
Guy de Maupassant

In the winter of 1916 I found myself in St Petersburg with a forged passport and without a copeck. I was given shelter by a teacher of Russian philology,* Aleksey Kazantsev.

He lived in Peski,* in a frozen, yellow, foul-smelling street. In order to eke out his meagre salary he did translations from Spanish; Blasco Ibáñez* was becoming famous at that time.

Kazantsev had never been in Spain, even passing through, but a love for that country filled his being – he knew every castle, garden and river in Spain. In addition to myself there pressed close to Kazantsev a large number of people who had been kicked out of the regular pattern of life. We lived in want. Now and again the gutter newspapers printed, in small type, our notes on current events.

In the mornings I lounged about the morgues and the police stations.

Happier than any of us, however, was Kazantsev. He had a motherland – Spain.

In November I was offered the post of clerk at the Obukhov steelworks, not a bad job, which carried with it exemption from military service.

I declined to become a clerk.

Even at that time – twenty years old – I said to myself: better to go hungry, to go to prison, to be a tramp, than to sit at an office desk ten hours a day. There is no particular daring in this vow, but I have not broken it and shall not do so. The wisdom of my grandfathers sat in my head: we are born for the pleasure of work, fighting, love, we are born for that and for nothing else.

As he listened to my lectures, Kazantsev ruffled the short yellow down on his head. The horror in his gaze was intermingled with admiration.

At Christmas fortune smiled on us. The barrister Bendersky, owner of the Halcyon publishing house, planned to bring out a new edition of the works of Maupassant. Raisa, the barrister's wife, undertook the translation. But nothing had yet come of the grand venture.

Kazantsev, who translated from Spanish, was asked if he knew anyone who could help Raisa Mikhaylovna. Kazantsev suggested me.

The following day, wearing a jacket that belonged to someone else, I set off for the Benderskys'. They lived on the corner of Nevsky and the Moyka, in a house that had been built from Finnish granite and decorated with pink columns, embrasures and stone coats of arms. Bankers without family or breeding, converts to the Christian faith who had got rich in the supply business, they had built a large number of these vulgar, pseudo-majestic castles in St Petersburg before the war.

A red carpet ran up the staircase. On the landings, raised on their hind legs, stood plush velvet bears.

In their gaping jaws burned crystal lamps.

The Benderskys' lived on the third floor. A chambermaid with a head-dress and high breasts opened the door. She led me into a drawing-room that was decorated in ancient Slavonic style. On the walls hung blue paintings by Roerich* – prehistoric stones and monsters. About the corners – on the china cupboards – ancient icons were arranged. The chambermaid with the high breasts moved majestically about the room. She was shapely, myopic, haughty. In her grey, wide-open eyes there was a hardened licentiousness. The girl moved slowly. I reflected that in love-making she must twist and turn with violent swiftness. The brocade curtain that hung above the door began to sway. A black-haired woman with pink eyes and a large bosom came into the drawing-room. It did not take much time to recognize in Benderskaya the ravishing type of Jewess that comes from Kiev and Poltava, from the replete towns of the steppes, planted with chestnuts and acacias. These women let their resourceful husbands' money overflow into the rosy fat on their bellies, the backs of their necks, their round shoulders. Their sleepy, delicately ironic smiles drive the garrison officers out of their minds.

'Maupassant is the only passion of my life,' Raisa said to me.

Trying to restrain the swaying of her large hips, she went

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out of the room and returned with a translation of 'Miss Harriet'. In her translation there remained not even a vestige of Maupassant's phrasing – free, flowing, with the long breathing of passion. Benderskaya wrote with wearisome correctness, lifelessly and casually – the way Jews used to write the Russian language in earlier days.

I took the manuscript home with me, and there, in Kazantsev's attic – among the sleepers – cut clearings in someone else's translation. This is not such unpleasant work as it might seem. A phrase is born into the world good and bad at the same time. The secret rests in a barely perceptible turn. The lever must lie in one's hand and get warm. It must be turned once, and no more.

In the morning I took back the corrected manuscript. Raisa had not been lying when she had spoken of her passion for Maupassant. She sat immobile during the reading, her hands clasped: those satin hands flowed to the floor, her forehead was pale, the lace between her downwards-crushed breasts moved aside and trembled.

'How did you do it?'

Then I began to speak of style, of the army of words, an army in which all kinds of weapons are on the move. No iron can enter the human heart as chillingly as a full stop placed at the right time. She listened, her head inclined, her painted lips slightly open. A black gleam shone in her lacquered hair, smoothly drawn back and divided by a parting. Her legs, with strong, soft calves, in shiny stockings, were placed apart over the carpet.

