
HAPPINESS

Guy de Maupassant

It was tea-time, just before the lights were brought in. The sky was all rosy with sunset and shimmering with gold dust. The villa looked down upon the Mediterranean, which lay without ripple or quiver, like a vast sheet of burnished metal, smooth and shining in the fading daylight. The irregular outline of the distant mountains on the right stood out black against the pale purple background of the western sky.

The conversation turned on love, that old familiar topic, and remarks that had been made many times before were being offered once again. The gentle melancholy of the twilight diffused a languorous charm and created an atmosphere of tender emotion. The word 'love', constantly reiterated, now in a man's virile voice, now in a woman's delicate tones, seemed to dominate the little drawing-room, hovering like a bird, brooding like a spirit.

'Is it possible to remain faithful to one love year after 'year?'

Some said yes, some said no. Distinctions were made, limits defined, and instances cited. The minds of all, men and woman alike, were surging with a host of disturbing memories, which trembled on their lips, but which they dared not utter. Their emotion expressed itself in the deep and ardent interest with which they discussed this common-

place, yet sovereign, passion, this tender and mysterious bond between two beings.

Suddenly someone, with his eyes on the distant prospect, exclaimed: 'Oh, look over there. What can it be?'

On the sky-line, a great blurred mass of grey was rising out of the sea. The ladies sprang to their feet and gazed in surprise at this startling thing that they had never seen before.

'It is Corsica,' someone explained. 'It is visible two or three times a year in certain exceptional atmospheric conditions. When the air is perfectly clear the mists of water vapour, which usually veil the horizon, are lifted.'

The ridges of the mountains could be faintly discerned, and some thought that they could make out even the snow on the peaks.

This sudden apparition of a phantom world, emerging from the sea, produced on those who witnessed it a disquieting impression, a feeling of uneasiness, almost of consternation.

An old gentleman, hitherto silent, exclaimed:

'That very island which has risen from the waters as if in response to our conversation, reminds me of a curious experience. It was there that I came upon a wonderful instance of faithful love, a love that was incredibly happy. This is the story:

'Five years ago I paid a visit to Corsica. Although visible now and then, like today, from the coast of France, less is known of that wild island than of America, and it seems almost more remote. Picture to yourselves a world still in a state of chaos, a raging sea of mountains, intersected by narrow gorges with rushing torrents. Instead of plains, there are vast, rolling sweeps of granite and gigantic undulations of the earth, overgrown with bush and great forests of chestnut trees and pines. It is a virgin country, desolate, uncultivated, in spite of an occasional village planted like a heap of rocks on a mountain top. There is no agriculture, industry, or art. You never come upon a scrap of wood-carving or sculpture, or any relic, showing in the Corsicans of old a taste, whether primitive or cultured, for graceful and beautiful things. It is this that strikes you most forcibly in that superb but austere country, its hereditary indifference to that striving after exquisite forms, which we call Art. In Italy, every palace is not only full of masterpieces, but is itself a masterpiece; in Italy, marble, wood, bronze, iron, metals,

stone, all testify to the genius of man, and even the humblest relics of antiquity, that lie about in old houses, reveal this divine passion for beauty. Italy is to all of us a beloved and sacred land, because it displays convincingly the energy, grandeur, power and triumph of creative intelligence.

‘And opposite her shores lies wild Corsica, just as she was in her earliest days. There a man leads his own life in his rude cottage, indifferent to everything that does not directly concern himself or his family quarrels. And he still retains the defects and qualities of primitive races. Passionate, vindictive, frankly bloodthirsty, he is at the same time hospitable, generous, faithful, ingenuous. He opens his door to the stranger and repays the most trifling act of kindness with loyal friendship.

‘For a whole month I had been wandering all over this magnificent island, and I had a feeling of having reached the end of the world. There were no inns, no taverns, no roads. Mule tracks lead up to hamlets that cling to the mountain sides and look down upon winding cañons, from whose depths rises of an evening the deep, muffled roar of torrents. The wanderer knocks at the door of a house and asks for a night’s hospitality. He takes his place at his host’s frugal board, sleeps beneath his humble roof, and the next day the master of the house escorts his guest to the outskirts of the village, where they shake hands and part.

‘One evening, after a ten hours’ tramp, I reached a little solitary dwelling at the upper end of a valley, which, a mile lower, fell away abruptly to the sea. It was a ravine of intense dreariness, walled in by bleak mountains, rising steeply on either side, and covered with bush, fallen rocks, and lofty trees. Near the hut there were some vines and a small garden, and at a little distance, some tall chestnut trees. It was enough to support life, and indeed amounted to a fortune on that poverty-stricken island.

‘I was met by an old woman of severe aspect and unusual cleanliness. Her husband rose from a straw-bottomed chair, bowed to me, and then resumed his seat without a word.

“‘Pray excuse him,” said his wife. “He is deaf. He is eighty-two.”

‘To my surprise, she spoke French like a Frenchwoman.

“‘You are not a native of Corsica?’ I asked.



'Never mind about him,' she continued, 'he can't hear us.'

“No, we are from the mainland, but we have lived here for fifty years.”

