GUY DE MAUPASSANT

ORIGINAL SHORT STORIES – VOLUME 04

Ги д. Мопассан

Original Short Stories – Volume 04

Мопассан Г. д.

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Содержание

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THE MORIBUND

The warm autumn sun was beating down on the farmyard. Under the grass, which had been cropped close by the cows, the earth soaked by recent rains, was soft and sank in under the feet with a soggy noise, and the apple trees, loaded with apples, were dropping their pale green fruit in the dark green grass.

Four young heifers, tied in a line, were grazing and at times looking toward the house and lowing. The fowls made a colored patch on the dung-heap before the stable, scratching, moving about and cackling, while two roosters crowed continually, digging worms for their hens, whom they were calling with a loud clucking.

The wooden gate opened and a man entered. He might have been forty years old, but he looked at least sixty, wrinkled, bent, walking slowly, impeded by the weight of heavy wooden shoes full of straw. His long arms hung down on both sides of his body. When he got near the farm a yellow cur, tied at the foot of an enormous pear tree, beside a barrel which served as his kennel, began at first to wag his tail and then to bark for joy. The man cried:

"Down, Finot!"

The dog was quiet.

A peasant woman came out of the house. Her large, flat, bony body was outlined under a long woollen jacket drawn in at the waist. A gray skirt, too short, fell to the middle of her legs, which were encased in blue stockings. She, too, wore wooden shoes, filled with straw. The white cap, turned yellow, covered a few hairs which were plastered to the scalp, and her brown, thin, ugly, toothless face had that wild, animal expression which is often to be found on the faces of the peasants.

The man asked:

"How is he gettin' along?"

The woman answered:

"The priest said it's the end – that he will never live through the night."

Both of them went into the house.

After passing through the kitchen, they entered a low, dark room, barely lighted by one window, in front of which a piece of calico was hanging. The big beams, turned brown with age and smoke, crossed the room from one side to the other, supporting the thin floor of the garret, where an army of rats ran about day and night.

The moist, lumpy earthen floor looked greasy, and, at the back of the room, the bed made an indistinct white spot. A harsh, regular noise, a difficult, hoarse, wheezing breathing, like the gurgling of water from a broken pump, came from the darkened couch where an old man, the father of the peasant woman, was dying.

The man and the woman approached the dying man and looked at him with calm, resigned eyes.

The son-in-law said:

"I guess it's all up with him this time; he will not last the night."

The woman answered:

"He's been gurglin' like that ever since midday." They were silent. The father's eyes were closed, his face was the color of the earth and so dry that it looked like wood. Through his open mouth came his harsh, rattling breath, and the gray linen sheet rose and fell with each respiration.

The son-in-law, after a long silence, said:

"There's nothing more to do; I can't help him. It's a nuisance, just the same, because the weather is good and we've got a lot of work to do."

His wife seemed annoyed at this idea. She reflected a few moments and then said:

"He won't be buried till Saturday, and that will give you all day tomorrow."

The peasant thought the matter over and answered:

"Yes, but to-morrow I'll have to invite the people to the funeral. That means five or six hours to go round to Tourville and Manetot, and to see everybody."

The woman, after meditating two or three minutes, declared:

"It isn't three o'clock yet. You could begin this evening and go all round the country to Tourville. You can just as well say that he's dead, seem' as he's as good as that now."

The man stood perplexed for a while, weighing the pros and cons of the idea. At last he declared:

"Well, I'll go!"

He was leaving the room, but came back after a minute's hesitation:

"As you haven't got anythin' to do you might shake down some apples to bake and make four dozen dumplings for those who come to the funeral, for one must have something to cheer them. You can light the fire with the wood that's under the shed. It's dry."

He left the room, went back into the kitchen, opened the cupboard, took out a six-pound loaf of bread, cut off a slice, and carefully gathered the crumbs in the palm of his hand and threw them into his mouth, so as not to lose anything. Then, with the end of his knife, he scraped out a little salt butter from the bottom of an earthen jar, spread it on his bread and began to eat slowly, as he did everything.

He recrossed the farmyard, quieted the dog, which had started barking again, went out on the road bordering on his ditch, and disappeared in the direction of Tourville.

As soon as she was alone, the woman began to work. She uncovered the meal-bin and made the dough for the dumplings. She kneaded it a long time, turning it over and over again, punching, pressing, crushing it. Finally she made a big, round, yellow-white ball, which she placed on the corner of the table.

Then she went to get her apples, and, in order not to injure the tree with a pole, she climbed up into it by a ladder. She chose the fruit with care, only taking the ripe ones, and gathering them in her apron.

A voice called from the road:

"Hey, Madame Chicot!"

She turned round. It was a neighbor, Osime Favet, the mayor, on his way to fertilize his fields, seated on the manure-wagon, with his feet hanging over the side. She turned round and answered:

"What can I do for you, Maitre Osime?"

"And how is the father?"

She cried:

"He is as good as dead. The funeral is Saturday at seven, because there's lots of work to be done."

The neighbor answered:

"So! Good luck to you! Take care of yourself."

To his kind remarks she answered:

"Thanks; the same to you."

And she continued picking apples.

