SELECTED STORIES BY MAUPASSANT

If he was understood and loved from the first, it was because the French soul found in him the gifts and qualities that have created its finest achievements.

—Emile Zola

Guy de Maupassant

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CLAIR DE LUNE

Abbe Marignan's martial name suited him well. He was a tall, thin priest, fanatic, excitable, yet upright. All his beliefs were fixed, never varying. He believed sincerely that he knew his God, understood His plans, desires and intentions.

When he walked with long strides along the garden walk of his little country parsonage, he would sometimes ask himself the question: "Why has God done this?" And he would dwell on this continually, putting himself in the place of God, and he almost invariably found an answer. He would never have cried out in an outburst of pious humility: "Thy ways, O Lord, are past finding out."

He said to himself: "I am the servant of God; it is right for me to know the reason of His deeds, or to guess it if I do not know it."

Everything in nature seemed to him to have been created in accordance with an admirable and absolute logic. The "whys" and "becauses" always balanced. Dawn was given to make our awakening pleasant, the days to ripen the harvest, the rains to moisten it, the evenings for preparation for slumber, and the dark nights for sleep.

The four seasons corresponded perfectly to the needs of agriculture, and no suspicion had ever come to the priest of the fact that nature has no intentions; that, on the contrary, everything which exists must conform to the hard demands of seasons, climates and matter.

But he hated woman—hated her unconsciously, and despised her by instinct. He often repeated the words of Christ: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" and he would add: "It seems as though God, Himself, were dissatisfied with this work of His." She was the tempter who led the first man astray, and who since then had ever been busy with her work of damnation, the feeble creature, dangerous and mysteriously affecting one.

And even more than their sinful bodies, he hated their loving hearts.

He had often felt their tenderness directed toward himself, and though he knew that he was invulnerable, he grew angry at this need of love that is always vibrating in them.

According to his belief, God had created woman for the sole purpose of tempting and testing man. One must not approach her without defensive precautions and fear of possible snares. She was, indeed, just like a snare, with her lips open and her arms stretched out to man.

He had no indulgence except for nuns, whom their vows had rendered inoffensive; but he was stern with them, nevertheless, because he felt that at the bottom of their fettered and humble hearts the everlasting tenderness was burning brightly—that tenderness which was shown even to him, a priest.

He felt this cursed tenderness, even in their docility, in the low tones of their voices when speaking to him, in their lowered eyes, and in their resigned tears when he reproved them roughly. And he would shake his cassock on leaving the convent doors, and walk off, lengthening his stride as though flying from danger.

He had a niece who lived with her mother in a little house near him. He was bent upon making a sister of charity of her.

She was a pretty, brainless madcap. When the abbe preached she laughed, and when he was angry with her she would give him a hug, drawing him to her heart, while he sought unconsciously to release himself from this embrace which nevertheless filled him with a sweet pleasure, awakening in his depths the sensation of paternity which slumbers in every man.

Often, when walking by her side, along the country road, he would speak to her of God, of his God. She never listened to him, but looked about her at the sky, the grass and flowers, and one could see the joy of life sparkling in her eyes. Sometimes she would dart forward to catch some flying creature, crying out as she brought it back: "Look, uncle, how pretty it is! I want to hug it!" And this desire to "hug" flies or lilac blossoms

disquieted, angered, and roused the priest, who saw, even in this, the ineradicable tenderness that is always budding in women's hearts.

Then there came a day when the sexton's wife, who kept house for Abbe Marignan, told him, with caution, that his niece had a lover.

Almost suffocated by the fearful emotion this news roused in him, he stood there, his face covered with soap, for he was in the act of shaving.

When he had sufficiently recovered to think and speak he cried: "It is not true; you lie, Melanie!"

But the peasant woman put her hand on her heart, saying: "May our Lord judge me if I lie, Monsieur le Cure! I tell you, she goes there every night when your sister has gone to bed. They meet by the river side; you have only to go there and see, between ten o'clock and midnight."

