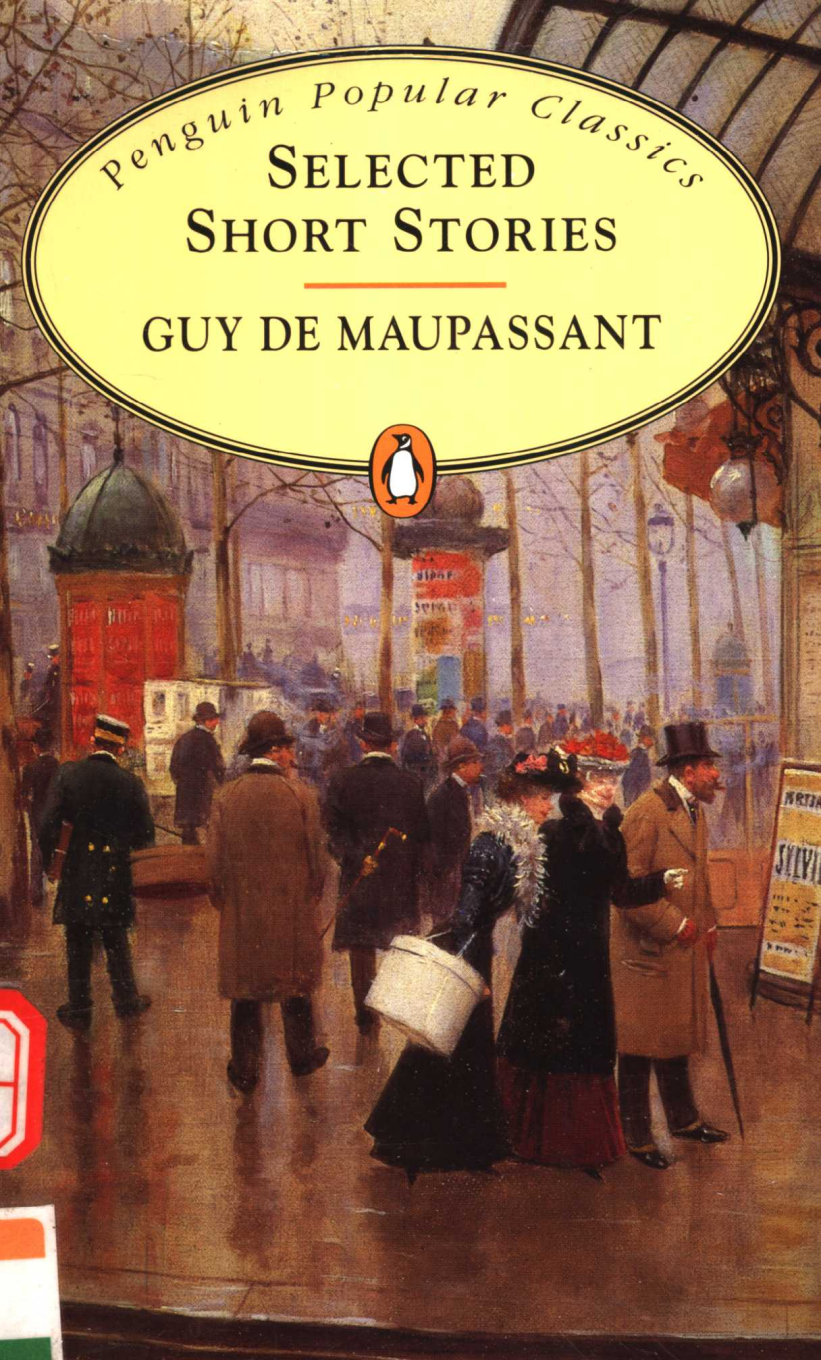


Penguin Popular Classics

SELECTED
SHORT STORIES

GUY DE MAUPASSANT



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STORIES

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN POPULAR CLASSICS

SELECTED SHORT STORIES

BY GUY DE MAUPASSANT

GUY DE MAUPASSANT (1850-1893). A prolific and notable French writer, Maupassant is best remembered for his wide-ranging, original and satirical short stories.

