

On the Journey

By Guy de Maupassant

Since leaving Cannes the carriage had been full; and being all acquainted, we conversed together. As we passed Tarascon some one said, "It is here the murders happen." And we began to talk of that mysterious assassin who has never been caught, and who from time to time during the last two years has offered up to himself some traveller's life. Every one hazarded suppositions, every one gave his opinion; the women looked shiveringly at the sombre night behind the panes, fearing to see the head of a man show suddenly in the doorway. And we began to tell dreadful stories of terrible adventures, of some tête-à-tête with a madman in an express, of hours passed opposite suspicious-looking persons, quite alone.

All the men had stories "on their honor," all had intimidated, knocked down, and choked some malefactor in surprising circumstances, and with admirable boldness and presence of mind. A physician, who passed each winter in the South, wished in his turn to tell a tale.

"I," said he, "have never had the chance to try my courage in an affair of that sort; but I knew a woman, one of my patients, who is now dead, to whom there happened the strangest thing in the world, and also the most mysterious and the most affecting.

"She was a Russian, the Countess Marie Baranow, a very great lady, of exquisite beauty. You all know how beautiful the Russian women are, or at least how beautiful they seem to us, with their fine nostrils, with their delicate mouths, with their eyes of an indefinable color—a sort of blue-gray, set close together—and with that grace of theirs which is cold and a little hard. They have about them something naughty and seductive, something haughty and gentle, something tender and severe, which is altogether charming to a Frenchman. It is perhaps, however, only the difference of race and type which makes me see so much.

"For several years her doctor had perceived that she was threatened with a malady of the chest, and had been trying to induce her to go to the South of France; but she obstinately refused to leave St. Petersburg. Finally, last autumn, the physician gave her up as lost, and so informed her husband, who at once ordered his wife to leave for Mentone.

"She took the train, alone in her carriage, her servants occupying another compartment. She leaned against the door-way, a little sad, watching the country and the passing villages, feeling herself in life so lonely, so abandoned, without children, almost without relatives, with a husband whose love was dead, and who, not coming with her, had just thrown her off to the end of the world as he would send to the hospital a valet who was sick.

"At each station her body-servant Ivan came to ask if anything was wanted by his mistress. He was an old servant, blindly devoted, ready to carry out any order which she might give.

"The night fell, the train rolled onward at full speed. She was much unstrung, she could not sleep. Suddenly she took the idea of counting the money which her husband had given her at the last moment, in French gold. She opened her little bag, and emptied the shining flood of metal upon her knees.

But all of a sudden a breath of cold air struck her in the face. She raised her head in surprise. The door had just swung open. The Countess Marie, in desperation, brusquely threw a shawl over the money which was spread upon her knees, and waited. Some seconds passed, then a man appeared, bareheaded, wounded in the hand, panting, in evening dress. He shut the door again,

sat down, looked at his neighbor with glittering eyes, then wrapped a handkerchief round his wrist, from which the blood was flowing.

“The young countess felt herself grow weak with fright. This man had certainly seen her counting her gold, and he was come to murder and to rob.

“He kept staring at her, breathless, his face convulsed, ready, no doubt, to make a spring.

“He said, suddenly:

“ ‘Have no fear, madame!’

“She answered nothing, being unable to open her mouth, hearing her heart beat and her ears hum.

“He continued:

“ ‘I am not a criminal, madame.’

“She still said nothing, but, in a brusque movement which she made, her knees came close together, and her gold began to flow down upon the carpet as water flows from a gutter.

“The man, surprised, looked at this rivulet of metal, and suddenly he stooped to pick up the money.

“She rose in a mad fright, casting all her treasure to the ground, and she ran to the door to throw herself out upon the track. But he understood what she was about to do, rushed forward, caught her in his arms, made her sit down by force, and holding her wrists: ‘Listen, madame, I am not a criminal, and the proof is that I am going to pick up this money and give it back to you. But I am a lost man, a dead man, unless you help me to cross the frontier. I cannot tell you more. In one hour we shall be at the last Russian station; in one hour and twenty minutes we shall pass the boundary of the empire. If you do not rescue me I am lost. And yet, madame, I have neither killed nor stolen, nor done anything against my honor. I swear it to you. I cannot tell you more.

“And getting down on his knees, he picked up the gold, looking even for the last pieces, which had rolled far under the seats. Then, when the little leather bag was once more full, he returned it to his neighbor without adding a word, and, again he went and sat in the other corner of the carriage.

“They no longer stirred, either one or the other. She remained motionless and dumb, still fainting with terror, then little by little growing more at ease. As for him, he did not make a gesture, a movement; he sat straight, his eyes fastened before him, very pale, as though he had been dead. From time to time she looked at him suddenly, and as suddenly looked away. He was a man about thirty, very handsome, with every appearance of a gentleman.