He ceased scraping his chin, and began to walk up and down impetuously, as he always did when he was in deep thought. When he began shaving again he cut himself three times from his nose to his ear.

All day long he was silent, full of anger and indignation. To his priestly hatred of this invincible love was added the exasperation of her spiritual father, of her guardian and pastor, deceived and tricked by a child, and the selfish emotion shown by parents when their daughter announces that she has chosen a husband without them.

After dinner he tried to read a little, but could not, growing more and more angry. When ten o'clock struck he seized his cane, a formidable oak stick, which he was accustomed to carry in his nocturnal walks when visiting the sick. And he smiled at the enormous club which he twirled in a threatening manner in his strong, country fist. Then he raised it suddenly and gritting his teeth, brought it down on a chair, the broken back of which fell over on the floor.

He opened the door to go out, but stopped on the sill, surprised by the splendid moonlight, of such brilliance as is seldom seen.

And, as he was gifted with an emotional nature, one such as had all those poetic dreamers, the Fathers of the Church, he felt suddenly distracted and moved by all the grand and serene beauty of this pale night.

In his little garden, all bathed in soft light, his fruit trees in a row cast on the ground the shadow of their slender branches, scarcely in full leaf, while the giant honeysuckle, clinging to the wall of his house, exhaled a delicious sweetness, filling the warm moonlit atmosphere with a kind of perfumed soul.

He began to take long breaths, drinking in the air as drunkards drink wine, and he walked along slowly, delighted, marveling, almost forgetting his niece.

As soon as he was outside of the garden, he stopped to gaze upon the plain all flooded with the caressing light, bathed in that tender, languishing charm of serene nights. At each moment was heard the short, metallic note of the cricket, and distant nightingales shook out their scattered notes—their light, vibrant music that sets one dreaming, without thinking, a music made for kisses, for the seduction of moonlight.

The abbe walked on again, his heart failing, though he knew not why. He seemed weakened, suddenly exhausted; he wanted to sit down, to rest there, to think, to admire God in His works.

Down yonder, following the undulations of the little river, a great line of poplars wound in and out. A fine mist, a white haze through which the moonbeams passed, silvering it and making it gleam, hung around and above the mountains, covering all the tortuous course of the water with a kind of light and transparent cotton.

The priest stopped once again, his soul filled with a growing and irresistible tenderness.

And a doubt, a vague feeling of disquiet came over him; he was asking one of those questions that he sometimes put to himself.

"Why did God make this? Since the night is destined for sleep, unconsciousness, repose, forgetfulness of everything, why make it more charming than day, softer than dawn or evening? And does why this seductive planet, more poetic than the sun, that seems destined, so discreet is it, to illuminate things too delicate and mysterious for the light of day, make the darkness so transparent?

"Why does not the greatest of feathered songsters sleep like the others? Why does it pour forth its voice in the mysterious night?

"Why this half-veil cast over the world? Why these tremblings of the heart, this emotion of the spirit, this enervation of the body? Why this display of enchantments that human beings do not see, since they are lying in their beds? For whom is destined this sublime spectacle, this abundance of poetry cast from heaven to earth?"

And the abbe could not understand.

But see, out there, on the edge of the meadow, under the arch of trees bathed in a shining mist, two figures are walking side by side.

The man was the taller, and held his arm about his sweetheart's neck and kissed her brow every little while. They imparted life, all at once, to the placid landscape in which they were framed as by a heavenly hand. The two seemed but a single being, the being for whom was destined this calm and silent night, and they came toward the priest as a living answer, the response his Master sent to his questionings.

He stood still, his heart beating, all upset; and it seemed to him that he saw before him some biblical scene, like the loves of Ruth and Boaz, the accomplishment of the will of the Lord, in some of those glorious stories of which the sacred books tell. The verses of the Song of Songs began to ring in his ears, the appeal of passion, all the poetry of this poem replete with tenderness.

And he said unto himself: "Perhaps God has made such nights as these to idealize the love of men."