Guy de Maupassant was born in Normandy in 1850. After his parents separated he stayed with his mother, who was a close friend of Gustav Flaubert. He served in the army from 1870 to 1871 and then became a Government office clerk, a job which he performed conscientiously, but for which he never showed much enthusiasm or ambition. He was more interested in outdoor sports, such as boating, fishing and shooting, and in writing, under the guidance of Flaubert. He was thus introduced into literary circles, where he met Emile Zola, who, among other writers, formed the *groupe naturaliste* in 1880. Maupassant contributed to their collection of short stories, *Les Soirées de Médan*, with his own *Boule de suif*, which made him a huge success virtually overnight. He left the Civil Service in 1882 and devoted the rest of his life to literature. He wrote over 300 short stories, which were extraordinary for the time. Pessimistic, nihilistic and sadly disillusioned, his writing greatly reflected his dissatisfaction with the world. However, there was also a positive response to life in his stories, as he presented vivid and charming images of the countryside, complete with the joys of rowing and fishing, although these scenes never quite achieved an idyllic state. In addition to the stories he wrote six novels, the best known being *A Woman's Life* (1883), *Bel-Ami* (1885) and *Pierre and Jean* (1887). Maupassant's last ten years proved to be prodigiously fruitful and earned him much money, which he spent extravagantly on his luxuriant and salacious lifestyle. A notorious womanizer, he suffered as a result from mental disorders, which were syphilitic in origin. This strain, combined with overwork, eventually led to his ruin and from 1890 his reason began to fail. An abortive suicide attempt in December 1891 was followed

by eighteen months in a mental home in Paris, where he died in 1893.

Guy de Maupassant's *Selected Short Stories* contains all his best-loved works. They vary in style, locale and the message conveyed, with *Boule de Suif*, which tells of a prostitute from Rouen; *A Vendetta*, the story of a mother's revenge; and a light-hearted, comic tale about *Madame Husson's May King*.

CONTENTS

BOULE DE SUIF	13
THE MINUET	58
MADAME HUSSON'S MAY KING	63
A VENDETTA	83
A DEAL	89
THE MODEL	96
THE OLIVE GROVE	104
ROSE	134
AT SEA	141
THE CAPTURE OF WALTER SCHNAFFS	147
THE PIECE OF STRING	156
HIS CONFESSION	165
TWO FRIENDS	173
THE DEVIL	181
THE DOWRY	190
A NIGHT OUT	197
MADAME TELLIER'S ESTABLISHMENT	208

原书缺页

原书缺页

原书缺页

原书缺页

原书缺页

原书缺页

BOULE DE SUIF

FOR several days in succession remnants of a defeated army had been passing through the town. They were not disciplined units, but hordes of stragglers. The men were unshaven and unwashed, their uniforms were in rags and they slouched along without colours or order. All seemed dazed and exhausted, marching mechanically, beyond thinking or planning, and collapsing from fatigue whenever they stopped. The reservists in particular, men of peace, who had lived quietly on their private means, were staggering under the weight of their rifles; there were the excitable militia-men, whose morale was easily lowered and as easily raised, as quick to attack as to run away. Mixed up with them came a few red-coats, the remains of a regular division that had been cut up in a big battle; gunners in their dark uniform marched alongside all these different infantrymen; and here and there appeared the polished helmet of a dragoon, whose heavy step had difficulty in keeping up with the brisker pace of the men of the line.

Guerrilla units with high-sounding names, the Death or Glory Boys, the Diehards, the Legion of Death, passed through, looking like brigands.

Their officers, ex-drapers or corn-merchants and men who had sold lard or soap, were soldiers only by force of circumstances; chosen to command owing to the length of their bank-balances or of their moustaches, armed to the teeth, wearing the red flannel waist-band of their rank and plastered with stripes, they spoke in loud confident voices, discussing strategy and boasting loudly that only they stood between France and destruction. But they were often afraid of their men, thorough-paced scoundrels,

often amazingly brave but given to looting and all kinds of excesses.

People said that the Prussians would soon be in Rouen.

The National Guard, who for the last two months had been patrolling the neighbouring woods with extreme caution, sometimes shooting their own sentries and preparing for action whenever a rabbit moved in the undergrowth, had gone home. Their arms, their uniforms, all the panoply of war, with which they had recently been terrorizing every mile-stone on the main roads for ten miles round, had suddenly disappeared.

