

The Orphan

By Guy De Maupassant

Mademoiselle Source had adopted this boy under very sad circumstances. She was at the time thirty-six years old. Being disfigured through having as a child slipped off her nurse's lap into the fireplace and burned her face shockingly, she had determined not to marry, for she did not want any man to marry her for her money.

A neighbor of hers, left a widow just before her child was born, died in giving birth, without leaving a sou. Mademoiselle Source took the new-born child, put him out to nurse, reared him, sent him to a boarding-school, then brought him home in his fourteenth year, in order to have in her empty house somebody who would love her, who would look after her, and make her old age pleasant.

She had a little country place four leagues from Rennes, and she now dispensed with a servant; her expenses having increased to more than double since this orphan's arrival, her income of three thousand francs was no longer sufficient to support three persons.

She attended to the housekeeping and cooking herself, and sent out the boy on errands, letting him also occupy himself in cultivating the garden. He was gentle, timid, silent, and affectionate. And she experienced a deep happiness, a fresh happiness when he kissed her without surprise or horror at her disfigurement. He called her "Aunt," and treated her as a mother.

In the evening they both sat down at the fireside, and she made nice little dainties for him. She heated some wine and toasted a slice of bread, and it made a charming little meal before going to bed. She often took him on her knees and covered him with kisses, murmuring tender words in his ear. She called him: "My little flower, my cherub, my adored angel, my divine jewel." He softly accepted her caresses, hiding his head on the old maid's shoulder. Although he was now nearly fifteen, he had remained small and weak, and had a rather sickly appearance.

Sometimes Mademoiselle Source took him to the city, to see two married female relatives of hers, distant cousins, who were living in the suburbs, and who were the only members of her family in existence. The two women had always found fault with her for having adopted this boy, on account of the inheritance; but for all that, they gave her a cordial welcome, having still hopes of getting a share for themselves, a third, no doubt, if what she possessed were only equally divided.

She was happy, very happy, always occupied with her adopted child. She bought books for him to improve his mind, and he became passionately fond of reading.

He no longer climbed on her knee to pet her as he had formerly done; but, instead, would go and sit down in his little chair in the chimney-corner and open a volume. The lamp placed at the edge of the little table above his head shone on his curly hair, and on a portion of his forehead; he did not move, he did not raise his eyes or make any gesture. He read on, interested, entirely absorbed in the story he was reading.

Seated opposite to him, she would gaze at him earnestly, astonished at his studiousness, often on the point of bursting into tears.

She said to him occasionally: "You will fatigue yourself, my treasure!" hoping that he would raise his head, and come across to embrace her; but he did not even answer her; he had not heard or understood what she was saying; he paid no attention to anything save what he read in those pages.

For two years he devoured an incalculable number of volumes. His character changed.

After this, he asked Mademoiselle Source several times for money, which she gave him. As he always wanted more, she ended by refusing, for she was both methodical and decided, and knew how to act rationally when it was necessary to do so. By dint of entreaties he obtained a large sum from her one night; but when he begged her for more a few days later, she showed herself inflexible, and did not give way to him further, in fact.

He appeared to be satisfied with her decision.

He again became quiet, as he had formerly been, remaining seated for entire hours, without moving, plunged in deep reverie. He now did not even talk to Madame Source, merely answering her remarks with short, formal words. Nevertheless, he was agreeable and attentive in his manner toward her; but he never embraced her now.

She had by this time grown slightly afraid of him when they sat facing one another at night on opposite sides of the fireplace. She wanted to wake him up, to make him say something, no matter what, that would break this dreadful silence, which was like the darkness of a wood. But he did not appear to listen to her, and she shuddered with the terror of a poor feeble woman when she had spoken to him five or six times successively without being able to get a word out of him.

What was the matter with him? What was going on in that closed-up head? When she had remained thus two or three hours opposite him, she felt as if she were going insane, and longed to rush away and to escape into the open country in order to avoid that mute, eternal companionship and also some vague danger, which she could not define, but of which she had a presentiment.

She frequently wept when she was alone. What was the matter with him? When she expressed a wish, he unobtrusively carried it into execution. When she wanted anything brought from the city, he immediately went there to procure it. She had no complaint to make of him; no, indeed! And yet .

Another year flitted by, and it seemed to her that a fresh change had taken place in the mind of the young man. She perceived it; she felt it; she divined it. How? No matter! She was sure she was not mistaken; but she could not have explained in what manner the unknown thoughts of this strange youth had changed.

It seemed to her that, until now, he had been like a person in a hesitating frame of mind, who had suddenly arrived at a determination. This idea came to her one evening as she met his glance, a fixed, singular glance which she had not seen in his face before.

Then he commenced to watch her incessantly, and she wished she could hide herself in order to avoid that cold eye riveted on her.

He kept staring at her, evening after evening, for hours together, only averting his eyes when she said, utterly unnerved:

“Do not look at me like that, my child!”

Then he would lower his head.

But the moment her back was turned she once more felt that his eyes were upon her. Wherever she went, he pursued her with his persistent gaze.

Sometimes, when she was walking in her little garden, she suddenly noticed him hidden behind a bush, as if he were lying in wait for her; and, again, when she sat in front of the house mending stockings while he was digging some vegetable bed, he kept continually watching her in a surreptitious manner, as he worked.

