

# From the Tomb

By Guy De Maupassant

The guests filed slowly into the hotel's great dining-hall and took their places, the waiters began to serve them leisurely, to give the tardy ones time to arrive and to save themselves the bother of bringing back the courses; and the old bathers, the yearly habitués, with whom the season was far advanced, kept a close watch on the door each time it opened, hoping for the coming of new faces.

New faces! the single distraction of all pleasure resorts. We go to dinner chiefly to canvass the daily arrivals, to wonder who they are, what they do and what they think. A restless desire seems to have taken possession of us, a longing for pleasant adventures, for friendly acquaintances, perhaps, for possible lovers. In this elbow-to-elbow life our unknown neighbors become of paramount importance. Curiosity is piqued, sympathy on the alert and the social instinct doubly active.

We have hatreds for a week, friendships for a month, and view all men with the special eyes of watering-place intimacy. Sometimes during an hour's chat after dinner, under the trees of the park, where ripples a healing spring, we discover men of superior intellect and surprising merit, and a month later have wholly forgotten these new friends, so charming at first sight.

There, too, more specially than elsewhere, serious and lasting ties are formed. We see each other every day, we learn to know each other very soon, and in the affection that springs up so rapidly between us there is mingled much of the sweet abandon of old and tried intimates. And later on, how tender are the memories cherished of the first hours of this friendship, of the first communion in which the soul came to light, of the first glances that questioned and responded to the secret thoughts and interrogatories the lips have not dared yet to utter, of the first cordial confidence and delicious sensation of opening one's heart to someone who has seemed to lay bare to you his own! The very dullness of the hours, as it were, the monotony of days all alike, but renders more complete the rapid budding and blooming of friendship's flower.

That evening, then, as on every evening, we awaited the appearance of unfamiliar faces.

There came only two, but very peculiar ones, those of a man and a woman, father and daughter. They seemed to have stepped from the pages of some weird legend; and yet there was an attraction about them, albeit an unpleasant one, that made me set them down at once as the victims of some fatality.

The father was tall, spare, a little bent, with hair blanched white; too white for his still young countenance, and in his manner and about his person the sedate austerity of carriage that bespeaks the Puritan. The daughter was, possibly, some twenty-four or twenty-five years of age. She was very slight, emaciated, her exceedingly pale countenance bearing a languid, spiritless expression; one of those people whom we sometimes encounter, apparently too weak for the cares and tasks of life, too feeble to move or do the things that we must do every day. Nevertheless the girl was pretty, with the ethereal beauty of an apparition. It was she, undoubtedly, who came for the benefit of the waters.

They chanced to be placed at table immediately opposite to me; and I was not long in noticing that the father, too, had a strange affection, something wrong about the nerves it seemed. Whenever he was going to reach for anything, his hand, with a jerky twitch, described a sort of fluttering zig-zag, before he was able to grasp what he was after. Soon, the motion disturbed me

so much, I kept my head turned in order not to see it. But not before I had also observed that the young girl kept her glove on her left hand while she ate.

Dinner ended, I went out as usual for a turn in the grounds belonging to the establishment. A sort of park, I might say, stretching clear to the little station of Auvergne, Chatel-Guyon, nestling in a gorge at the foot of the high mountain, from which flowed the sparkling, bubbling springs, hot from the furnace of an ancient volcano. Beyond us there, the domes, small extinct craters—of which Chatel-Guyon is the starting point—raised their serrated heads above the long chain; while beyond the domes came two distinct regions, one of them, needle-like peaks, the other of bold, precipitous mountains.

It was very warm that evening, and I contented myself with pacing to and fro under the rustling trees, gazing at the mountains and listening to the strains of the band, pouring from the Casino, situated on a knoll that overlooked the grounds.

Presently, I perceived the father and daughter coming toward me with slow steps. I bowed to them in that pleasant Continental fashion with which one always salutes his hotel companions. The gentleman halted at once.

“Pardon me, sir,” said he, “but may I ask if you can direct us to a short walk, easy and pretty, if possible?”

“Certainly,” I answered, and offered to lead them myself to the valley through which the swift river flows—a deep, narrow cleft between two great declivities, rocky and wooded.

They accepted, and as we walked, we naturally discussed the virtue of the mineral waters. They had, as I had surmised, come there on his daughter’s account.

“She has a strange malady,” said he, “the seat of which her physicians cannot determine. She suffers from the most inexplicable nervous symptoms. Sometimes they declare her ill of a heart disease; sometimes of a liver complaint; again of a spinal trouble. At present they attribute it to the stomach—that great motor and regulator of the body—this Protean disease of a thousand forms, a thousand modes of attack. It is why we are here. I, myself, think it is her nerves. In any case it is sad.”