He shrank back from this couple that still advanced with arms intertwined. Yet it was his niece. But he asked himself now if he would not be disobeying God. And does not God permit love, since He surrounds it with such visible splendor?

And he went back musing, almost ashamed, as if he had intruded into a temple where he had, no right to enter.

THEODULE SABOT'S CONFESSION

When Sabot entered the inn at Martinville it was a signal for laughter. What a rogue he was, this Sabot! There was a man who did not like priests, for instance! Oh, no, oh, no! He did not spare them, the scamp.

Sabot (Theodule), a master carpenter, represented liberal thought in Martinville. He was a tall, thin, than, with gray, cunning eyes, and thin lips, and wore his hair plastered down on his temples. When he said "our holy father, the pope" in a certain manner, everyone laughed. He made a point of working on Sunday during the hour of mass. He killed his pig each year on Monday in Holy Week in order to have enough black pudding to last till Easter, and when the priest passed by, he always said by way of a joke: "There goes one who has just swallowed his God off a salver."

The priest, a stout man and also very tall, dreaded him on account of his boastful talk which attracted followers. The Abbe Maritime was a politic man, and believed in being diplomatic. There had been a rivalry between them for ten years, a secret, intense, incessant rivalry. Sabot was municipal councillor, and they thought he would become mayor, which would inevitably mean the final overthrow of the church.

The elections were about to take place. The church party was shaking in its shoes in Martinville.

One morning the cure set out for Rouen, telling his servant that he was going to see the archbishop. He returned in two days with a joyous, triumphant air. And everyone knew the following day that the chancel of the church was going to be renovated. A sum of six hundred francs had been contributed by the archbishop out of his private fund. All the old pine pews were to be removed, and replaced by new pews made of oak. It would be a big carpentering job, and they talked about it that very evening in all the houses in the village.

Theodule Sabot was not laughing.

When he went through the village the following morning, the neighbors, friends and enemies, all asked him, jokingly:

"Are you going to do the work on the chancel of the church?"

He could find nothing to say, but he was furious, he was good and angry.

Ill-natured people added:

"It is a good piece of work; and will bring in not less than two or three hundred francs profit."

Two days later, they heard that the work of renovation had been entrusted to Celestin Chambrelan, the carpenter from Percheville. Then this was denied, and it was said that all the pews in the church were going to be changed. That would be well worth the two thousand francs that had been demanded of the church administration.

Theodule Sabot could not sleep for thinking about it. Never, in all the memory of man, had a country carpenter undertaken a similar piece of work. Then a rumor spread abroad that the cure felt very grieved that he had to give this work to a carpenter who was a stranger in the community, but that Sabot's opinions were a barrier to his being entrusted with the job.

Sabot knew it well. He called at the parsonage just as it was growing dark. The servant told him that the cure was at church. He went to the church.

Two attendants on the altar of the Virgin, two soar old maids, were decorating the altar for the month of Mary, under the direction of the priest, who stood in the middle of the chancel with his portly paunch, directing the two women who, mounted on chairs, were placing flowers around the tabernacle.

Sabot felt ill at ease in there, as though he were in the house of his greatest enemy, but the greed of gain was gnawing at his heart. He drew nearer, holding his cap in his hand, and not paying any attention to the "demoiselles de la Vierge," who remained standing startled, astonished, motionless on their chairs.

He faltered:

"Good morning, monsieur le cure."

The priest replied without looking at him, all occupied as he was with the altar:

"Good morning, Mr. Carpenter."

Sabot, nonplussed, knew not what to say next. But after a pause he remarked:

"You are making preparations?"

Abbe Maritime replied:

"Yes, we are near the month of Mary."

"Why, why," remarked Sabot and then was silent. He would have liked to retire now without saying anything, but a glance at the chancel held him back. He saw sixteen seats that had to be remade, six to the right and eight to the left, the door of the sacristy occupying the place of two. Sixteen oak seats, that would be worth at most three hundred francs, and by figuring carefully one might certainly make two hundred francs on the work if one were not clumsy.

Then he stammered out:

"I have come about the work."

The cure appeared surprised. He asked:

"What work?"