The chambermaid, turning her hardened, licentious eyes away to the side, brought in breakfast on a tray.

A glassy St Petersburg sun lay on the faded, uneven carpet. Twenty-nine books by Maupassant stood above the table on a little shelf. With melting fingers the sun touched the morocco leather bindings of the books – the beautiful tomb of a human heart.

We were served coffee in small blue cups and we began to translate 'Idyll'. Everyone recalls the story of how the hungry young carpenter sucks the overflowing milk of the fat wet-nurse. It happens on a train going from Nice to Marseilles, one intensely hot midday in the land of roses, the motherland of roses, there, where plantations of flowers descend to the shore of the sea . . .

I left the Benderskys' with a twenty-five rouble advance. That evening our commune at Peski was as drunk as a flock of intoxicated geese. We scooped up the unpressed caviar in spoons and followed it down with liver sausage. Tight, I began to rail against Tolstoy.

'He got frightened, your count, he got cold feet . . . His religion is fear . . . Frightened by cold, old age, death, the count made himself a woolly jumper out of faith . . .'

'Go on,' Kazantsev kept saying, shaking his bird-like head.

We fell asleep beside our own beds. I dreamed about Katya, the forty-year-old washerwoman who lived below us. In the mornings we got boiling water from her. I had never even seen her face clearly, but in my dream Katya and I did God only knows what. We exhausted each other with kisses. I could not restrain myself from going to ask her for boiling water the following morning.

I was met by a faded, shawl-crossed woman with loosened ash-grey curls and damp hands.

From that day on I had breakfast at the Benderskys' every morning. Our attic acquired a new stove, herring, chocolate. Twice Raisa drove me out to the islands in her carriage. I lost my inhibitions and told her about my childhood. The story sounded dismal, to my own surprise. From under the moleskin cap, shining, frightened eyes looked at me. The reddish fur of their eyelashes quivered dolefully.

I made the acquaintance of Raisa's husband – a sallow-faced Jew with a bald head and a flat, strong body that was turned slantwise for the purpose of flight. Rumour had it that

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he was close to Rasputin. The profits he made out of the military supply business had given him the look of a man possessed. His eyes wandered, the fabric of reality had broken for him. Raisa was embarrassed when introducing new people to her husband. Because of my youth I noticed this a week later than I should have done.

After New Year Raisa had a visit from her two sisters in Kiev. One day I brought the manuscript of 'The Confession' and, not finding Raisa at home, came back again in the evening. Dinner was in progress in the dining-room. From there came the silvery neighing of mares and the boom of men's voices, outrageously exultant. In wealthy houses that have no traditions, dinner is a noisy affair. It was a Jewish noise, with thunderous peals and melodious endings. Raisa came out to me wearing a ball gown with a bare back. Her feet, in unsteady little patent-leather shoes, stepped awkwardly.

'I'm drunk, darling' – and she stretched out to me arms that were covered with platinum chains and emerald stars. Her body swayed like the body of a snake rising towards the ceiling to the accompaniment of music. She shook her frizzled hair, jangled her rings, and suddenly fell into an armchair with ancient Russian carving. On her powdered back smouldered scars.

Through the wall there was another explosion of female laughter. From the dining-room emerged the sisters with their little moustaches, just as strapping and full-busted as Raisa. Their busts were pushed forward, their black hair flowed loose. Both were married to Benderskys of their own. Incoherent female gaiety filled the room, the gaiety of mature women. The husbands wrapped the sisters in sealskin mantles, in Orenburg shawls, shod them in little black overshoes; beneath the snowy visors of their shawls remained only rouged and burning cheeks, marble noses and eyes with a myopic, semitic sheen. After a bit of noise they left for the theatre, where Chaliapin was singing in *Judith*.*

'I want to work,' Raisa babbled, stretching out her bare arms, 'we have lost a whole week . . .'

From the dining-room she brought a bottle and two wine-glasses. Her breasts moved freely in the loose silk of her gown, the nipples erect under the silk.

'A sacred vintage,' said Raisa, as she poured out the wine, 'Muscadet '83, my husband will murder me when he finds out . . .'

I had never had any dealings with Muscadet '83 before and had no hesitation in drinking down three glasses, one after the other. They at once carried me off to side-lanes where orange flame wafted and music was heard.

'I'm drunk, darling . . . What are we working on today . . .'

┌ 'Today it's "*L'aveu*".'

