the same difficulty.

Their principal interest was in the redistribution of wealth. It was, obviously, mine too. But the coincidence of our views went no further. According to them this redistribution could not take place without a mass movement which they awaited impatiently. Thus does a straw dropped on the road wait for a gust of wind to blow it into the stream whose current will at least carry it somewhere. For my part I should have preferred an immediate redistribution brought about, if necessary, by myself. But this notion seemed to them chimerical. They had made up their minds once and for all to call any personal initiative whatsoever an "isolated" action, and as such destined to failure, hence pointless and even pernicious. This point of view manifestly enabled them to avoid ever having to come to a decision about anything at all. Their distrust of any "isolated" act went to such lengths that some of them refused to take even the simplest initiative, such as going to the barber's, for instance, or even washing their faces. All this served to enlighten me as to their real nature: these idlers were, fundamentally, no better than *amorphous*. The true laziness, of which my grandfather had talked to me, must, surely, be something quite different, and to begin with a definite attitude to life. It must be sufficient unto itself and it must draw, from its own force