"The work to be done," murmured Sabot, in dismay.

Then the priest turned round and looking him straight in the eyes, said:

"Do you mean the repairs in the chancel of my church?"

At the tone of the abbe, Theodule Sabot felt a chill run down his back and he once more had a longing to take to his heels. However, he replied humbly:

"Why, yes, monsieur le cure."

Then the abbe folded his arms across his large stomach and, as if filled with amazement, said:

"Is it you—you—you, Sabot—who have come to ask me for this... You—the only irreligious man in my parish! Why, it would be a scandal,

a public scandal! The archbishop would give me a reprimand, perhaps transfer me."

He stopped a few seconds, for breath, and then resumed in a calmer tone: "I can understand that it pains you to see a work of such importance entrusted to a carpenter from a neighboring parish. But I cannot do otherwise, unless—but no—it is impossible—you would not consent, and unless you did, never."

Sabot now looked at the row of benches in line as far as the entrance door. Christopher, if they were going to change all those!

And he asked:

"What would you require of me? Tell me."

The priest, in a firm tone replied:

"I must have an extraordinary token of your good intentions."

"I do not say—I do not say; perhaps we might come to an understanding," faltered Sabot.

"You will have to take communion publicly at high mass next Sunday," declared the cure.

The carpenter felt he was growing pale, and without replying, he asked:

"And the benches, are they going to be renovated?"

The abbe replied with confidence:

"Yes, but later on."

Sabot resumed:

"I do not say, I do not say. I am not calling it off, I am consenting to religion, for sure. But what rubs me the wrong way is, putting it in practice; but in this case I will not be refractory."

The attendants of the Virgin, having got off their chairs had concealed themselves behind the altar; and they listened pale with emotion.

The cure, seeing he had gained the victory, became all at once very friendly, quite familiar.

"That is good, that is good. That was wisely said, and not stupid, you understand. You will see, you will see."

Sabot smiled and asked with an awkward air:

"Would it not be possible to put off this communion just a trifle?"

But the priest replied, resuming his severe expression:

"From the moment that the work is put into your hands, I want to be assured of your conversion."

Then he continued more gently:

"You will come to confession tomorrow; for I must examine you at least twice."

"Twice?" repeated Sabot.

"Yes."

The priest smiled.

"You understand perfectly that you must have a general cleaning up, a thorough cleansing. So I will expect you tomorrow."

The carpenter, much agitated, asked:

"Where do you do that?"

"Why—in the confessional."

"In—that box, over there in the corner? The fact is—is—that it does not suit me, your box."

"How is that?"

"Seeing that—seeing that I am not accustomed to that, and also I am rather hard of hearing."

The cure was very affable and said:

"Well, then! you shall come to my house and into my parlor. We will have it just the two of us, tete-a-tete. Does that suit you?"

"Yes, that is all right, that will suit me, but your box, no."

"Well, then, tomorrow after the days work, at six o'clock."

"That is understood, that is all right, that is agreed on. Tomorrow, monsieur le cure. Whoever draws back is a skunk!"

And he held out his great rough hand which the priest grasped heartily with a clap that resounded through the church.

Theodule Sabot was not easy in his mind all the following day. He had a feeling analogous to the apprehension one experiences when a tooth

has to be drawn. The thought recurred to him at every moment: "I must go to confession this evening." And his troubled mind, the mind of an atheist only half convinced, was bewildered with a confused and overwhelming dread of the divine mystery.

As soon as he had finished his work, he betook himself to the parsonage. The cure was waiting for him in the garden, reading his breviary as he walked along a little path. He appeared radiant and greeted him with a good-natured laugh.

"Well, here we are! Come in, come in, Monsieur Sabot, no one will eat you."

And Sabot preceded him into the house. He faltered:

"If you do not mind I should like to get through with this little matter at once."

The cure replied:

"I am at your service. I have my surplice here. One minute and I will listen to you."

The carpenter, so disturbed that he had not two ideas in his head, watched him as he put on the white vestment with its pleated folds. The priest beckoned to him and said:

"Kneel down on this cushion."

