

*The Best
Short Stories of*
**GUY
DE MAUPASSANT**



Introduction by Raymond R. Canon

THE
Best Short Stories
OF
Guy de Maupassant
GUY DE MAUPASSANT

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GUY DE MAUPASSANT

INTRODUCTION

The name of Guy de Maupassant has become synonymous with short story writing at its very best. Few writers in any language have rivalled him, and none has surpassed him. Maupassant was able to maintain a high level of excellence in all his works. Thus his reputation has a firm and wide base, for he was a prolific author and produced over three hundred short stories in slightly more than one decade. Most of those who have read Maupassant remember only those stories that have become standard fare for the high school anthology. Presented here is a wider sampling of Maupassant's incomparable art.

Guy de Maupassant was born in Normandy, France, in 1850. His parents separated when he was about six and he went to live with his mother on her country estate. At age thirteen, he was sent to a Catholic school, but was expelled. He continued his education at a school in Rouen and there won a prize for one of his poems. Thus his writing began at an early age. Outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War (1870) created a temporary pause in his literary career, but, after the war, he went to Paris to seek a civil service job,

which he hoped would leave him time free to write. It was in Paris that Maupassant came under the tutelage of one of the masters of French prose, Gustave Flaubert. [Flaubert had a personal interest in Guy because Maupassant's mother was the sister of one of Flaubert's best friends and the same friend was married to Maupassant's paternal aunt.] In Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant had a stern critic and an insightful one from whom he was able to learn much. Flaubert was also instrumental in introducing Maupassant to the great literary figures of the day: Turgenev, Zola, Daudet and Goncourt, to name a few. Only a few of the writings which Maupassant did for Flaubert are still available, but they give a definite indication of good things to come.

Besides his writing, Maupassant found time to devote himself to rowing. According to popular story, he is reputed to have rowed as many as fifty miles in one day. His other interest was women and he became the center figure in many whispered tales of conquest. It was at this time in his life that the first hint appeared of his later bouts with serious illness. He complained of various illnesses and spent much time in doctor's offices. The tragic truth was that Maupassant had contracted syphilis. He went to take the cure at various thermal baths, but there was no absolute remedy for the disease at that time. The best that could be hoped for was that the disease would enter into a period of remission from time to time before continuing on its deadly course.

It is understandable that a man such as Maupassant would find life in the civil service restricting, although he did find material for many stories while working as a clerk. But he turned more and more away from the office work and toward a full-time literary career. His short story "Ball-of-Fat" was accepted for publication in a volume of short stories prepared by Zola and his circle. The story is of a prostitute traveling across Normandy during its occupation by German soldiers. Her companions in the stagecoach are respectable citizens of Rouen who don't want to muddle their own moral purity by mixing with one of her kind. They remain painfully aloof until it becomes obvious that the prostitute is the only one who is carrying any food. In this story Maupassant makes full use of his talent. His feelings are not difficult to discern.

He has nothing but contempt for the "solid citizens" of Rouen, nor has he any illusions about the nature of war. The story illustrates well Maupassant's ability to draw the reader into his stories. The reader experiences a definite sense of uneasiness as the plot unfolds. The uneasiness is created by our recognition of the truth of Maupassant's point—that society professes one set of values, but practices quite another. The only characters who emerge morally unscathed are the humble whose common sense and basic values keep them from the corruption of hypocrisy.

The story is representative of the later works of Maupassant, not only because of the view expressed on war, but because of the theme of appearance and reality. This was Maupassant's first great story, and the highest praise of it came from Flaubert himself, who called it "a masterpiece of writing, of comedy, and of observation."

Shortly after this first triumph, Maupassant did leave the civil service in order to spend full time on his writing. By the age of thirty-four, he had a well-established reputation. During this time, Maupassant did some of his best-known and best work, including "The Diamond Necklace," probably one of the most famous short stories in the world. The force of the ending never loses its appeal. Some critics have compared the character of Mme. Loisel to that of Emma Bovary in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, for both of their downfalls stem from their pride and social aspirations. While there is some truth in that comparison, it should not be carried too far. Maupassant's development of character is necessarily more limited for within the confines of the short story it is the simplicity and compelling quality of the plot which are of greatest importance. If one were to generalize, it might be said that the outstanding aspect of Maupassant's stories is their detached spareness in which each detail moves the reader inexorably along towards the conclusion.

Many of Maupassant's remarkable stories were written in between bouts of growing illness, for Maupassant's incurable affliction was gaining ground. He struggled to continue writing and occasionally, with tremendous will-power, he was able to produce a story which met his own exacting standards. Added to his physical and mental suffering, he had

increased trouble with publishers who frequently had the misfortune of dealing with him at some of his most depressed moments which did little to recommend Maupassant to them.

For Maupassant, the end was as tragic as for some of his protagonists. He became steadily worse, was admitted to a sanatorium, and finally failed to even recognize the friends who came to visit him. He died on July 6, 1893.

