



GUY DE MAUPASSANT

In the winter of 1916 I found myself in Petersburg with forged papers and without a kopeck to my name. Aleksei Kazantsev, a teacher of Russian philology, gave me shelter.

He lived on a frozen, reeking, yellow street in Peski.* To increase his meager income, he did Spanish translations—in those days the fame of Blasco Ibáñez[†] was on the rise.

Kazantsev had never been to Spain, not even once, but his whole being was flooded with love for the country—he knew every Spanish castle, park, and river. Besides myself, a large number of men and women who had fallen through the cracks of life flocked to him. We lived in dire poverty. From time to time our pieces on current events appeared in small print in the popular press.

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

But the happiest of us all was Kazantsev. He had a motherland—Spain.

In November I was offered the position of clerk at the Obukhovsky Factory,** not a bad job, bringing with it an exemption from conscription.

I refused to become a clerk.

* A poor suburb of Petersburg.

† Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, 1867–1928, was a Spanish novelist and anti-monarchist politician. His novels, with their themes of war and social injustice, were particularly popular in Soviet Russia.

** Steelworks founded in 1863. Its almost twelve thousand workers were to play an important role in the Revolution.

Even in those days, at the age of twenty, I said to myself: Better to suffer hunger, prison, and homelessness than to sit at a clerk's desk ten hours a day. There is no particular daring in making such a pledge, but I haven't broken it to this day, nor will I. The wisdom of my forefathers was ingrained in me: we have been born to delight in labor, fighting, and love. That is what we have been born for, and nothing else.

Kazantsev patted the short yellow down on his head as he listened to my sermon. The horror in his eyes was mixed with rapture.

At Christmas, fortune smiled upon us. Bendersky, a lawyer who owned the Halcyon Publishing House, had decided to bring out a new edition of Maupassant's works. His wife, Raisa, was going to do the translation. But nothing had yet come of the grand enterprise.

Kazantsev, as a Spanish translator, was asked if he knew anyone who might be able to help Raisa Mikhailovna. Kazantsev suggested me.

The following day, donning another man's jacket, I set out to the Benderskys'. They lived at the corner of the Nevsky Prospekt by the Moika River, in a house built of Finnish granite trimmed with pink columns, embrasures, and stone coats of arms. Before the war, bankers without family or breeding—Jewish converts to Christianity who grew rich through trade—had built a large number of such spuriously majestic, vulgar castles in Petersburg.

A red carpet ran up the stairs. Stuffed bears on their hind legs stood on the landings. Crystal lamps shone in their wide-open jaws.

The Benderskys lived on the third floor. The door was opened by a maid in a white cap and pointed breasts. She led me into a living room, decorated in old Slavic style. Blue paintings by Roerich,* prehistoric rocks and monsters, hung on the walls. Ancient icons stood on little stands in the corners. The maid with the pointed breasts moved ceremoniously about the room. She was well built, nearsighted, haughty. Debauchery had congealed in her gray, wide-open eyes. Her movements were indolent. I thought how she must thrash about with savage agility when she made love. The brocade curtain that hung over the door swayed. A black-haired, pink-eyed woman, bearing her large

*Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich, 1874–1947, was a Russian painter and popular mystic who gained international fame for the sets he designed for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

breasts before her, came into the living room. It took me no more than a moment to see that Benderskaya was one of those ravishing breed of Jewesses from Kiev or Poltava, from the sated towns of the steppes that abounded with acacias and chestnut trees. These women transmute the money of their resourceful husbands into the lush pink fat on their bellies, napes, and round shoulders. Their sleepy smiles, delicate and sly, drive garrison officers out of their minds.

"Maupassant is the one passion of my life," Raisa told me.

Struggling to restrain the swaying of her large hips, she left the room and came back with her translation of "Miss Harriet." The translation had no trace of Maupassant's free-flowing prose with its powerful breath of passion. Benderskaya wrote with laborious and inert correctness and lack of style—the way Jews in the past used to write Russian.

I took the manuscript home with me to Kazantsev's attic, where all night, among his sleeping friends, I cut swaths through Benderskaya's translation. This work isn't as bad as it might seem. When a phrase is born, it is both good and bad at the same time. The secret of its success rests in a crux that is barely discernible. One's fingertips must grasp the key, gently warming it. And then the key must be turned once, not twice.

The following morning I brought back the corrected manuscript. Raisa had not lied in speaking of her passion for Maupassant. She sat transfixed as I read to her, her hands clasped together. Her satin arms flowed down toward the ground, her forehead grew pale, and the lace between her struggling breasts swerved and trembled.

"How did you do this?"

I spoke to her of style, of an army of words, an army in which every type of weapon is deployed. No iron spike can pierce a human heart as icily as a period in the right place. She listened with her head inclined and her painted lips apart. A black gleam shone in her lacquered hair, parted and pulled smoothly back. Her stockinged legs, with their strong, delicate calves, were planted apart on the carpet.

