

Happiness

By Guy de Maupassant

It was tea-time before the appearance of the lamps. The villa commanded the sea; the sun, which had disappeared, had left the sky all rosy from his passing—rubbed, as it were, with gold-dust; and the Mediterranean, without a ripple, without a shudder, smooth, still shining under the dying seemed like a huge and polished metal plate.

Far off to the right the jagged mountains outlined their black profile on the paled purple of the west.

We talked of love, we discussed that old subject, we said again the things which we had said already very often. The sweet melancholy of the twilight made our words slower, caused a tenderness to waver in our souls; and that word, “love,” which came back ceaselessly, now pronounced by a strong man's voice, now uttered by the frail-toned voice of a woman, seemed to fill the little *salon*, to flutter there like a bird, to hover there like a spirit.

Can one remain in love for several years in succession?

“Yes,” maintained some.

“No,” affirmed others.

We distinguished cases, we established limitations, we cited examples; and all, men and women, filled with rising and troubling memories, which they could not quote, and which mounted to their lips, seemed moved, and talked of that common, that sovereign thing, the tender and mysterious union of two beings, with a profound emotion and an ardent interest.

But all of a sudden some one, whose eyes had been fixed upon the distance, cried out:

“Oh! Look down there; what is it?”

On the sea, at the bottom of the horizon, loomed up a mass, gray, enormous and confused.

The women had risen from their seats, and without understanding, looked at this surprising thing which they had never seen before.

Some one said:

“It is Corsica! You see it so two or three times a year, in certain exceptional conditions of the atmosphere, when the air is perfectly clear, and it is not concealed by those mists of sea-fog which always veil the distances.”

We distinguished vaguely the mountain ridges, we thought we recognized the snow of their summits. And every one remained surprised, troubled, almost terrified, by this sudden apparition of a world, by this phantom risen from the sea. Maybe that those who, like Columbus, went away across undiscovered oceans had such strange visions as this.

Then said an old gentleman who had not yet spoken:

“See here: I knew in that island which raises itself before us, as if in person to answer what we said, and to recall to me a singular memory—I knew, I say, an admirable case of love which was true, of love which, improbably enough, was happy.

“Here it is—

“Five years ago I made a journey in Corsica. That savage island is more unknown and more distant from us than America, even though you see it sometimes from the very coasts of France, as we have done to-day.

“Imagine a world which is still chaos, imagine a storm of mountains separated by narrow ravines where torrents roll; not a single plain, but immense waves of granite, and giant undulations of earth covered with brushwood or with high forests of chestnut-trees and pines. It is a virgin soil, uncultivated, desert, although you sometimes make out a village, like a heap of rocks, on the summit of a mountain. No culture, no industries, no art. One never meets here with a morsel of carved wood, or a bit of sculptured stone, never the least reminder that the ancestors of these people had any taste, whether rude or refined, for gracious and beautiful things. It is this which strikes you the most in their superb and hard country: their hereditary indifference to that search for seductive forms which is called Art.

“Italy, where every palace, full of masterpieces, is a masterpiece itself; Italy, where marble, wood, bronze, iron, metals, and precious stones attest man’s genius, where the smallest old things which lie about in the ancient houses reveal that divine care for grace—Italy is for us the sacred country which we love, because she shows to us and proves to us the struggle, the grandeur, the power, and the triumph of the intelligence which creates.

“And, face to face with her, the savage Corsica has remained exactly as in her earliest days. A man lives there in his rude house, indifferent to everything which does not concern his own bare existence or his family feuds. And he has retained the vices and the virtues of savage races; he is violent, malignant, sanguinary without a thought of remorse, but also hospitable, generous, devoted, simple, opening his door to passers-by, and giving his faithful friendship in return for the least sign of sympathy.

“So, for a month, I had been wandering over this magnificent island with the sensation that I was at the end of the world. No more inns, no taverns, no roads. You gain by mule-paths hamlets hanging up, as it were, on a mountain-side, and commanding tortuous abysses whence of an evening you hear rising the steady sound, the dull and deep voice, of the torrent. You knock at the doors of the houses. You ask a shelter for the night and something to live on till the morrow. And you sit down at the humble board, and you sleep under the humble roof, and in the morning you press the extended hand of your host, who has guided you as far as the outskirts of the village.

“Now, one night, after ten hours’ walking, I reached a little dwelling quite by itself at the bottom of a narrow valley which was about to throw itself into the sea a league farther on. The two steep slopes of the mountain, covered with brush, with fallen rocks, and with great trees, shut in this lamentably sad ravine like two sombre walls.

“Around the cottage were some vines, a little garden, and, farther off, several large *chestnut-trees*—enough to live on; in fact, a fortune for this poor country.

“The woman who received me was old, severe, and neat—exceptionally so. The man, seated on a straw chair, rose to salute me, then sat down again without saying a word. His companion said to me:

“ ‘Excuse him; he is deaf now. He is eighty-two years old.’

“She spoke the French of France. I was surprised.

“I asked her:

“ ‘You are not of Corsica?’

“She answered:

“ ‘No; we are from the Continent. But we have lived here now fifty years.’