When she went back to the house, she went over to look at her father, expecting to find him dead. But as soon as she reached the door she heard his monotonous, noisy rattle, and, thinking it a waste of time to go over to him, she began to prepare her dumplings. She wrapped up the fruit, one by one, in a thin layer of paste, then she lined them up on the edge of the table. When she had made forty-eight dumplings, arranged in dozens, one in front of the other, she began to think of preparing

supper, and she hung her kettle over the fire to cook potatoes, for she judged it useless to heat the oven that day, as she had all the next day in which to finish the preparations.

Her husband returned at about five. As soon as he had crossed the threshold he asked:

"Is it over?"

She answered:

"Not yet; he's still gurglin'."

They went to look at him. The old man was in exactly the same condition. His hoarse rattle, as regular as the ticking of a clock, was neither quicker nor slower. It returned every second, the tone varying a little, according as the air entered or left his chest.

His son-in-law looked at him and then said:

"He'll pass away without our noticin' it, just like a candle."

They returned to the kitchen and started to eat without saying a word. When they had swallowed their soup, they ate another piece of bread and butter. Then, as soon as the dishes were washed, they returned to the dying man.

The woman, carrying a little lamp with a smoky wick, held it in front of her father's face. If he had not been breathing, one would certainly have thought him dead.

The couple's bed was hidden in a little recess at the other end of the room. Silently they retired, put out the light, closed their eyes, and soon two unequal snores, one deep and the other shriller, accompanied the uninterrupted rattle of the dying man.

The rats ran about in the garret.

The husband awoke at the first streaks of dawn. His father-in-law was still alive. He shook his wife, worried by the tenacity of the old man.

"Say, Phemie, he don't want to quit. What would you do?"

He knew that she gave good advice.

She answered:

"You needn't be afraid; he can't live through the day. And the mayor won't stop our burying him to-morrow, because he allowed it for Maitre Renard's father, who died just during the planting season."

He was convinced by this argument, and left for the fields.

His wife baked the dumplings and then attended to her housework.

At noon the old man was not dead. The people hired for the day's work came by groups to look at him. Each one had his say. Then they left again for the fields.

At six o'clock, when the work was over, the father was still breathing. At last his son-in-law was frightened.

"What would you do now, Phemie?"

She no longer knew how to solve the problem. They went to the mayor. He promised that he would close his eyes and authorize the funeral for the following day. They also went to the health officer, who likewise promised, in order to oblige Maitre Chicot, to antedate the death certificate. The man and the woman returned, feeling more at ease.

They went to bed and to sleep, just as they did the preceding day, their sonorous breathing blending with the feeble breathing of the old man.

When they awoke, he was not yet dead.

Then they began to be frightened. They stood by their father, watching him with distrust, as though he had wished to play them a mean trick, to deceive them, to annoy them on purpose, and they were vexed at him for the time which he was making them lose.

The son-in-law asked:

"What am I goin' to do?"

She did not know. She answered:

"It certainly is annoying!"

The guests who were expected could not be notified. They decided to wait and explain the case to them.

Toward a quarter to seven the first ones arrived. The women in black, their heads covered with large veils, looking very sad. Then men, ill at ease in their homespun coats, were coming forward more slowly, in couples, talking business.

Maitre Chicot and his wife, bewildered, received them sorrowfully, and suddenly both of them together began to cry as they approached the first group. They explained the matter, related their difficulty, offered chairs, bustled about, tried to make excuses, attempting to prove that everybody would have done as they did, talking continually and giving nobody a chance to answer.

They were going from one person to another:

"I never would have thought it; it's incredible how he can last this long!"

The guests, taken aback, a little disappointed, as though they had missed an expected entertainment, did not know what to do, some remaining seated others standing. Several wished to leave. Maitre Chicot held them back:

"You must take something, anyhow! We made some dumplings; might as well make use of 'em."

The faces brightened at this idea. The yard was filling little by little; the early arrivals were telling the news to those who had arrived later. Everybody was whispering. The idea of the dumplings seemed to cheer everyone up.

The women went in to take a look at the dying man. They crossed themselves beside the bed, muttered a prayer and went out again. The men, less anxious for this spectacle, cast a look through the window, which had been opened.

Madame Chicot explained her distress:

"That's how he's been for two days, neither better nor worse. Doesn't he sound like a pump that has gone dry?"

When everybody had had a look at the dying man, they thought of the refreshments; but as there were too many people for the kitchen to hold, the table was moved out in front of the door. The four dozen golden dumplings, tempting and appetizing, arranged in two big dishes, attracted the eyes of all. Each one reached out to take his, fearing that there would not be enough. But four remained over.

Maitre Chicot, his mouth full, said:

"Father would feel sad if he were to see this. He loved them so much when he was alive."

A big, jovial peasant declared:

"He won't eat any more now. Each one in his turn."

This remark, instead of making the guests sad, seemed to cheer them up. It was their turn now to eat dumplings.

Madame Chicot, distressed at the expense, kept running down to the cellar continually for cider. The pitchers were emptied in quick succession. The company was laughing and talking loud now. They were beginning to shout as they do at feasts.

Suddenly an old peasant woman who had stayed beside the dying man, held there by a morbid fear of what would soon happen to herself, appeared at the window and cried in a shrill voice:

"He's dead! he's dead!"