The maid, turning away her eyes in which debauchery had congealed, brought in breakfast on a tray.

The Complete Works of Isaac Babel

The glass sun of Petersburg reclined on the uneven, faded carpet. Twenty-nine books by Maupassant stood on a shelf above the table. The sun, with its melting fingers, touched the books' morocco leather bindings—the magnificent crypt of the human heart.

We were served coffee in little blue cups, and we began to translate "Idyll." Who can forget the tale of the hungry young carpenter sucking milk from the overflowing breasts of the fat wet-nurse. This took place on a train going from Nice to Marseilles, on a sultry midday in the land of roses, the motherland of roses where flower plantations stretch down to the shores of the sea.

I left the Benderskys' with a twenty-five-ruble advance. That evening our commune in Peski got as drunk as a flock of inebriated geese. We scooped up the finest caviar and chased it down with liver-wurst. Heated by liquor, I began ranting against Tolstoy.

"He got frightened, our count did! He lacked courage! It was fear that made him turn to religion! Frightened of the cold, of old age, the count knitted himself a jersey out of faith!"

"Go on," Kazantsev said, wagging his birdlike head.

We fell asleep on the floor next to our beds. I dreamt of Katya, the forty-year-old washerwoman who lived on the floor beneath us. In the mornings we would go and get boiling water from her. I'd never had a good look at her face, but in my dream Katya and I did God only knows what. We consumed each other with kisses. The following morning I could not resist going down to her for boiling water.

I came face-to-face with a wilted woman, a shawl tied across her chest, with disheveled ash-gray curls and sodden hands.

From then on I breakfasted every day at the Benderskys'. In our attic we now had a new stove, herring, and chocolate. Twice Raisa drove me out to the islands.* I couldn't resist telling her about my childhood. To my own surprise, my tale sounded doleful. Her frightened sparkling eyes peered at me from under her fur hat. The reddish hairs of her eyelashes quivered mournfully.

I met Raisa's husband, a yellow-faced Jew with a bald head and a

* Islands of the Neva and the Bay of Finland, on which St. Petersburg was built.

lean, powerful body that always seemed poised to surge up into the air. There were rumors that he was close to Rasputin. The profits he had made from military supplies had given him the look of a madman. His eyes wandered—the fabric of his reality had been rent. Raisa was embarrassed introducing her husband to new people. Because of my youth, it took me a week longer than it should have to realize this.

After the New Year, Raisa's two sisters came up from Kiev. One day I went to her house with the manuscript of "The Confession," and, not finding her there, dropped by again in the evening. They were in the dining room at the dinner table. I heard silvery neighing and the thunder of excessively jubilant men's voices. Dining is invariably boisterous in wealthy houses that lack pedigree. Their boisterousness was Jewish, with peals of thunder and melodious flourishes. Raisa came out to me in a ball gown, her back bare. Her feet tottered in wavering patent leather shoes.

"Oh, how drunk I am!" And she stretched out her arms draped in platinum chains and emerald stars.

Her body swayed like the body of a snake rising to music toward the ceiling. She shook her curly head, her rings tinkled, and suddenly she fell into an armchair with ancient Russian carving. Scars shimmered on her powdered back.

There was another explosion of women's laughter in the room next door. Out of the dining room came her sisters with their little mustaches, just as big-breasted and tall as Raisa. Their breasts were thrust forward, their black hair flowed free. Both were married to Benderskys of their own. The room filled with rambling female vivacity, the vivacity of mature women. The husbands wrapped the sisters in sealskin coats, in Orenburg shawls,* and shod them in black boots. Peering out from the snowy shields of their shawls were their burning, rouged cheeks, their marble noses, and eyes with a nearsighted Semitic sparkle. After some lively commotion, they left for the theater, where Chaliapin was appearing in *Judith*.†

* Delicate lace shawls, fashionable in Russia at the time, knitted from goat wool by Orenburg Tatars.

† Chaliapin, the renowned opera singer. *Judith* is an opera by Alexander Nikolayevich Serov, 1820-1871.

"I want to work," Raisa jabbered, stretching out her bare arms. "We've lost a whole week."

She brought a bottle and two glasses from the dining room. Her breasts lay loose in the silken sack of her dress. Her nipples stiffened, the silk impeding them.

"A cherished vintage," Raisa said, pouring the wine. "A Muscatel '83. My husband will kill me when he finds out!"

I had never had any dealings with a Muscatel '83 before, and did not hesitate to empty three glasses one after the other. I was immediately wafted off to a little side street where orange flames flickered and music played.

"Oh, how drunk I am. . . . What are we going to do today?"

"Today we're doing 'L'aveu.'"