Raymond R. Canon

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BALL-OF-FAT

For many days now the fag-end of the army had been straggling through the town. They were not troops, but a disbanded horde. The beards of the men were long and filthy, their uniforms in tatters, and they advanced at an easy pace without flag or regiment. All seemed worn-out and back-broken, incapable of a thought or a resolution, marching by habit solely, and falling from fatigue as soon as they stopped. In short, they were a mobilized, pacific people, bending under the weight of the gun; some little squads on the alert, easy to take alarm and prompt in enthusiasm, ready to attack or to flee; and in the midst of them, some red breeches, the remains of a division broken up in a great battle; some somber artillery men in line with these varied kinds of foot soldiers; and, sometimes the brilliant helmet of a dragoon on foot who followed with difficulty the shortest march of the lines.

Some legions of free-shooters, under the heroic names of "Avengers of the Defeat," "Citizens of the Tomb," "Partakers of Death," passed in their turn with the air of bandits.

Their leaders were former cloth or grain merchants, ex-merchants in tallow or soap, warriors of circumstance, elected officers on account of their escutcheons and the length of their mustaches, covered with arms and with braid, speaking in constrained voices, discussing plans of campaign, and pretending to carry agonized France alone on their swaggering shoulders, but sometimes fearing their own soldiers, prison-birds, that were often brave at first and later proved to be plunderers and debauchees.

It was said that the Prussians were going to enter Rouen. The National Guard who for two months had been care-

fully reconnoitering in the neighboring woods, shooting sometimes their own sentinels, and ready for a combat whenever a little wolf stirred in the thicket, had now returned to their firesides. Their arms, their uniforms, all the murderous accoutrements with which they had lately struck fear into the national heart for three leagues in every direction, had suddenly disappeared.

The last French soldiers finally came across the Seine to reach the Audemer bridge through Saint-Sever and Bourg-Achard; and, marching behind, on foot, between two officers of ordnance, the General, in despair, unable to do anything with these incongruous tatters, himself lost in the breaking-up of a people accustomed to conquer, and disastrously beaten, in spite of his legendary bravery.

A profound calm, a frightful, silent expectancy had spread over the city. Many of the heavy citizens, emasculated by commerce, anxiously awaited the conquerors, trembling lest their roasting spits or kitchen knives be considered arms.

All life seemed stopped; shops were closed, the streets dumb. Sometimes an inhabitant, intimidated by this silence, moved rapidly along next the walls. The agony of waiting made them wish the enemy would come.

In the afternoon of the day which followed the departure of the French troops, some uhlands, coming from one knows not where, crossed the town with celerity. Then, a little later, a black mass descended the side of St. Catharine, while two other invading bands appeared by the way of Darnetal and Boisguillaume. The advance guard of the three bodies joined one another at the same moment in Hotel de Ville square and, by all the neighboring streets, the German army continued to arrive, spreading out its battalions, making the pavement resound under their hard, rhythmic step.

Some orders of the commander, in a foreign, guttural voice, reached the houses which seemed dead and deserted, while behind closed shutters, eyes were watching these victorious men, masters of the city, of fortunes, of lives, through the "rights of war." The inhabitants, shut up in their rooms, were visited with the kind of excitement that

a cataclysm, or some fatal upheaval of the earth, brings to us, against which all force is useless. For the same sensation is produced each time that the established order of things is overturned, when security no longer exists, and all that protect the laws of man and of nature find themselves at the mercy of unreasoning, ferocious brutality. The trembling of the earth crushing the houses and burying an entire people; a river overflowing its banks and carrying in its course the drowned peasants, carcasses of bees, and girders snatched from roofs, or a glorious army massacring those trying to defend themselves, leading others prisoners, pillaging in the name of the sword and thanking God to the sound of the cannon, all are alike frightful scourges which disconnect all belief in eternal justice, all the confidence that we have in the protection of Heaven and the reason of man.

Some detachments rapped at each door, then disappeared into the houses. It was occupation after invasion. Then the duty commences for the conquered to show themselves gracious toward the conquerors.

After some time, as soon as the first terror disappears, a new calm is established. In many families, the Prussian officer eats at the table. He is sometimes well bred and, through politeness, pities France, and speaks of his repugnance in taking part in this affair. One is grateful to him for this sentiment; then, one may be, some day or other, in need of his protection. By treating him well, one has, perhaps, a less number of men to feed. And why should we wound anyone on whom we are entirely dependent? To act thus would be less bravery than temerity. And temerity is no longer a fault of the commoner of Rouen, as it was at the time of the heroic defense, when their city became famous. Finally, each told himself that the highest judgment of French urbanity required that they be allowed to be polite to the strange soldier in the house, provided they did not show themselves familiar with him in public. Outside they would not make themselves known to each other, but at home they could chat freely, and the German might remain longer each evening warming his feet at their hearthstones.