Everybody was silent. The women arose quickly to go and see. He was indeed dead. The rattle had ceased. The men looked at each other, looking down, ill at ease. They hadn't finished eating the dumplings. Certainly the rascal had not chosen a propitious moment. The Chicots were no longer weeping. It was over; they were relieved.

They kept repeating:

"I knew it couldn't 'last. If he could only have done it last night, it would have saved us all this trouble."

Well, anyhow, it was over. They would bury him on Monday, that was all, and they would eat some more dumplings for the occasion.

The guests went away, talking the matter over, pleased at having had the chance to see him and of getting something to eat.

And when the husband and wife were alone, face to face, she said, her face distorted with grief:

“We’ll have to bake four dozen more dumplings! Why couldn’t he have made up his mind last night?”

The husband, more resigned, answered:

“Well, we’ll not have to do this every day.”

THE GAMEKEEPER

It was after dinner, and we were talking about adventures and accidents which happened while out shooting.

An old friend, known to all of us, M. Boniface, a great sportsman and a connoisseur of wine, a man of wonderful physique, witty and gay, and endowed with an ironical and resigned philosophy, which manifested itself in caustic humor, and never in melancholy, suddenly exclaimed:

"I know a story, or rather a tragedy, which is somewhat peculiar. It is not at all like those which one hears of usually, and I have never told it, thinking that it would interest no one.

"It is not at all sympathetic. I mean by that, that it does not arouse the kind of interest which pleases or which moves one agreeably.

"Here is the story:

"I was then about thirty-five years of age, and a most enthusiastic sportsman.

"In those days I owned a lonely bit of property in the neighborhood of Jumieges, surrounded by forests and abounding in hares and rabbits. I was accustomed to spending four or five days alone there each year, there not being room enough to allow of my bringing a friend with me.

"I had placed there as gamekeeper, an old retired gendarme, a good man, hot-tempered, a severe disciplinarian, a terror to poachers and fearing nothing. He lived all alone, far from the village, in a little house, or rather hut, consisting of two rooms downstairs, with kitchen and store-room, and two upstairs. One of them, a kind of box just large enough to accommodate a bed, a cupboard and a chair, was reserved for my use.

"Old man Cavalier lived in the other one. When I said that he was alone in this place, I was wrong. He had taken his nephew with him, a young scamp about fourteen years old, who used to go to the village and run errands for the old man.

"This young scapegrace was long and lanky, with yellow hair, so light that it resembled the fluff of a plucked chicken, so thin that he seemed bald. Besides this, he had enormous feet and the hands of a giant.

"He was cross-eyed, and never looked at anyone. He struck me as being in the same relation to the human race as ill-smelling beasts are to the animal race. He reminded me of a polecat.

"He slept in a kind of hole at the top of the stairs which led to the two rooms.

"But during my short sojourns at the Pavilion – so I called the hut – Marius would give up his nook to an old woman from Ecorcheville, called Celeste, who used to come and cook for me, as old man Cavalier's stews were not sufficient for my healthy appetite.

"You now know the characters and the locality. Here is the story:

"It was on the fifteenth of October, 1854 – I shall remember that date as long as I live.

"I left Rouen on horseback, followed by my dog Bock, a big Dalmatian hound from Poitou, full-chested and with a heavy jaw, which could retrieve among the bushes like a Pont-Andemer spaniel.

"I was carrying my satchel slung across my back and my gun diagonally across my chest. It was a cold, windy, gloomy day, with clouds scurrying across the sky.

"As I went up the hill at Canteleu, I looked over the broad valley of the Seine, the river winding in and out along its course as far as the eye could see. To the right the towers of Rouen stood out against the sky, and to the left the landscape was bounded by the distant slopes covered with trees. Then I crossed the forest of Roumare and, toward five o'clock, reached the Pavilion, where Cavalier and Celeste were expecting me.

"For ten years I had appeared there at the same time, in the same manner; and for ten years the same faces had greeted me with the same words:

"'Welcome, master! We hope your health is good.'

"Cavalier had hardly changed. He withstood time like an old tree; but Celeste, especially in the past four years, had become unrecognizable.

"She was bent almost double, and, although still active, when she walked her body was almost at right angles to her legs.

"The old woman, who was very devoted to me, always seemed affected at seeing me again, and each time, as I left, she would say:

"'This may be the last time, master.'

"The sad, timid farewell of this old servant, this hopeless resignation to the inevitable fate which was not far off for her, moved me strangely each year.

"I dismounted, and while Cavalier, whom I had greeted, was leading my horse to the little shed which served as a stable, I entered the kitchen, which also served as dining-room, followed by Celeste.

"Here the gamekeeper joined us. I saw at first glance that something was the matter. He seemed preoccupied, ill at ease, worried.

"I said to him:

"'Well, Cavalier, is everything all right?'

"He muttered:

"'Yes and no. There are things I don't like.'

"I asked:

"'What? Tell me about it.'

"But he shook his head.

"'No, not yet, monsieur. I do not wish to bother you with my little troubles so soon after your arrival.'

"I insisted, but he absolutely refused to give me any information before dinner. From his expression, I could tell that it was something very serious.

"Not knowing what to say to him, I asked:

"'How about game? Much of it this year?'

"'Oh, yes! You'll find all you want. Thank heaven, I looked out for that.'

