

MONSIEUR BUSH

GOING down the main staircase of his club, which was centrally heated to the temperature of a greenhouse, the Baron de Mordiane had left his fur coat open; the result was that when the massive front door closed behind him he felt an icy shiver, one of those sudden painful shivers, which affect the spirits like the shock of grief. Besides, he had lost money and he had been having trouble with his digestion for some time and had to be careful what he ate.

He was going home and suddenly the thought of his great empty flat, of his manservant dozing in the hall, of the bathroom, where the water for his evening bath would be singing gently in the heater, of his antique bed, broad and solemn as a mortuary couch, sent another shiver to the bottom of his heart and the marrow of his bones, even more painful than that of the icy air.

For some years he had been conscious of the oppression of loneliness which sometimes affects elderly bachelors. Before, he had been strong, active and cheerful, spending all his days in sport and all his nights in amusements. Now he was putting on weight and losing the power of enjoyment. Exercise tired him, suppers and even dinner-parties were bad for him, and women now bored him as much as they had amused him in his youth.

The monotony of evenings like this, with the same friends whom he always found in the same chairs at the club, the same game with its runs of good and bad luck, which always provoked the same comment, the same jokes on the same subjects made by the same men, the same scandal about the same women, all this sickened him to such an extent that he sometimes actually thought of suicide. He could not go on following this empty routine, so common place, so frivolous and at the same time so tedious, and he longed for some kind of peace and quiet, something comforting, without knowing exactly what.

He did not think of marriage, he was quite certain on that point; he had not the courage to condemn himself to the boredom and the slavery of the married state, to the hateful existence in which two

people, always living together, get to know each other so well that it is impossible for one to say anything that the other does not know in advance, or to have an idea, a desire, an opinion, not already guessed by the other. He held that it can be interesting to see a woman again only when one knows her slightly, while there is still in her something inscrutable and unknown, while she remains to some extent intriguing and mysterious. So he would have needed a family that was not a family, where he could have spent only a part of his life! And again the memory of his son haunted him.

For a year this son had never been out of his thoughts; he was conscious of a desire that gave him no peace to see him and know him. He had had the child in his young days as the result of a dramatic love affair. The baby had been sent to the South and brought up near Marseilles in ignorance of his father's name.

The latter had first paid a nurse's wages, then school fees, then a young man's extravagances, and finally he had provided money to enable him to make a sensible marriage. A discreet solicitor had acted for him in the matter without giving away his secret.

The Baron de Mordiane, therefore, knew only that a son of his blood was living somewhere not far from Marseilles, that he was considered intelligent and well educated, that he had married the daughter of an architect-contractor, to whose business he had succeeded. He was also said to be doing very well.

Why shouldn't he go and see this unknown son, concealing his identity, in order to make a preliminary investigation and see whether he might later on, if necessary, find a haven of refuge with this family?

He had done things handsomely, giving his son a large sum of money, gratefully accepted, to enable him to set up house. So he was certain not to find himself up against excessive pride; and this thought, this desire to go South was never out of his consciousness like some itch. He was drawn there, too, by a strange egotistical sentiment of self-pity at the idea of this cheerful sunny house on the sea, where he would find his daughter-in-law, young and pretty, his grandchildren welcoming him with open arms, and his son, who would remind him of his short-lived happiness in the

affair of long ago. He was only sorry that he had given him so much money and that the young man had made such good use of it that he could no longer appear in the role of benefactor.

He was walking along thinking of all this, with his fur collar turned up; and he suddenly made up his mind. A cab was passing; he hailed it and drove home and, when his manservant had woken up and opened the door, he said:

'Louis, we shall be starting to-morrow evening for Marseilles. We may be away for a fortnight; make all the necessary arrangements.'

The train was running by the side of the muddy Rhône and on across a dusty plain with smiling villages, a country of extensive views, bounded in the distance by bare mountains.

The Baron de Mordiane, waking up after a night in his sleeping compartment, looked sadly at himself in the small mirror he carried in his dressing-case. The hard Southern light showed him wrinkles which he had not realized were there; he had aged without being aware of it in the half-light of Paris flats.

As he looked at the crowsfeet round his eyes and the sagging lids and saw how the hair was receding from his temples and forehead, he thought:

'Good God! I've not only lost my youth; I'm an old man.'

And his longing for peace suddenly became acute, with a vague desire he had never felt before to dandle his grandchildren on his knee.

About one o'clock in the afternoon he arrived in an open carriage hired in Marseilles, in front of one of those country houses one finds in the South, which are so white, at the end of a drive of plane-trees, that one is dazzled and involuntarily closes the eyes. He smiled, as he walked up the drive, thinking:

'Upon my word! this is a jolly spot!'

Suddenly a child of five or six appeared from behind a shrub and stood on the edge of the drive, gazing wide-eyed at the gentleman.

Mordiane went up to him:

'Good afternoon, my boy!'

The boy did not answer.

The Baron bent down and picked him up to kiss him, but he was met by a suffocating smell of garlic, which seemed to exhale from his whole person, and put him down again quickly, murmuring:

'Oh! he must be the gardener's son.'

And he went on towards the house.

Washing was drying on a line in front of the door, shirts, napkins, cloths, aprons and sheets, while rows of socks on strings one above the other filled a whole window, like sausages hanging up in front of a pork-butcher's shop.

The Baron called.

A servant appeared, a typical Southern servant, dirty and slatternly, with unbrushed hair falling over her face; her skirt, darkened by an accumulation of stains, still showed traces of its original gaudy colour, reminiscent of a clown at a country fair.

He asked:

'Is M. Bush at home?'

He had given his son this name long ago, with a libertine's cynical levity, to make it clear that he had been found under a gooseberry bush.