A wave of horror and dismay swept over me at the thought of those fifty years spent in that gloomy cranny, so far from towns and places where men live. An old shepherd entered, and we all sat down to supper, which consisted of a single course, thick broth containing potatoes, bacon, and cabbages all cooked together. When the short meal was over I took a seat before the door. I was weighed down by the melancholy aspect of that forbidding landscape and by that feeling of depression which at times overtakes the traveller on a dismal evening in dreary surroundings, a foreboding that the end of everything, the end of existence, the end of the world, is at hand. Suddenly the appalling wretchedness of life is borne in upon us; the isolation of each one of us; the hollowness of everything, the black loneliness of the heart, which is lulled and deceived by its own imaginings to the brink of the grave.

Presently the old woman rejoined me, and with the curiosity which lingers even in the serenest soul, she began to question me.

“So you come from France?”

“Yes, I am on a pleasure trip.”

“I suppose you live in Paris.”

“No, my home is Nancy.”

At this she seemed to be seized by some violent emotion, and yet I cannot explain how it was that I saw, or rather felt, her agitation.

“Your home is Nancy?” she repeated slowly.

Her husband appeared in the doorway, with the impassive air that deaf people have.

“Never mind about him,” she continued, “he cannot hear us.” After a pause she resumed:

“Then you know people at Nancy?”

“Yes, nearly everyone.”

“Do you know the Saint-Allaizes?”

“Very well indeed. They were friends of my father’s.”

“What is your name?”

I told her. She looked at me searchingly. Then, in the low voice of one conjuring up the past:

“Yes, yes, I remember perfectly. And what has become of the Brisemares?”

““They are all dead.”

““Ah! And did you know the Sirmonts?”

““Yes, the last of them is a General now.”

She was quivering with excitement, with pain, with mingled emotions, strong, sacred, impossible to describe, with a strange yearning to break the silence, to utter all the secrets hitherto locked away in her heart, to speak about those people, whose very names shook her to the soul.

““Henri de Sirmont. Yes, I know,” she exclaimed. “He is my brother.”

“I glanced at her in amazement. Suddenly I remembered.

“Long ago there had been a terrible scandal among the Lorraine aristocracy. Suzanne de Sirmont, a beautiful and wealthy girl, had eloped with a non-commissioned officer in the Hussar regiment commanded by her father. The son of a peasant, but for all that a fine figure in his blue pelisse, this common soldier had captivated his Colonel’s daughter. No doubt she had had opportunities of seeking him, admiring him, and falling in love with him, as she watched the squadrons trooping past. But how had she contrived to speak to him? How had they managed to meet and come to an understanding? How had she ventured to convey to him that she loved him? No one ever knew.

“No suspicion had been aroused. At the end of the soldier’s term of service they disappeared together one night. A search was made for them, but without result. Nothing was ever heard of them again and the family looked upon her as dead.

“And now I had found her in this desolate valley.

““I remember perfectly,” I said at last. “You are Mademoiselle Suzanne.”

“She nodded. Tears welled from her eyes. Then, with a glance towards the old man, who was standing motionless on the threshold of his hut:

““And that is my husband.”

“Then I realized that she still loved him, that she still beheld him with eyes that had not lost their illusion.

““I trust that you have been happy?” I ventured.

“In a voice straight from the heart she answered:

““Yes, very happy. He has made me very happy. I have never regretted anything.”

‘I gazed at her in sympathetic surprise, marvelling at the power of love. This well-bred, wealthy girl had followed that humble peasant, and had stooped to his level. She had submitted to an existence destitute of all the graces, luxuries, and refinements of life. She had conformed to his simple ways. And she still loved him. She had become a peasant woman, in bonnet and cotton gown. She sat on a straw-bottomed chair at a wooden table, and supped on a broth of cabbages, potatoes, and bacon, served in an earthenware dish. All night she lay on a palliasse by his side. She had never had a thought for anything but her lover. And she regretted nothing, neither jewels, silks and satins, luxuries, cushioned chairs, the warmth and perfume of tapestried rooms, nor downy couches so grateful to weary limbs. He was her one desire. As long as he was there she asked no more of life.

‘A mere girl, she had sacrificed her whole future, the world, and those who had brought her up and loved her. All alone with him, she had come to this wild ravine. And he had been all in all to her. He had satisfied her heart’s desires, its dreams, its endless longings, its undying hopes. He had filled her whole life with bliss from beginning to end. She could not possibly have been happier.

‘I lay awake all night, listening to the old soldier’s stertorous breathing, as he slept on his pallet by the side of her who had followed him to the ends of the earth, and I pondered on their strange, yet simple story; their happiness, so perfect, yet founded on so little.

‘At sunrise I shook hands with the old couple and bade them farewell.’



The speaker was silent.

‘You may say what you please,’ one of the women exclaimed, ‘her ideals were paltry. Her wants and desires were absurdly primitive. She was just a fool.’

‘What did that matter?’ replied another woman pensively. ‘She was happy.’

On the horizon, Corsica was vanishing in the gloom of night, sinking slowly back into the sea, as if its vast shadowy form had manifested

itself for no other purpose than to tell its tale of those two simple lovers who had found a refuge on its shores.