"He said this with so much seriousness, with such sad solemnity, that it was really almost funny. His big gray mustache seemed almost ready to drop from his lips.

"Suddenly I remembered that I had not yet seen his nephew.

"'Where is Marius? Why does he not show himself?'

"The gamekeeper started, looking me suddenly in the face:

"Well, monsieur, I had rather tell you the whole business right away; it's on account of him that I am worrying.'

"'Ah! Well, where is he?'

"'Over in the stable, monsieur. I was waiting for the right time to bring him out.'

"'What has he done?'

"'Well, monsieur – '

"The gamekeeper, however, hesitated, his voice altered and shaky, his face suddenly furrowed by the deep lines of an old man.

"He continued slowly:

"'Well, I found out, last winter, that someone was poaching in the woods of Roseraies, but I couldn't seem to catch the man. I spent night after night on the lookout for him. In vain. During that time they began poaching over by Ecorcheville. I was growing thin from vexation. But as for catching the trespasser, impossible! One might have thought that the rascal was forewarned of my plans.

"'But one day, while I was brushing Marius' Sunday trousers, I found forty cents in his pocket. Where did he get it?

"'I thought the matter over for about a week, and I noticed that he used to go out; he would leave the house just as I was coming home to go to bed – yes, monsieur.

“‘Then I started to watch him, without the slightest suspicion of the real facts. One morning, just after I had gone to bed before him, I got right up again, and followed him. For shadowing a man, there is nobody like me, monsieur.

“‘And I caught him, Marius, poaching on your land, monsieur; he my nephew, I your keeper!

“‘The blood rushed to my head, and I almost killed him on the spot, I hit him so hard. Oh! yes, I thrashed him all right. And I promised him that he would get another beating from my hand, in your presence, as an example.

“‘There! I have grown thin from sorrow. You know how it is when one is worried like that. But tell me, what would you have done? The boy has no father or mother, and I am the last one of his blood; I kept him, I couldn’t drive him out, could I?

“‘I told him that if it happened again I would have no more pity for him, all would be over. There! Did I do right, monsieur?’

“I answered, holding out my hand:

“‘You did well, Cavalier; you are an honest man.’

“He rose.

“‘Thank you, monsieur. Now I am going to fetch him. I must give him his thrashing, as an example.’

“I knew that it was hopeless to try and turn the old man from his idea. I therefore let him have his own way.

“He got the rascal and brought him back by the ear.

“I was seated on a cane chair, with the solemn expression of a judge.

“Marius seemed to have grown; he was homelier even than the year before, with his evil, sneaking expression.

“His big hands seemed gigantic.

“His uncle pushed him up to me, and, in his soldierly voice, said:

“‘Beg the gentleman’s pardon.’

“The boy didn’t say a word.

“Then putting one arm round him, the former gendarme lifted him right off the ground, and began to whack him with such force that I rose to stop the blows.

“The boy was now howling: ‘Mercy! mercy! mercy! I promise – ’

“Cavalier put him back on the ground and forced him to his knees:

“‘Beg for pardon,’ he said.

“With eyes lowered, the scamp murmured:

“‘I ask for pardon!’

“Then his uncle lifted him to his feet, and dismissed him with a cuff which almost knocked him down again.

“He made his escape, and I did not see him again that evening.

“Cavalier appeared overwhelmed.’

“‘He is a bad egg,’ he said.

“And throughout the whole dinner, he kept repeating:

“‘Oh! that worries me, monsieur, that worries me.’

“I tried to comfort him, but in vain.

“I went to bed early, so that I might start out at daybreak.

“My dog was already asleep on the floor, at the foot of my bed, when I put out the light.

“I was awakened toward midnight by the furious barking of my dog Bock. I immediately noticed that my room was full of smoke. I jumped out of bed, struck a light, ran to the door and opened it. A cloud of flames burst in. The house was on fire.

"I quickly closed the heavy oak door and, drawing on my trousers, I first lowered the dog through the window, by means of a rope made of my sheets; then, having thrown out the rest of my clothes, my game-bag and my gun, I in turn escaped the same way.

"I began to shout with all my might: 'Cavalier! Cavalier! Cavalier!'

"But the gamekeeper did not wake up. He slept soundly like an old gendarme.

"However, I could see through the lower windows that the whole ground-floor was nothing but a roaring furnace; I also noticed that it had been filled with straw to make it burn readily.

"Somebody must purposely have set fire to the place!

"I continued shrieking wildly: 'Cavalier!'

"Then the thought struck me that the smoke might be suffocating him. An idea came to me. I slipped two cartridges into my gun, and shot straight at his window.

"The six panes of glass shattered into the room in a cloud of glass. This time the old man had heard me, and he appeared, dazed, in his nightshirt, bewildered by the glare which illumined the whole front of his 'house.

"I cried to him:

"'Your house is on fire! Escape through the window! Quick! Quick!'

"The flames were coming out through all the cracks downstairs, were licking along the wall, were creeping toward him and going to surround him. He jumped and landed on his feet, like a cat.

"It was none too soon. The thatched roof cracked in the middle, right over the staircase, which formed a kind of flue for the fire downstairs; and an immense red jet jumped up into the air, spreading like a stream of water and sprinkling a shower of sparks around the hut. In a few seconds it was nothing but a pool of flames.