“The train ran through the darkness, cast rending cries across the night, sometimes slackened its pace, then went off again at full speed. But suddenly it slowed, whistled several times, and stopped.

“Ivan appeared at the door to get his orders.

“The Countess Marie, with a trembling voice, considered her strange companion for the last time, then said to her servant, with a brusque voice:

“ ‘Ivan, you are to return to the count; I have no more need of you.’

“The man, speechless, opened his enormous eyes. He stammered:

“ ‘But—Barine!’

“She continued:

“ ‘No, you are not to come; I have changed my mind. I desire that you remain in Russia. Here is money to return. Give me your cap and your cloak.’

“The old servant, quite bewildered, bared his head and held out his cloak. He always obeyed without reply, being well accustomed to the sudden wishes and the irresistible caprices of his masters. And he withdrew, the tears in his eyes.

“The train went on, running towards the frontier.

“Then the Countess Marie said to her neighbor:

“ ‘These things are for you, monsieur; you are Ivan, my servant. I add only one condition to what I do: it is that you shall never speak to me, that you shall not address me a single word, either to thank me or for any purpose whatever.’

“The unknown bowed without uttering a word.

“Very soon they came to a stop once more, and officials in uniform visited the train. The countess offered them her papers, and pointing to the man seated at the back of the carriage:

“ ‘My servant, Ivan. Here is his passport.’

“The train went on.

“During the whole night they remained in tête-à-tête, both silent.

“In the morning, when they stopped at a German station, the unknown got down; then, standing straight in the door-way:

“ ‘Forgive my breaking my promise, madame; but I have deprived you of your servant, it is right that I should fill his place. Have you need of anything?’

“She answered, coldly:

“ ‘Go and find my maid.’

“He went to do so, then disappeared.

“When she got out of the carriage at some restaurant or other, she perceived him from a distance looking at her. They reached Mentone.”

The doctor was silent a second, then resumed:

“One day, as I was receiving my patients in my office, I saw enter a tall young fellow, who said to me:

“ ‘Doctor, I come to ask news about the Countess Marie Baranow. I am, although she does not know me, a friend of her husband.’

“I replied:

“ ‘She is doomed. She will never go back to Russia,’

“And the man suddenly commenced to sob, then he got up and went out, reeling like a drunkard.

“The same night I told the countess that a stranger had come to inquire from me about her health. She seemed moved, and told me all the story which I have just told you. She added:

“ ‘That man, whom I do not know at all, now follows me like my shadow, I meet him every time I go out; he looks at me after a strange fashion, but he has never spoken.’

“She reflected, then added:

“ ‘See, I would wager he is under my windows.’

“She left her easy-chair, went to pull back the curtains, and, sure enough, she showed me the man who had come to see me, now seated there on a bench upon the promenade, his eyes lifted towards the hotel. He perceived us, rose, and went off without once turning his head.

“And from that time forward I assisted at a surprising and sorrowful thing—at the silent love of these two beings, who did not even know one another.

“He loved her with the affection of an animal who has been saved, and who is grateful and devoted unto death. He came each day to say to me: ‘How is she?’ understanding that I had divined the secret. And he cried when he had seen her pass each day feebler and paler.

“She said to me:

“ ‘I have spoken but a single time to that strange man, and it seems to me as if I had known him for twenty years.

“And when they met, she would return his bow with a grave and charming smile. I could see that she was happy—she, the abandoned, the doomed—I could see that she was happy to be loved like this, with such respect and such constancy, with such exaggerated poetry, with this devotion which was ready for all things. And notwithstanding, faithful to her mystical resolve, she wildly refused to receive him, to know his name, to speak with him. She said: ‘No, no, that would spoil for me this curious friendship. We must remain strangers one to the other.’

“As for him, he also was certainly a kind of Don Quixote, because he made no attempt to approach her. He meant to keep to the end the absurd promise of never speaking, which he had made her in the railway carriage.

“Often, during her weary hours of weakness, she rose from her long chair, and went to open the curtains a little way to see if he was there, beneath her window. And when she had seen him, always motionless upon his bench, she went back and lay down with a smile upon her lips.

“She died one day about ten o’clock. As I was leaving the hotel he came up to me with a distracted face; he had already heard the news.

“ ‘I should like to see her, for one second, in your presence,’ said he.

“I took him by the arm and went back into the house.

“When he was before the couch of the dead he seized her hand and kissed it with an endless kiss, then escaped like a madman.”

The doctor again was silent; then continued:

“This is certainly the strangest railway adventure that I know. It must also be said that men take sometimes the wildest freaks.”

A woman murmured, half aloud:

“Those two people were not so crazy as you think. They were—they were—”

But she could not speak further, she was crying so. As we changed the conversation to calm her, we never knew what she had wished to say.