“A feeling of anguish and of fear seized me at the thought of those fifty years passed in this gloomy hole, so far from the cities where human beings dwell. An old shepherd returned, and we

began to eat the only dish there was for dinner, a thick soup in which potatoes, lard, and cabbages had been boiled together.

“When the short repast was finished, I went and sat down before the door, my heart pinched by the melancholy of the mournful landscape, wrung by that distress which sometimes seizes travellers on certain sad evenings, in certain desolate places. It seems that everything is near its ending—existence, and the universe itself. You perceive sharply the dreadful misery of life, the isolation of every one, the nothingness of all things, and the black loneliness of the heart which nurses itself and deceives itself with dreams until the hour of death.

“The old woman rejoined me, and, tortured by that curiosity which ever lives at the bottom of the most resigned of souls:

“ ‘So you come from France?’ said she.

“ ‘Yes; I’m travelling for pleasure.’

“ ‘You are from Paris, perhaps?’

“ ‘No, I am from Nancy.’

“It seemed to me that an extraordinary emotion agitated her. How I saw, or rather how I felt it, I do not know.

“She repeated, in a slow voice:

“ ‘You are from Nancy?’

“The man appeared in the door, impassible, like all the deaf.

“She resumed:

“ ‘It doesn’t make any difference. He can’t hear.’

“Then, at the end of several seconds:

“ ‘So you know people at Nancy?’

“ ‘Oh yes, nearly everybody.’

“ ‘The family of Sainte-Allaize?’

“ ‘Yes, very well; they were friends of my father.’

“ ‘What are you called?’

“I told her my name. She regarded me fixedly, then said, in that low voice which is roused by memories:

“ ‘Yes, yes; I remember well. And the Brisemares, what has become of them?’

“ ‘They are all dead.’

“ ‘Ah! And the Sirmonts, do you know them?’

“ ‘Yes, the last of the family is a general.’

“Then she said, trembling with emotion, with anguish, with I do not know what, feeling confused, powerful, and holy, with I do not know how great a need to confess, to tell all, to talk of those things which she had hitherto kept shut in the bottom of her heart, and to speak of those people whose name distracted her soul:

“ ‘Yes, Henri de Sirmont. I know him well. He is my brother.’

“And I lifted my eyes at her, aghast with surprise. And all of a sudden my memory of it came back.

“It had caused, once, a great scandal among the nobility of Lorraine. A young girl, beautiful and rich, Suzanne de Sirmont, had run away with an under-officer in the regiment of hussars commanded by her father.

“He was a handsome fellow, the son of a peasant, but he carried his blue dolman very well, this soldier who had captivated his colonel’s daughter. She had seen him, noticed him, fallen in love with him, doubtless while watching the squadrons filing by. But how she had got speech of him,

how they had managed to see one another, to hear from one another; how she had dared to let him understand she loved him—that was never known.

“Nothing was divined, nothing suspected. One night when the soldier had just finished his time of service, they disappeared together. Her people looked for them in vain.

They never received tidings, and they considered her as dead.

“So I found her in this sinister valley.

“Then in my turn I took up the word:

“ ‘Yes, I remember well. You are Mademoiselle Suzanne.’

“She made the sign ‘yes,’ with her head. Tears fell from her eyes. Then with a look showing me the old man motionless on the threshold of his hut, she said:

“ ‘That is he.’

“And I understood that she loved him yet, that she still saw him with her bewitched eyes.

“I asked:

“ ‘Have you at least been happy?’

“She answered with a voice which came from her heart:

“ ‘Oh yes! very happy. He has made me very happy. I have never regretted.’

“I looked at her, sad, surprised, astounded by the sovereign strength of love! That rich young lady had followed this man, this peasant: She was become herself a peasant woman. She had made for herself a life without charm, without luxury, without delicacy of any kind, she had stooped to simple customs. And she loved him yet. She was become the wife of a rustic, in a cap, in a cloth skirt. Seated on a straw-bottomed chair, she ate from an earthen-ware dish, at a wooden table, a soup of potatoes and of cabbages with lard. She slept on a mattress by his side.

“She had never thought of anything but of him. She had never regretted her jewels, nor her fine dresses, nor the elegancies of life, nor the perfumed warmth of the chambers hung with tapestry, nor the softness of the down-beds where the body sinks in for repose. She had never had need of anything but him; provided he was there, she desired nothing.

“Still young, she had abandoned life and the world and those who had brought her up, and who had loved her. She had come, alone with him, into this savage valley. And he had been everything to her, all that one desires, all that one dreams of, all that one waits for without ceasing, all that one hopes for without end. He had filled her life with happiness from the one end to the other.

“She could not have been more happy.

“And all the night, listening to the hoarse breathing of the old soldier stretched on his pallet beside her who had followed him so far, I thought of this strange and simple adventure, of this happiness so complete, made of so very little.

“And I went away at sunrise, after having pressed the hands of that aged pair.”

The story-teller was silent. A woman said:

“All the same, she had ideals which were too easily satisfied, needs which were too primitive, requirements which were too simple. She could only have been a fool.”

Another said, in a low, slow voice, “What matter! she was happy.”

And down there at the end of the horizon, Corsica was sinking into the night, returning gently into the sea, blotting out her great shadow, which had appeared as if in person to tell the story of those two humble lovers who were sheltered by her coasts.