"Cavalier, thunderstruck, asked:

"'How did the fire start?'

"I answered:

"'Somebody lit it in the kitchen.'

"He muttered:

"'Who could have started the fire?'

"And I, suddenly guessing, answered:

"'Marius!'

"The old man understood. He stammered:

"'Good God! That is why he didn't return.'

"A terrible thought flashed through my mind. I cried:

"'And Celeste! Celeste!'

"He did not answer. The house caved in before us, forming only an enormous, bright, blinding brazier, an awe-inspiring funeral-pile, where the poor woman could no longer be anything but a glowing ember, a glowing ember of human flesh.

"We had not heard a single cry.

"As the fire crept toward the shed, I suddenly bethought me of my horse, and Cavalier ran to free it.

"Hardly had he opened the door of the stable, when a supple, nimble body darted between his legs, and threw him on his face. It was Marius, running for all he was worth.

"The man was up in a second. He tried to run after the wretch, but, seeing that he could not catch him, and maddened by an irresistible anger, yielding to one of those thoughtless impulses which we cannot foresee or prevent, he picked up my gun, which was lying on the ground. near him, put it to his shoulder, and, before I could make a motion, he pulled the trigger without even noticing whether or not the weapon was loaded.

"One of the cartridges which I had put in to announce the fire was still intact, and the charge caught the fugitive right in the back, – throwing him forward on the ground, bleeding profusely. He

immediately began to claw the earth with his hands and with his knees, as though trying to run on all fours like a rabbit who has been mortally wounded, and sees the hunter approaching.

"I rushed forward to the boy, but I could already hear the death-rattle. He passed away before the fire was extinguished, without having said a word.

"Cavalier, still in his shirt, his legs bare, was standing near us, motionless, dazed.

"When the people from the village arrived, my gamekeeper was taken away, like an insane man.

"I appeared at the trial as witness, and related the facts in detail, without changing a thing. Cavalier was acquitted. He disappeared that very day, leaving the country.

"I have never seen him since.

"There, gentlemen, that is my story."

THE STORY OF A FARM GIRL

PART I

As the weather was very fine, the people on the farm had hurried through their dinner and had returned to the fields.

The servant, Rose, remained alone in the large kitchen, where the fire was dying out on the hearth beneath the large boiler of hot water. From time to time she dipped out some water and slowly washed her dishes, stopping occasionally to look at the two streaks of light which the sun threw across the long table through the window, and which showed the defects in the glass.

Three venturesome hens were picking up the crumbs under the chairs, while the smell of the poultry yard and the warmth from the cow stall came in through the half-open door, and a cock was heard crowing in the distance.

When she had finished her work, wiped down the table, dusted the mantelpiece and put the plates on the high dresser close to the wooden clock with its loud tick-tock, she drew a long breath, as she felt rather oppressed, without exactly knowing why. She looked at the black clay walls, the rafters that were blackened with smoke and from which hung spiders' webs, smoked herrings and strings of onions, and then she sat down, rather overcome by the stale odor from the earthen floor, on which so many things had been continually spilled and which the heat brought out. With this there was mingled the sour smell of the pans of milk which were set out to raise the cream in the adjoining dairy.

She wanted to sew, as usual, but she did not feel strong enough, and so she went to the door to get a mouthful of fresh air, which seemed to do her good.

The fowls were lying on the steaming dunghill; some of them were scratching with one claw in search of worms, while the cock stood up proudly in their midst. When he crowed, the cocks in all the neighboring farmyards replied to him, as if they were uttering challenges from farm to farm.

The girl looked at them without thinking, and then she raised her eyes and was almost dazzled at the sight of the apple trees in blossom. Just then a colt, full of life and friskiness, jumped over the ditches and then stopped suddenly, as if surprised at being alone.

She also felt inclined to run; she felt inclined to move and to stretch her limbs and to repose in the warm, breathless air. She took a few undecided steps and closed her eyes, for she was seized with a feeling of animal comfort, and then she went to look for eggs in the hen loft. There were thirteen of them, which she took in and put into the storeroom; but the smell from the kitchen annoyed her again, and she went out to sit on the grass for a time.

The farmyard, which was surrounded by trees, seemed to be asleep. The tall grass, amid which the tall yellow dandelions rose up like streaks of yellow light, was of a vivid, fresh spring green. The apple trees cast their shade all round them, and the thatched roofs, on which grew blue and yellow irises, with their sword-like leaves, steamed as if the moisture of the stables and barns were coming through the straw. The girl went to the shed, where the carts and buggies were kept. Close to it, in a ditch, there was a large patch of violets, whose fragrance was spread abroad, while beyond the slope the open country could be seen, where grain was growing, with clumps of trees in places, and groups of laborers here and there, who looked as small as dolls, and white horses like toys, who were drawing a child's cart, driven by a man as tall as one's finger.

She took up a bundle of straw, threw it into the ditch and sat down upon it. Then, not feeling comfortable, she undid it, spread it out and lay down upon it at full length on her back, with both arms under her head and her legs stretched out.

Gradually her eyes closed, and she was falling into a state of delightful languor. She was, in fact, almost asleep when she felt two hands on her bosom, and she sprang up at a bound. It was Jacques,

one of the farm laborers, a tall fellow from Picardy, who had been making love to her for a long time. He had been herding the sheep, and, seeing her lying down in the shade, had come up stealthily and holding his breath, with glistening eyes and bits of straw in his hair.