The maid repeated:

'Do you want M. Bush?'

'Yes.'

'Well, he's in his room, drawing plans.'

'Tell him that M. Merlin wants to speak to him.'

She replied in astonishment:

'Well, come in, if you want to see him.'

And she shouted:

'M. Bush, a visitor!'

The Baron entered, and in a large room, darkened with half-closed shutters, he was dimly conscious of people and things in a general atmosphere of dirt.

Standing at a table covered with every kind of litter, a short bald man was drawing on a large sheet of paper.

He stopped his work and stepped forward.

His waistcoat open, his trousers unbuttoned and his shirt-sleeves

rolled up indicated that he felt the heat and his muddy shoes showed that it had rained some days before.

He asked with a strong Southern accent:

'Whom have I the honour of addressing?'

'Monsieur Merlin . . . I've come to consult you about buying a building site.'

'Ah! Excellent!'

And Bush, turning to his wife, who was knitting in the semi-darkness, said:

'Clear a chair, Joséphine.'

Mordiane now noticed a young woman, already looking elderly, for women in the provinces age at twenty-five, for want of care and daily baths, all the little precautions, all the little cleansing treatments, all the little attentions of the beauty parlour, which preserve the freshness of youth and prolong charm and beauty almost up to the age of fifty. She had a shawl over her shoulders and her hair was twisted into a knob anyhow; it was beautiful hair, thick and black, but one guessed that it rarely saw the brush; as she reached out towards a chair her hands were those of a charwoman; she picked up a child's garment, a knife, a piece of string, an empty flower-pot and a dirty plate, that had all been left on the chair, and offered it to the visitor.

He sat down and noticed on Bush's work-table, besides books and papers, two freshly pulled heads of lettuce, a basin, a hair-brush, a napkin, a revolver and several dirty cups.

The architect saw his expression and said with a smile:

'You must excuse us! The drawing-room is a bit untidy; it's because of the children.'

And he brought his chair up to talk to his client.

'So you're looking for a site not far from Marseilles?'

His breath, though from a distance, carried to the Baron the whiff of garlic which all Southerners exhale as naturally as a flower exhales its scent.

Mordiane asked:

'Was it your son I met under the plane-trees?'

'Yes! Yes! The second.'

'You've got two?'

'Three, Sir, one a year.'

And Bush seemed very proud of the fact.

The Baron was thinking: 'If they all smell as strong, their room must be a regular hothouse!'

He went on: 'Yes, I'm looking for a nice site, near the sea, with a little private beach.'

Bush plunged into details. He had ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred places of this sort, at all prices, to suit all tastes. Words flowed from him like water from a tap; he had a self-satisfied smile and kept nodding his bald round head.

And Mordiane remembered a little fair woman, slim, with a hint of sadness in her soft voice, saying 'My own darling love'; even the memory of that voice stirred the blood in his veins. She had loved him passionately, wildly, for three months; then she had become pregnant, her husband being away as a colonial governor; and she had run away and hidden herself, out of her mind with despair and fear, till the child was born, whom Mordiane had taken away one summer evening and whom they had never seen again.

She had died three years later of consumption, having gone to join her husband in his distant colonial governorship. Now this was their son in front of him; he accented his final syllables like the clang of a bell, as he said:

'This plot, Sir, is a unique bargain . . .'

Mordiane remembered that other voice, as soft as the whisper of the breeze, murmuring:

'My darling love, we'll never part.'

And he recalled the melting depths of those blue loving eyes, as he looked at the expressionless goggle eyes, blue also, of this absurd little man, who was yet like his mother.

Yes, he was getting more and more like her every minute; he had her intonation, her gestures, all her little ways; he was like her, as a monkey can be like a human being; he was her son, he had inherited from her a thousand little points of likeness, but, though unmistakable, they were caricatured, irritating and horrible. The Baron was miserable, suddenly haunted by this revolting likeness,

more obvious every minute; it was maddening, exasperating, it tortured him like a nightmare, like remorse.

He stammered: 'When could we inspect this site?'

'Oh! to-morrow, if you like.'

'Yes, to-morrow. What time?'

'One o'clock.'

'Right!'

The child he had met on the drive appeared at the open door and bawled: 'Fayther!'

Nobody answered him.

Mordiane was standing up, his legs quivering with the desire to run away and escape. The child's 'fayther' had struck him like a bullet. It was his son who was being addressed, his son, who stank of garlic, a typical Southern 'fayther'. How sweet had been the scent of his lover's body long ago!

Bush showed him to the door.

'Is the house yours?' said the Baron.

'Yes, Sir, I've just bought it. And I'm proud of it. I'm nobody's child and I don't forget it; I'm proud of it. I owe nothing to anyone. I'm a self-made man; I owe everything to my own efforts.'

The child, who had stayed near the door, shouted again, but from further away, 'Fayther.'

Mordiane, trembling and panic-stricken, fled as one flees from some great danger.

'He'll guess who I am and recognize me,' he thought. 'He'll throw his arms round my neck and call me "fayther" too and give me a garlic-scented kiss!'

'See you to-morrow, Sir.'

'Yes, to-morrow at one o'clock.'

The open carriage was bowling along the dusty road:

'Drive to the station!'

He could hear the two voices, one far off and soft, the weak, sad voice from the dead, saying 'My darling love', and the other, raucous, drawling, terrifying, bawling 'fayther', as one shouts 'Stop thief!', when a burglar is running away down the street.

The next evening, as he went into the club, the Comte d'Etreillis said to him :

'We haven't seen you for three days. Have you been ill?'

'Yes, I've been a bit off colour. I get headaches from time to time.'