This reminded me of his own jerking hand.

“It may be hereditary,” said I, “your own nerves are a little disturbed, are they not?”

“Mine?” he answered, tranquilly. “Not at all, I have always possessed the calmest nerves.” Then, suddenly, as if bethinking himself:

“For this,” touching his hand, “is not nerves, but the result of a shock, a terrible shock that I suffered once. Fancy it, sir, this child of mine has been buried alive!”

I could find nothing to say, I was dumb with surprise.

“Yes,” he continued, “buried alive; but hear the story, it is not long. For some time past Juliette had seemed affected with a disordered action of the heart. We were finally certain that the trouble was organic and feared the worst. One day it came, she was brought in lifeless—dead. She had fallen dead while walking in the garden. Physicians came in haste, but nothing could be done. She was gone. For two days and nights I watched beside her myself, and with my own hands placed her in her coffin, which I followed to the cemetery and saw placed in the family vault. This was in the country, in the province of Lorraine.

“It had been my wish, too, that she should be buried in her jewels, bracelets, necklace and rings, all presents that I had given her, and in her first ball dress. You can imagine, sir, the state of my heart in retaining home. She was all that I had left, my wife had been dead for many years. I returned, in truth, half mad, shut myself alone in my room and fell into my chair dazed, unable to move, merely a miserable, breathing wreck.

“Soon my old valet, Prosper, who had helped me place Juliette in her coffin and lay her away for her last sleep, came in noiselessly to see if he could not induce me to eat. I shook my head, answering nothing. He persisted:

“ ‘Monsieur is wrong; this will make him ill. Will monsieur allow me, then, to put him to bed?’

“ ‘No, no,’ I answered. ‘Let me alone.’

“He yielded and withdrew.

“How many hours passed I do not know. What a night! What a night! It was very cold; my fire of logs had long since burned out in the great fireplace; and the wind, a wintry blast, charged with an icy frost, howled and screamed about the house and strained at my windows with a curiously sinister sound.

“Long hours, I say, rolled by. I sat still where I had fallen, prostrated, overwhelmed; my eyes wide open, but my body strengthless, dead; my soul drowned in despair. Suddenly the great bell gave a loud peal.

“I gave such a leap that my chair cracked under me. The slow, solemn sound rang through the empty house. I looked at the clock.

“It was two in the morning. Who could be coming at such an hour?

“Twice again the bell pulled sharply. The servants would never answer, perhaps never hear it. I took up a candle and made my way to the door. I was about to demand:

“ ‘Who is there?’ but, ashamed of the weakness, nerved myself and drew back the bolts. My heart throbbed, my pulse beat, I threw back the panel brusquely and there, in the darkness, saw a shape like a phantom, dressed in white.

“I recoiled, speechless with anguish, stammering:

“ ‘Who—who are you?’

“A voice answered:

“ ‘It is I, father.’

“It was my child, Juliette.

“Truly, I thought myself mad. I shuddered, shrinking backward before the specter as it advanced, gesticulating with my hand to ward off the apparition. It is that gesture which has never left me.

“Again the phantom spoke:

“ ‘Father, father! See, I am not dead. Someone came to rob me of my jewels—they cut off my finger—the—the flowing blood revived me.’

“And I saw then that she was covered with blood. I fell to my knees panting, sobbing, laughing, all in one. As soon as I regained my senses, but still so bewildered I scarcely comprehended the happiness that had come to me, I took her in my arms, carried her to her room, and rang frantically for Prosper to rekindle the fire, bring a warm drink for her, and go for the doctor.

“He came running, entered, gazed a moment at my daughter in the chair—gave a gasp of fright and horror and fell back—dead.

“It was he who had opened the vault, who had wounded and robbed my child, and then abandoned her; for he could not efface all trace of his deed; and he had not even taken the trouble to return the coffin to its niche; sure, besides, of not being suspected by me, who trusted him so fully. We are truly very unfortunate people, monsieur.”

He was silent.

Meanwhile the night had come on, enveloping in the gloom the still and solitary little valley; a sort of mysterious dread seemed to fall upon me in presence of these strange beings—this corpse come to life, and this father with his painful gestures.

“Let us return,” said I, “the night has grown chill.”

And still in silence, we retraced our steps back to the hotel, and I shortly afterward returned to the city. I lost all further knowledge of the two peculiar visitors to my favorite summer resort.