He tried to kiss her, but she gave him a smack in the face, for she was as strong as he, and he was shrewd enough to beg her pardon; so they sat down side by side and talked amicably. They spoke about the favorable weather, of their master, who was a good fellow, then of their neighbors, of all the people in the country round, of themselves, of their village, of their youthful days, of their recollections, of their relations, who had left them for a long time, and it might be forever. She grew sad as she thought of it, while he, with one fixed idea in his head, drew closer to her.

"I have not seen my mother for a long time," she said. "It is very hard to be separated like that," and she directed her looks into the distance, toward the village in the north which she had left.

Suddenly, however, he seized her by the neck and kissed her again, but she struck him so violently in the face with her clenched fist that his nose began to bleed, and he got up and laid his head against the stem of a tree. When she saw that, she was sorry, and going up to him, she said: "Have I hurt you?" He, however, only laughed. "No, it was a mere nothing; only she had hit him right on the middle of the nose. What a devil!" he said, and he looked at her with admiration, for she had inspired him with a feeling of respect and of a very different kind of admiration which was the beginning of a real love for that tall, strong wench. When the bleeding had stopped, he proposed a walk, as he was afraid of his neighbor's heavy hand, if they remained side by side like that much longer; but she took his arm of her own accord, in the avenue, as if they had been out for an evening's walk, and said: "It is not nice of you to despise me like that, Jacques." He protested, however. No, he did not despise her. He was in love with her, that was all.

"So you really want to marry me?" she asked.

He hesitated and then looked at her sideways, while she looked straight ahead of her. She had fat, red cheeks, a full bust beneath her cotton jacket; thick, red lips; and her neck, which was almost bare, was covered with small beads of perspiration. He felt a fresh access of desire, and, putting his lips to her ear, he murmured: "Yes, of course I do."

Then she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him till they were both out of breath. From that moment the eternal story of love began between them. They plagued one another in corners; they met in the moonlight beside the haystack and gave each other bruises on the legs, under the table, with their heavy nailed boots. By degrees, however, Jacques seemed to grow tired of her; he avoided her, scarcely spoke to her, and did not try any longer to meet her alone, which made her sad and anxious; and soon she found that she was enceinte.

At first she was in a state of consternation, but then she got angry, and her rage increased every day because she could not meet him, as he avoided her most carefully. At last, one night, when every one in the farmhouse was asleep, she went out noiselessly in her petticoat, with bare feet, crossed the yard and opened the door of the stable where Jacques was lying in a large box of straw above his horses. He pretended to snore when he heard her coming, but she knelt down by his side and shook him until he sat up.

"What do you want?" he then asked her. And with clenched teeth, and trembling with anger, she replied: "I want – I want you to marry me, as you promised." But he only laughed and replied: "Oh! if a man were to marry all the girls with whom he has made a slip, he would have more than enough to do."

Then she seized him by the throat, threw him or his back, so that he could not get away from her, and, half strangling him, she shouted into his face:

"I am enceinte, do you hear? I am enceinte!"

He gasped for breath, as he was almost choked, and so they remained, both of them, motionless and without speaking, in the dark silence, which was only broken by the noise made by a horse as he, pulled the hay out of the manger and then slowly munched it.

When Jacques found that she was the stronger, he stammered out: “Very well, I will marry you, as that is the case.” But she did not believe his promises. “It must be at once,” she said. “You must have the banns put up.” “At once,” he replied. “Swear solemnly that you will.” He hesitated for a few moments and then said: “I swear it, by Heaven!”

Then she released her grasp and went away without another word.

She had no chance of speaking to him for several days; and, as the stable was now always locked at night, she was afraid to make any noise, for fear of creating a scandal. One morning, however, she saw another man come in at dinner time, and she said: “Has Jacques left?” “Yes;” the man replied; “I have got his place.”

This made her tremble so violently that she could not take the saucepan off the fire; and later, when they were all at work, she went up into her room and cried, burying her head in the bolster, so that she might not be heard. During the day, however, she tried to obtain some information without exciting any suspicion, but she was so overwhelmed by the thoughts of her misfortune that she fancied that all the people whom she asked laughed maliciously. All she learned, however, was that he had left the neighborhood altogether.

PART II

Then a cloud of constant misery began for her. She worked mechanically, without thinking of what she was doing, with one fixed idea in her head:

"Suppose people were to know."

This continual feeling made her so incapable of reasoning that she did not even try to think of any means of avoiding the disgrace that she knew must ensue, which was irreparable and drawing nearer every day, and which was as sure as death itself. She got up every morning long before the others and persistently tried to look at her figure in a piece of broken looking-glass, before which she did her hair, as she was very anxious to know whether anybody would notice a change in her, and, during the day, she stopped working every few minutes to look at herself from top to toe, to see whether her apron did not look too short.

The months went on, and she scarcely spoke now, and when she was asked a question, did not appear to understand; but she had a frightened look, haggard eyes and trembling hands, which made her master say to her occasionally: "My poor girl, how stupid you have grown lately."