The town even took on, little by little, its ordinary aspect. The French scarcely went out, but the Prussian soldiers grumbled in the streets. In short, the officers of the Blue Hussars, who dragged with arrogance their great weapons of death up and down the pavement, seemed to have no more grievous scorn for the simple citizens than the officers or the sportsmen who, the year before, drank in the same *cafés*.

There was nevertheless, something in the air, something subtle and unknown, a strange, intolerable atmosphere like a penetrating odor, the odor of invasion. It filled the dwellings and the public places, changed the taste of the food, gave the impression of being on a journey, far away, among barbarous and dangerous tribes.

The conquerors exacted money, much money. The inhabitants always paid and they were rich enough to do it. But the richer a trading Norman becomes the more he suffers at every outlay, at each part of his fortune that he sees pass from his hands into those of another.

Therefore, two or three leagues below the town, following the course of the river toward Croisset, Dieppedalle, or Biessart mariners and fishermen often picked up the swollen corpse of a German in uniform from the bottom of the river, killed by the blow of a knife, the head crushed with a stone, or perhaps thrown into the water by a push from the high bridge. The slime of the river bed buried these obscure vengeance, savage, but legitimate, unknown heroisms, mute attacks more perilous than the battles of broad day, and without the echoing sound of glory.

For hatred of the foreigner always arouses some intrepid ones, who are ready to die for an idea.

Finally, as soon as the invaders had brought the town quite under subjection with their inflexible discipline, without having been guilty of any of the horrors for which they were famous along their triumphal line of march, people began to take courage, and the need of trade put new heart into the commerce of the country. Some had large interests at Havre, which the French army occupied, and they wished to try and reach this port by going to Dieppe by land and there embarking.

They used their influence with the German soldiers with whom they had an acquaintance, and finally, an authorization of departure was obtained from the General-in-chief.

Then, a large diligence, with four horses, having been engaged for this journey, and ten persons having engaged seats in it, it was resolved to set out on Tuesday morning before daylight, in order to escape observation.

For some time before, the frost had been hardening the earth and on Monday, toward three o'clock, great black clouds coming from the north brought the snow which fell without interruption during the evening and all night.

At half past four in the morning, the travelers met in the courtyard of Hotel Normandie, where they were to take the carriage.

They were still full of sleep, and shivering with cold under their wraps. They could only see each other dimly in the obscure light, and the accumulation of heavy winter garments made them all resemble fat curates in long cassocks. Only two of the men were acquainted; a third accosted them and they chatted: "I'm going to take my wife," said one. "I too," said another. "And I," said the third. The first added: "We shall not return to Rouen, and if the Prussians approach Havre, we shall go over to England." All had the same projects, being of the same mind.

As yet the horses were not harnessed. A little lantern, carried by a stable boy, went out one door from time to time, to immediately appear at another. The feet of the horses striking the floor could be heard, although deadened by the straw and litter, and the voice of a man talking to the beasts, sometimes swearing, came from the end of the building. A light tinkling of bells announced that they were taking down the harness; this murmur soon became a clear and continuous rhythm by the movement of the animal, stopping sometimes, then breaking into a brusque shake which was accompanied by the dull stamp of a sabot upon the hard earth.

The door suddenly closed. All noise ceased. The frozen citizens were silent; they remained immovable and stiff.

A curtain of uninterrupted white flakes constantly sparkled in its descent to the ground. It effaced forms, and pow-

dered everything with a downy moss. And nothing could be heard in the great silence. The town was calm, and buried under the wintry frost, as this fall of snow, unnamable and floating, a sensation rather than a sound (trembling atoms which only seem to fill all space), came to cover the earth.

The man reappeared with his lantern, pulling at the end of a rope a sad horse which would not come willingly. He placed him against the pole, fastened the traces, walked about a long time adjusting the harness, for he had the use of but one hand, the other carrying the lantern. As he went for the second horse, he noticed the travelers, motionless, already white with snow, and said to them: "Why not get into the carriage? You will be under cover, at least."

They had evidently not thought of it, and they hastened to do so. The three men installed their wives at the back and then followed them. Then the other forms, undecided and veiled, took in their turn the last places without exchanging a word.

The floor was covered with straw, in which the feet ensconced themselves. The ladies at the back having brought little copper foot stoves, with a carbon fire, lighted them and, for some time, in low voices, enumerated the advantages of the appliances, repeating things that they had known for a long time.

Finally, the carriage was harnessed with six horses instead of four, because the traveling was very bad, and a voice called out:

"Is everybody aboard?"

And a voice within answered: "Yes."

They were off. The carriage moved slowly, slowly for a little way. The wheels were imbedded in the snow; the whole body groaned with heavy cracking sounds; the horses glistened, puffed, and smoked; and the great whip of the driver snapped without ceasing, hovering about on all sides, knotting and unrolling itself like a thin serpent, lashing brusquely some horse on the rebound, which then put forth its most violent effort.

Now the day was imperceptibly dawning. The light flakes, which one of the travelers, a Rouenese by birth, said looked like a shower of cotton, no longer fell. A faint light filtered