It was in vain that she asked him:

“What’s the matter with you, my boy? For the last three years, you have become very different. I don’t recognize you. Do tell me what ails you, and what you are thinking of.”

He invariably replied, in a quiet, weary tone:

“Why, nothing ails me, aunt!”

And when she persisted:

“Ah! my child, answer me, answer me when I speak to you. If you knew what grief you caused me, you would always answer, and you would not look at me that way. Have you any trouble? Tell me! I’ll comfort you!”

He went away, with a tired air, murmuring:

“But there is nothing the matter with me, I assure you.”

He had not grown much, having always a childish look, although his features were those of a man. They were, however, hard and badly cut. He seemed incomplete, abortive, only half finished, and disquieting as a mystery. He was a self-contained, unapproachable being, in whom there seemed always to be some active, dangerous mental labor going on.

Mademoiselle Source was quite conscious of all this, and she could not sleep at night, so great was her anxiety. Frightful terrors, dreadful nightmares assailed her. She shut herself up in her own room, and barricaded the door, tortured by fear.

What was she afraid of? She could not tell.

She feared everything, the night, the walls, the shadows thrown by the moon on the white curtains of the windows, and, above all, she feared him.

Why?

What had she to fear? Did she know what it was?

She could live this way no longer! She felt certain that a misfortune threatened her, a frightful misfortune.

She set forth secretly one morning, and went into the city to see her relatives. She told them about the matter in a gasping voice. The two women thought she was going mad and tried to reassure her.

She said:

“If you knew the way he looks at me from morning till night. He never takes his eyes off me! At times, I feel a longing to cry for help, to call in the neighbors, so much am I afraid. But what could I say to them? He does nothing but look at me.”

The two female cousins asked:

“Is he ever brutal to you? Does he give you sharp answers?”

She replied:

“No, never; he does everything I wish; he works hard; he is steady; but I am so frightened that I care nothing for that. He is planning something, I am certain of that—quite certain. I don’t care to remain all alone like that with him in the country.”

The relatives, astonished at her words, declared that people would be amazed, would not understand; and they advised her to keep silent about her fears and her plans, without, however, dissuading her from coming to reside in the city, hoping in that way that the entire inheritance would eventually fall into their hands.

They even promised to assist her in selling her house, and in finding another, near them.

Mademoiselle Source returned home. But her mind was so much upset that she trembled at the slightest noise, and her hands shook whenever any trifling disturbance agitated her.

Twice she went again to consult her relatives, quite determined now not to remain any longer in this way in her lonely dwelling. At last, she found a little cottage in the suburbs, which suited her, and she privately bought it.

The signature of the contract took place on a Tuesday morning, and Mademoiselle Source devoted the rest of the day to the preparations for her change of residence.

At eight o'clock in the evening she got into the diligence which passed within a few hundred yards of her house, and she told the conductor to put her down in the place where she usually alighted. The man called out to her as he whipped his horses:

“Good evening, Mademoiselle Source—good night!”

She replied as she walked on:

“Good evening, Père Joseph.” Next morning, at half-past seven, the postman who conveyed letters to the village noticed at the cross-road, not far from the high road, a large splash of blood not yet dry. He said to himself: “Hallo! some boozier must have had a nose bleed.”

But he perceived ten paces farther on a pocket handkerchief also stained with blood. He picked it up. The linen was fine, and the postman, in alarm, made his way over to the ditch, where he fancied he saw a strange object.

Mademoiselle Source was lying at the bottom on the grass, her throat cut with a knife.

An hour later, the gendarmes, the examining magistrate, and other authorities made an inquiry as to the cause of death.

The two female relatives, called as witnesses, told all about the old maid's fears and her last plans.

The orphan was arrested. After the death of the woman who had adopted him, he wept from morning till night, plunged, at least to all appearance, in the most violent grief.

He proved that he had spent the evening up to eleven o'clock in a café. Ten persons had seen him, having remained there till his departure.

The driver of the diligence stated that he had set down the murdered woman on the road between half-past nine and ten o'clock.

The accused was acquitted. A will, drawn up a long time before, which had been left in the hands of a notary in Rennes, made him sole heir. So he inherited everything.

For a long time, the people of the country boycotted him, as they still suspected him. His house, that of the dead woman, was looked upon as accursed. People avoided him in the street.

But he showed himself so good-natured, so open, so familiar, that gradually these horrible doubts were forgotten. He was generous, obliging, ready to talk to the humblest about anything, as long as they cared to talk to him.

The notary, Maitre Rameau, was one of the first to take his part, attracted by his smiling loquacity. He said at a dinner, at the tax collector's house:

“A man who speaks with such facility and who is always in good humor could not have such a crime on his conscience.”

Touched by his argument, the others who were present reflected, and they recalled to mind the long conversations with this man who would almost compel them to stop at the road corners to listen to his ideas, who insisted on their going into his house when they were passing by his garden, who could crack a joke better than the lieutenant of the gendarmes himself, and who possessed such contagious gaiety that, in spite of the repugnance with which he inspired them, they could not keep from always laughing in his company.

All doors were opened to him after a time.

He is to-day the mayor of his township.