In church she hid behind a pillar, and no longer ventured to go to confession, as she feared to face the priest, to whom she attributed superhuman powers, which enabled him to read people's consciences; and at meal times the looks of her fellow servants almost made her faint with mental agony; and she was always fancying that she had been found out by the cowherd, a precocious and cunning little lad, whose bright eyes seemed always to be watching her.

One morning the postman brought her a letter, and as she had never received one in her life before she was so upset by it that she was obliged to sit down. Perhaps it was from him? But, as she could not read, she sat anxious and trembling with that piece of paper, covered with ink, in her hand. After a time, however, she put it into her pocket, as she did not venture to confide her secret to any one. She often stopped in her work to look at those lines written at regular intervals, and which terminated in a signature, imagining vaguely that she would suddenly discover their meaning, until at last, as she felt half mad with impatience and anxiety, she went to the schoolmaster, who told her to sit down and read to her as follows:

"MY DEAR DAUGHTER: I write to tell you that I am very ill. Our neighbor, Monsieur Dentu, begs you to come, if you can.

"From your affectionate mother,

"CESAIRE DENTU, Deputy Mayor."

She did not say a word and went away, but as soon as she was alone her legs gave way under her, and she fell down by the roadside and remained there till night.

When she got back, she told the farmer her bad news, and he allowed her to go home for as long as she liked, and promised to have her work done by a charwoman and to take her back when she returned.

Her mother died soon after she got there, and the next day Rose gave birth to a seven-months child, a miserable little skeleton, thin enough to make anybody shudder, and which seemed to be suffering continually, to judge from the painful manner in which it moved its poor little hands, which were as thin as a crab's legs; but it lived for all that. She said she was married, but could not be burdened with the child, so she left it with some neighbors, who promised to take great care of it, and she went back to the farm.

But now in her heart, which had been wounded so long, there arose something like brightness, an unknown love for that frail little creature which she had left behind her, though there was fresh suffering in that very love, suffering which she felt every hour and every minute, because she was parted from her child. What pained her most, however, was the mad longing to kiss it, to press it

in her arms, to feel the warmth of its little body against her breast. She could not sleep at night; she thought of it the whole day long, and in the evening, when her work was done, she would sit in front of the fire and gaze at it intently, as people do whose thoughts are far away.

They began to talk about her and to tease-her about her lover. They asked her whether he was tall, handsome and rich. When was the wedding to be and the christening? And often she ran away to cry by herself, for these questions seemed to hurt her like the prick of a pin; and, in order to forget their jokes, she began to work still more energetically, and, still thinking of her child, she sought some way of saving up money for it, and determined to work so that her master would be obliged to raise her wages.

By degrees she almost monopolized the work and persuaded him to get rid of one servant girl, who had become useless since she had taken to working like two; she economized in the bread, oil and candles; in the corn, which they gave to the chickens too extravagantly, and in the fodder for the horses and cattle, which was rather wasted. She was as miserly about her master's money as if it had been her own; and, by dint of making good bargains, of getting high prices for all their produce, and by baffling the peasants' tricks when they offered anything for sale, he, at last, entrusted her with buying and selling everything, with the direction of all the laborers, and with the purchase of provisions necessary for the household; so that, in a short time, she became indispensable to him. She kept such a strict eye on everything about her that, under her direction, the farm prospered wonderfully, and for five miles around people talked of "Master Vallin's servant," and the farmer himself said everywhere: "That girl is worth more than her weight in gold."

But time passed by, and her wages remained the same. Her hard work was accepted as something that was due from every good servant, and as a mere token of good will; and she began to think rather bitterly that if the farmer could put fifty or a hundred crowns extra into the bank every month, thanks to her, she was still only earning her two hundred francs a year, neither more nor less; and so she made up her mind to ask for an increase of wages. She went to see the schoolmaster three times about it, but when she got there, she spoke about something else. She felt a kind of modesty in asking for money, as if it were something disgraceful; but, at last, one day, when the farmer was having breakfast by himself in the kitchen, she said to him, with some embarrassment, that she wished to speak to him particularly. He raised his head in surprise, with both his hands on the table, holding his knife, with its point in the air, in one, and a piece of bread in the other, and he looked fixedly at, the girl, who felt uncomfortable under his gaze, but asked for a week's holiday, so that she might get away, as she was not very well. He acceded to her request immediately, and then added, in some embarrassment himself:

"When you come back, I shall have something to say to you myself."

PART III

The child was nearly eight months old, and she did not recognize it. It had grown rosy and chubby all over, like a little roll of fat. She threw herself on it, as if it had been some prey, and kissed it so violently that it began to scream with terror; and then she began to cry herself, because it did not know her, and stretched out its arms to its nurse as soon as it saw her. But the next day it began to know her, and laughed when it saw her, and she took it into the fields, and ran about excitedly with it, and sat down under the shade of the trees; and then, for the first time in her life, she opened her heart to somebody, although he could not understand her, and told him her troubles; how hard her work was, her anxieties and her hopes, and she quite tired the child with the violence of her caresses.

She took the greatest pleasure in handling it, in washing and dressing it, for it seemed to her that all this was the confirmation of her maternity; and she would look at it, almost feeling surprised 'that it was hers, and would say to herself in a low voice as she danced it in her arms: "It is my baby, it's my baby."