The last French soldiers had just crossed the Seine and occupied Pont-Audemer, moving through Saint-Sever and Bourg-Achard; bringing up the rear between two aides plodded the general. He was in despair, unable to do anything with this riff-raff, himself dazed by the catastrophe that had overtaken a people accustomed to victory and now hopelessly defeated in spite of their traditional bravery.

And now a deep calm, a dumb terrified foreboding had settled down upon the city. Many of the shopkeeper class, grown portly and enervated in business, awaited the conquerors anxiously, fearing that their roasting-spits or their big kitchen knives might be mistaken for arms.

Life seemed to have stopped; the shops were closed and the streets deserted. Sometimes one of the townspeople, terrified by the silence, slunk along keeping close to the walls.

The agony of waiting made everyone long for the arrival of the enemy. On the afternoon of the day following the departure of the French troops, a few uhlans, suddenly appearing from nowhere, rode rapidly through the town. A little later a dark column of men marched down St. Catherine's Hill, while two other detachments of the enemy appeared on the roads from Darnetal and Boisguillaume. The advance guards of the three bodies, arriving at exactly the same moment, met on the square in front of the Town Hall;

and along all the neighbouring streets the German army began to arrive, the cobble-stones ringing under the heavy rhythmical tread of the marching battalions.

Orders were shouted in an unintelligible guttural language outside the houses, which seemed dead and deserted, while behind the closed shutters peering eyes watched the conquerors, now masters of the town and of the lives and fortunes of its people by right of war. The townsfolk in their darkened rooms were dazed as if by some cataclysm, some devastating earthquake, against which all wisdom and all resistance is of no avail. Such a feeling is produced every time the established order of things is upset, when security is destroyed and everything hitherto protected by the laws of man or nature is suddenly at the mercy of wild unreasoning brutality. The earthquake crushing a whole people beneath collapsing houses, the river in flood which sweeps away the drowned peasantry along with the bodies of cattle and beams torn from the roofs, or the victorious army massacring all who resist and carrying off the rest as prisoners, looting by right of the sword and thanking their God with the roar of cannon—these are all scourges of the same kind which destroy belief in eternal justice and all the confidence we have learned to feel in the protection of heaven and the rationality of man.

Soon small parties were knocking at every door and then disappearing into the houses. Occupation was following invasion. It now became the duty of the conquered to show themselves accommodating to their masters.

After a short time, when the first panic had subsided, a new calm descended on the town. In many houses the Prussian officer ate at the family table. He was not infrequently a gentleman, and out of politeness expressed sympathy with France, saying how much he disliked having to take part in the war. People were grateful to him for this sentiment; moreover, one day they might need his pro-

tection. If they were nice to him, they might perhaps have fewer men to feed. And why make things unpleasant for him, when they were entirely at his mercy? This would be rashness rather than bravery. And rashness is no longer the fault of the Rouen shopkeeper, as it had been in the days of heroic defence, which had on so many occasions in the past shed glory on the city. They put forward traditional French good manners as their final justification; they reflected that politeness inside their own houses was quite permissible, provided they did not fraternize in public with enemy soldiers. In the streets they cut each other, but at home they chatted freely, and every evening the German stayed later, warming himself at the fire with the family.

Even the town gradually resumed its normal appearance. The French still mostly stayed at home, but the streets swarmed with Prussian soldiers. Moreover, the officers of the Blue Hussars, arrogantly trailing their long sabres on the pavement, did not show noticeably greater contempt for the ordinary civilian than the French Light Infantry officers, who had been drinking at the same cafés the year before.

But there was nevertheless something in the air, something subtle and mysterious, a strange unbearable atmosphere like some penetrating smell, which one could only call the smell of invasion. It filled private houses and public places alike, affected the taste of food, and made everyone feel as though he was in a foreign country, far from home, among dangerous and savage tribes.

The conquerors demanded money, a great deal of money; the population was always having to pay. It is true they were rich; but the richer a Normandy shopkeeper becomes, the more any sacrifice hurts, and the less he likes to see any fraction of his wealth passing into other hands.

Nevertheless, six or eight miles below the city downstream in the direction of Croisset, Dieppeville or Bissart, barges or fishermen often brought up from the river bottom