In other words, "The Confession." The hero of this tale is the sun, *le soleil de France*. Incandescent drops of sun, falling on red-haired Céleste, turned into freckles. Wine, apple cider, and the sun with its steep rays had burnished the face of Polyte, the coachman. Twice a week, Céleste drove into town to sell cream, eggs, and chickens. She paid Polyte ten sous for the ride and four to carry her basket. And on every ride Polyte winked at her and asked, "When are we going to have a bit of fun, *ma belle?*"

"What do you mean by that, Monsieur Polyte?"

"Having fun means having fun, damn it!" Polyte explained, bouncing on the seat. "A man and a woman, no need for music!"

"I don't like such jokes, Monsieur Polyte," Céleste answered, and swept her skirts, which hung over her powerful, red-stockinged calves, away from the young man.

But Polyte, the devil, kept guffawing and coughing. "We'll have fun someday, *ma belle!*" And tears of mirth trickled down his face, which was the color of rust-red blood and wine.

I drank another glass of the cherished Muscatel. Raisa clinked glasses with me.

The maid with the congealed eyes walked through the room and disappeared.

*Ce diable de Polyte** . . . Over a period of two years Céleste paid him

*"That devil Polyte."

forty-eight francs. Two francs short of fifty! One day at the end of the second year, when they were alone together in the buggy, Polyte, who had drunk some cider before they set out, asked her as usual, "How about having some fun today, Ma'mselle Céleste?"

"I'm at your service, M'sieur Polyte."

Raisa laughed out loud, slumping over the table. *Ce diable de Polyte!*

The buggy was harnessed to a white nag. The white nag, its lips pink with age, walked a slow walk. The joyful sun of France embraced the buggy, shut off from the world by a faded brown cover. The young man and the girl—they needed no music.

Raisa handed me a glass. It was the fifth.

"To Maupassant, *mon vieux!*"

"Aren't we going to have some fun today, *ma belle?*"

I reached over to Raisa and kissed her on the lips. They trembled and bulged.

"You're so funny," Raisa muttered through her teeth, tottering backward.

She pressed herself against the wall, spreading her bare arms. Blotches flared up on her arms and shoulders. Of all the gods ever crucified, she was the most captivating.

"Be so kind as to seat yourself, M'sieur Polyte."

She pointed to the reclining blue Slavic armchair. Its back was made of interlaced carved wood on which tails were painted. I stumbled toward it.

Night obstructed my youth with a bottle of Muscatel '83 and twenty-nine books, twenty-nine petards crammed with pity, genius, and passion. I jumped up, knocking over the armchair and bumping into the shelf. Twenty-nine volumes came tumbling onto the carpet, falling onto their spines, their pages flying wild . . . and the white nag of my fate walked a slow walk.

"You're so funny," Raisa growled.

I left the granite house on the Moika Canal after eleven, just before her husband and sisters came back from the theater. I was sober and could have walked a thin plank, but stumbling was far better, and I swayed from side to side, singing in a language I had just invented.

Mists of fog rolled in waves through the tunnels of streets girded with a chain of street lamps. Monsters roared behind seething walls. The carriageways cut the legs that walked over them.

Back at home Kazantsev was asleep. He slept sitting up, his haggard legs stretched out in felt boots. The canary down was fluffed up on his head. He had fallen asleep by the stove, hunched over a 1624 edition of *Don Quixote*. There was a dedication on the title page to the Duke de Broglio. I lay down quietly so as not to wake Kazantsev, pulled the lamp toward me, and began to read Édouard de Maynial's book *The Life and Works of Guy de Maupassant*.*

Kazantsev's lips moved, his head lolled forward.

That night I learned from Édouard de Maynial that Maupassant was born in 1850 to a Norman nobleman and Laure Le Poittevin, Flaubert's cousin. At twenty-five, he had his first attack of congenital syphilis. He fought the disease with all the potency and vitality he had. In the beginning, he suffered from headaches and bouts of hypochondria. Then the phantom of blindness loomed before him. His eyesight grew weaker. Paranoia, unsociability, and belligerence developed. He struggled with passion, rushed about the Mediterranean on his yacht, fled to Tunis, Morocco, and central Africa, and wrote unceasingly. Having achieved fame, he cut his throat at the age of forty, bled profusely, but lived. They locked him in a madhouse. He crawled about on all fours and ate his own excrement. The last entry in his sorrowful medical report announces: "*Monsieur de Maupassant va s'animaliser* (Monsieur de Maupassant is degenerating to an animal state)." He died at the age of forty-two. His mother outlived him.

I read the book through to the end and got up from my bed. The fog had come to the window, hiding the universe. My heart constricted. I was touched by a premonition of truth.

* *La vie et l'oeuvre de Guy de Maupassant* was published by Société du Mercure de France in 1906.