She cried all the way home as she returned to the farm and had scarcely got in before her master called her into his room; and she went, feeling astonished and nervous, without knowing why.

"Sit down there," he said. She sat down, and for some moments they remained side by side, in some embarrassment, with their arms hanging at their sides, as if they did not know what to do with them, and looking each other in the face, after the manner of peasants.

The farmer, a stout, jovial, obstinate man of forty-five, who had lost two wives, evidently felt embarrassed, which was very unusual with him; but, at last, he made up his mind, and began to speak vaguely, hesitating a little, and looking out of the window as he talked. "How is it, Rose," he said, "that you have never thought of settling in life?" She grew as pale as death, and, seeing that she gave him no answer, he went on: "You are a good, steady, active and economical girl; and a wife like you would make a man's fortune."

She did not move, but looked frightened; she did not even try to comprehend his meaning, for her thoughts were in a whirl, as if at the approach of some great danger; so, after waiting for a few seconds, he went on: "You see, a farm without a mistress can never succeed, even with a servant like you." Then he stopped, for he did not know what else to say, and Rose looked at him with the air of a person who thinks that he is face to face with a murderer and ready to flee at the slightest movement he may make; but, after waiting for about five minutes, he asked her: "Well, will it suit you?" "Will what suit me, master?" And he said quickly: "Why, to marry me, by Heaven!"

She jumped up, but fell back on her chair, as if she had been struck, and there she remained motionless, like a person who is overwhelmed by some great misfortune. At last the farmer grew impatient and said: "Come, what more do you want?" She looked at him, almost in terror, then suddenly the tears came into her eyes and she said twice in a choking voice: "I cannot, I cannot!" "Why not?" he asked. "Come, don't be silly; I will give you until tomorrow to think it over."

And he hurried out of the room, very glad to have got through with the matter, which had troubled him a good deal, for he had no doubt that she would the next morning accept a proposal which she could never have expected and which would be a capital bargain for him, as he thus bound a woman to his interests who would certainly bring him more than if she had the best dowry in the district.

Neither could there be any scruples about an unequal match between them, for in the country every one is very nearly equal; the farmer works with his laborers, who frequently become masters in their turn, and the female servants constantly become the mistresses of the establishments without its making any change in their life or habits.

Rose did not go to bed that night. She threw herself, dressed as she was, on her bed, and she had not even the strength to cry left in her, she was so thoroughly dumfounded. She remained quite inert,

scarcely knowing that she had a body, and without being at all able to collect her thoughts, though, at moments, she remembered something of what had happened, and then she was frightened at the idea of what might happen. Her terror increased, and every time the great kitchen clock struck the hour she broke out in a perspiration from grief. She became bewildered, and had the nightmare; her candle went out, and then she began to imagine that some one bad cast a spell over her, as country people so often imagine, and she felt a mad inclination to run away, to escape and to flee before her misfortune, like a ship scudding before the wind. An owl hooted; she shivered, sat up, passed her hands over her face, her hair, and all over her body, and then she went downstairs, as if she were walking in her sleep. When she got into the yard she stooped down, so as not to be seen by any prowling scamp, for the moon, which was setting, shed a bright light over the fields. Instead of opening the gate she scrambled over the fence, and as soon as she was outside she started off. She went on straight before her, with a quick, springy trot, and from time to time she unconsciously uttered a piercing cry. Her long shadow accompanied her, and now and then some night bird flew over her head, while the dogs in the farmyards barked as they heard her pass; one even jumped over the ditch, and followed her and tried to bite her, but she turned round and gave such a terrible yell that the frightened animal ran back and cowered in silence in its kennel.

The stars grew dim, and the birds began to twitter; day was breaking. The girl was worn out and panting; and when the sun rose in the purple sky, she stopped, for her swollen feet refused to go any farther; but she saw a pond in the distance, a large pond whose stagnant water looked like blood under the reflection of this new day, and she limped on slowly with her hand on her heart, in order to dip both her feet in it. She sat down on a tuft of grass, took off her heavy shoes, which were full of dust, pulled off her stockings and plunged her legs into the still water, from which bubbles were rising here and there.

A feeling of delicious coolness pervaded her from head to foot, and suddenly, while she was looking fixedly at the deep pool, she was seized with dizziness, and with a mad longing to throw herself into it. All her sufferings would be over in there, over forever. She no longer thought of her child; she only wanted peace, complete rest, and to sleep forever, and she got up with raised arms and took two steps forward. She was in the water up to her thighs, and she was just about to throw her self in when sharp, pricking pains in her ankles made her jump back, and she uttered a cry of despair, for, from her knees to the tips of her feet, long black leeches were sucking her lifeblood, and were swelling as they adhered to her flesh. She did not dare to touch them, and screamed with horror, so that her cries of despair attracted a peasant, who was driving along at some distance, to the spot. He pulled off the leeches one by one, applied herbs to the wounds, and drove the girl to her master's farm in his gig.

She was in bed for a fortnight, and as she was sitting outside the door on the first morning that she got up, the farmer suddenly came and planted himself before her. "Well," he said, "I suppose the affair is settled isn't it?" She did not reply at first, and then, as he remained standing and looking at her intently with his piercing eyes, she said with difficulty: "No, master, I cannot." He immediately flew into a rage.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.