'So, "*The Confession*", then. The sun is the hero of this story, *le soleil de France*. Melted drops of sun, falling on the red-haired Céleste, were turned into freckles. The sun polished with its vertical rays, wine and apple cider, the phiz of the coachman Polyte. Twice a week Céleste took cream, eggs and chickens to sell in the town. For fare she paid Polyte ten sous for herself and four sous for the basket. And on each journey Polyte, winking, would ask the red-haired Céleste: 'But when are we going to have a bit of fun, *ma belle*?''

'"What is your meaning, Monsieur Polyte?"'

'As he bobbed up and down on the driver's seat, the coachman explained: "To have a bit of fun means to have a bit of fun, the devil take me . . . A lad and a girl – and no music needed . . ."'

"I do not like such jokes, Monsieur Polyte," replied Céleste, moving away from the lad with her skirts that hung over her mighty calves in their red stockings.

'But that devil Polyte kept roaring with laughter, and coughing – "One day we shall have a bit of fun, *ma belle*," – and tears of merriment rolled down his face, which was the colour of brick-blood and wine.'

I drank down another glass of the sacred Muscadet. Raisa clinked glasses with me.

The chambermaid with the hard eyes walked through the room and disappeared.

'*Ce diable de Polyte . . .* In two years Céleste had paid him forty-eight francs. That was two francs short of fifty. At the end of the second year, when they were alone in the coach and Polyte, who had had a few ciders before leaving, asked, as was his wont, "Aren't we going to have a bit of fun, Mademoiselle Céleste?" – she replied, lowering her eyes, "I am at your service, Monsieur Polyte . . ."

Raisa collapsed on to the table with a roar of laughter. *Ce diable de Polyte . . .*

'The coach was harnessed to a white nag. The white nag, its mouth pink with age, went slowly. The merry sunlight of France surrounded the large coach that was shut off from the world by a rusty hood. A lad and a girl need no music . . .'

Raisa handed me a glass. This was my fifth.

'*Mon vieux*, to Maupassant . . .'

'Aren't we going have a bit of fun today, *ma belle . . .*' I stretched over to Raisa and kissed her on the lips. They began to tremble and swell.

'You're a funny one,' Raisa muttered through her teeth, staggering backwards. She pressed herself against the wall, spreading her exposed arms. On her hands and shoulder spots began to burn. Of all the gods ever crucified on a cross, this was the most seductive.

'Please sit down, Monsieur Polyte.'

She directed me to a sloping blue armchair made in Slavonic style. Its back was of carved wood with a design of interlaced tails. I made my way to it, stumbling.

The night had placed under my hungry youth a bottle of Muscadet '83 and twenty-nine books, twenty-nine petards filled with pity, genius, passion . . . I leapt up, knocked over

the chair, bumped into the shelf. The twenty-nine volumes came crashing to the carpet, their pages flew asunder, they stood on their sides . . . and the white nag of my fate moved slowly on.

'You're a funny one,' Raisa growled.

I left the granite house on the Moyka before midnight, when the sisters and husband would return from the theatre. I was sober and could have walked on a single board, but it was much better to stagger, and I swayed from side to side, singing loudly in a language I had only just invented. Down the tunnels of the streets, lined by a chain of street lamps, in waves, passed the vapours of the fog. Monsters roared behind seething walls. The wooden pavements cut off the legs of those who walked on them.

At home, Kazantsev was asleep. He slept sitting up, his thin legs stretched out in their felt boots. The canary fluff was standing up on his head. He had fallen asleep by the stove, leaning over *Don Quixote* in an edition of 1624. On the title page of this book there was a dedication to the Duc de Broglio. I got into bed silently, so as not to wake Kazantsev, moved the lamp towards me and began to read a book by Édouard de Maynial – *La Vie et l'oeuvre de Guy de Maupassant*.*

Kazantsev's lips were moving, his head kept slumping down.

And that night I discovered from Édouard de Maynial that Maupassant was born in 1850 to a Normandy nobleman and Laure Lepoitevin, Flaubert's cousin. At the age of twenty-five he experienced his first attack of hereditary syphilis. With his energy and high spirits he tried to put up a fight against the disease. At first he suffered from headaches and fits of hypochondria. Then the spectre of blindness arose before him. His eyesight deteriorated. He became paranoic, unsociable, litigious. He struggled fiercely, tossed about the Mediterranean in a yacht, fled to Tunis, to Morocco, to central Africa – and

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wrote incessantly. Having achieved fame, in his fortieth year he cut his throat and nearly bled to death. He was locked up in a lunatic asylum. There he crawled about on all fours and ate his own excrement. The last entry in his medical report reads: '*Monsieur de Maupassant va s'animaliser*'. He died at the age of forty-two. His mother outlived him.

I read the book to its end and got out of bed. The fog had come up to the window, obscuring the universe. My heart was constricted. I was brushed by a foreboding of truth.