Sabot remained standing, ashamed of having to kneel. He stuttered:

"Is it necessary?"

But the abbe had become dignified.

"You cannot approach the penitent bench except on your knees."

And Sabot knelt down.

"Repeat the confiteor," said the priest.

"What is that?" asked Sabot.

"The confiteor. If you do not remember it, repeat after me, one by one, the words I am going to say." And the cure repeated the sacred prayer, in a slow tone, emphasizing the words which the carpenter repeated after him. Then he said:

"Now make your confession."

But Sabot was silent, not knowing where to begin. The abbe then came to his aid.

"My child, I will ask you questions, since you don't seem familiar with these things. We will take, one by one, the commandments of God. Listen to me and do not be disturbed. Speak very frankly and never fear that you may say too much.

"'One God alone, thou shalt adore,
And love him perfectly.'

"Have you ever loved anything, or anybody, as well as you loved God? Have you loved him with all your soul, all your heart, all the strength of your love?"

Sabot was perspiring with the effort of thinking. He replied:

"No. Oh, no, m'sieu le cure. I love God as much as I can. That is—yes—I love him very much. To say that I do not love my children, no—I cannot say that. To say that if I had to choose between them and God, I could not be sure. To say that if I had to lose a hundred francs for the love of God, I could not say about that. But I love him well, for sure, I love him all the same." The priest said gravely: "You must love Him more than all besides." And Sabot, meaning well, declared: "I will do what I possibly can, m'sieu le cure." The abbe resumed:

"'God's name in vain thou shalt not take
Nor swear by any other thing.'

"Did you ever swear?"

"No-oh, that, no! I never swear, never. Sometimes, in a moment of anger, I may say sacre nom de Dieu! But then, I never swear."

"That is swearing," cried the priest, and added seriously:

"Do not do it again.

"'Thy Sundays thou shalt keep
In serving God devoutly.'

"What do you do on Sunday?"

This time Sabot scratched his ear.

"Why, I serve God as best I can, m'sieu le cure. I serve him—at home. I work on Sunday."

The cure interrupted him, saying magnanimously:

"I know, you will do better in future. I will pass over the following commandments, certain that you have not transgressed the two first. We will take from the sixth to the ninth. I will resume:

"'Others' goods thou shalt not take
Nor keep what is not thine.'

"Have you ever taken in any way what belonged to another?"

But Theodule Sabot became indignant.

"Of course not, of course not! I am an honest man, m'sieu le cure, I swear it, for sure. To say that I have not sometimes charged for a few more hours of work to customers who had means, I could not say that. To say that I never add a few centimes to bills, only a few, I would not say that. But to steal, no! Oh, not that, no!"

The priest resumed severely:

"To take one single centime constitutes a theft. Do not do it again.

"'False witness thou shalt not bear,
Nor lie in any way.'

"Have you ever told a lie?"

"No, as to that, no. I am not a liar. That is my quality. To say that I have never told a big story, I would not like to say that. To say that I have never made people believe things that were not true when it was to my own

interest, I would not like to say that. But as for lying, I am not a liar."

The priest simply said:

"Watch yourself more closely." Then he continued:

"'The works of the flesh thou shalt not desire
Except in marriage only.'

"Did you ever desire, or live with, any other woman than your wife?"

Sabot exclaimed with sincerity:

"As to that, no; oh, as to that, no, m'sieu le Cure. My poor wife, deceive her! No, no! Not so much as the tip of a finger, either in thought or in act. That is the truth."

They were silent a few seconds, then, in a lower tone, as though a doubt had arisen in his mind, he resumed:

"When I go to town, to say that I never go into a house, you know, one of the licensed houses, just to laugh and talk and see something different, I could not say that. But I always pay, monsieur le cure, I always pay. From the moment you pay, without anyone seeing or knowing you, no one can get you into trouble."

The cure did not insist, and gave him absolution.

Theodule Sabot did the work on the chancel, and goes to communion every month.