

# The Colonel's Views.

BY GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

Translated for "THE SCRAP BOOK" by E. H. da Bois.

As to who is the most perfect master of the short story, opinions differ; but the palm must be undoubtedly awarded either to Edgar Allan Poe or to Guy de Maupassant. De Maupassant (1850—1893) was a native of Normandy who, early in life, conceived an ambition for literary fame. There was a family friendship between his mother and the great French realistic novelist, Gustave Flaubert; so that the latter undertook to train young Maupassant in the practise of fiction writing. Flaubert was an unsparing critic and a hard task-master. He would say to Maupassant: "Go and walk about the town for an hour or two, and then come back and write a description of what you have seen. In this way I can tell whether you have really seen the things that are most striking, and whether you can make me see them when I read your words." Often the young man would return and eagerly write, striving hard to bring out vividly what he thought to be the essential points; and often Flaubert would tear up the manuscript and send him out again, saying that he had missed everything and had really seen nothing whatsoever.

Little by little this discipline trained the mind and sharpened the perception of the future story-teller. He learned to produce in the fewest possible words a perfect etching of the scene that he had in mind and to give exactly the impression that he desired to convey. He became a wonderful observer of all phases of every-day existence; and finally, in his thirtieth year, he felt himself justified in publishing his first story. Every one instantly recognized the fact that a new writer of great power had arisen; and from that moment to the day of his death Maupassant stood in the very front rank of living writers. He wrote several novels, but his fame rests chiefly on the two hundred or more short stories which he composed from time to time. They are intensely real; they show an intimate knowledge of human nature; but unfortunately only five of them are suffused with gentleness and good feeling. The rest are either cynical or salacious, or hideously morbid; so that while they are miracles of literary art, they are unpleasant to a healthy taste. This fact is, in part, to be ascribed to the author's mode of life and in part to his waning sanity. After 1887 his mind became filled with ghastly pictures of death, and what he wrote at that time affords evidence of his mental condition. In 1890 his brain gave way entirely, and he was confined in an asylum until his death.

**M** A *foi!* (said Colonel Laporte) I am an old man. I have the gout. My legs are as stiff as ramrods, and yet, if a woman, a pretty woman, ordered me to go through the eye of a needle, I believe I'd jump like a clown at the circus. I shall always be so—it's in the blood. I'm an old beau, you see; an

old beau of the old school. The sight of a woman, a pretty woman, affects me clear down to my boots—*Voilà!*

Besides, we are all a bit like that in France, gentlemen. We remain cavaliers, cavaliers of love and adventure, even now that they have by edict suppressed God, whose sworn soldiers we used to be.

But woman, you see, they cannot take

out of our hearts. She is there and she will stay there. We love her and we shall love her and commit all sorts of follies for her while there is a France on the map of Europe. And even if they wipe out France, there will always remain Frenchmen.

As for me, under the eyes of a woman, a pretty woman, I can do anything. *Sapristi!* When the sacred thought of her comes into my heart, it is like fire in my veins. I want to do something, I don't know what—to fight, to knock somebody down, to break the furniture, to show myself the strongest, the bravest, the most reckless and devoted of men.

But I'm not the only one. No, indeed. The whole French army is like that, I assure you. From the meanest private all the way up to the general, we are ready to go to the last extremity for the sake of a woman, a pretty woman.

Think what Joan of Arc made us do, long ago. Why, I bet you that if a woman, a pretty woman, had taken command of the army on the eve of Sedan, when Marshal MacMahon was wounded, we would have burst through the Prussian lines, *sacré bleu!* and drunk blood from their cannons.

It isn't a Trochu that we need in Paris, but a Sainte Geneviève.

I remember well a little story of the war which proves, beyond a doubt, that we are capable of anything in the presence of a woman. I was captain, then, only captain, and had command of a detachment of scouts who were fighting their way back through territory occupied by the Prussians. We were hemmed in, pursued, beaten, disheartened, and almost dead with exhaustion and hunger. Moreover, we must reach Bar-sur-Tain before morning, or we would be done for, cut to pieces, every one of us. How had we escaped so far? I'm sure I don't know. We had still twelve miles to make during the night, twelve miles in the snow and through the snow, with nothing to eat. I said to myself: "It's all up! My poor fellows will never get there."

The day before we had had nothing to eat. All that day we had remained hidden in a barn, close against one another, to keep warm, unable to speak or to move, sleeping by fits and starts,

as men do when they are completely worn out. At five o'clock it was night, the pale night of a snow-storm. I roused my men. Many of them did not want to get up, they could not move or stand on their feet, so stiff were they with cold and lying down. In front of us the open country, a great waste of country all bare, with the snow falling. It fell and fell like a curtain, the white flakes that hid everything under a heavy, frozen mantle, thick and dead, a mattress or cloth of ice. You would have said it was the end of the world.

"Forward, march, my children!"

They looked in front of them, at the white dust that fell from the sky, and seemed to be thinking: "What's the use? As well die here!"

Then I drew my revolver. "The first man who falters I'll shoot!" And they started to march, ever so slowly, like men whose legs can no longer support them.

I sent four ahead to show us the way, three hundred yards in front; then the rest followed *pêle mêle*, in a mass, according to the chance of fatigue and length of step. The strongest I placed in the rear with the order to hurry up the laggards at the point of the bayonet—in the back. The snow seemed to bury us alive; it powdered the caps and cloaks without melting upon them, it made fantoms of us, ghosts, the ghosts of dead soldiers, tired out.

I said to myself: "We'll never get out of this, except by a miracle."

Sometimes we stopped for a few minutes on account of those who could not keep up. Then we heard nothing but the vague whisper of the snow, that almost imperceptible sound made by the colliding and mingling of all the flakes that fell. Some of the men shook themselves. Others did not budge. Then I gave the order to move on. Muskets were raised once more to shoulders and in utter exhaustion we took up the march.

Suddenly the scouts returned. Something had alarmed them. They had heard voices in front of us. I sent forward six men and a sergeant and waited.

A moment later a shrill cry, the cry of a woman, pierced the heavy silence of the storm, and, in a few minutes they brought back two prisoners, an old man

and a girl. I questioned them in a low voice. They were fleeing from the Prussians who had seized their house that evening and at once invaded the larder. The father was afraid for his daughter and, without saying a word to the servants, the two of them had escaped into the night.

I perceived at once that they were farmers, nothing but farmers.

"You will accompany us," I said to them, and again we started. As the old man knew the country, he was our guide. The snow ceased to fall, the stars came out, and it grew terribly cold. The young girl, who had her father's arm, walked with difficulty. She murmured several times, "I can't feel my feet any more," and I suffered more than she did to see the poor little woman dragging herself that way through the snow.

Suddenly she stopped.

"Father," she said, "I am so tired that I can't go any farther."

The old man wanted to carry her, but he could not even lift her, and she sank down on the ground, heaving a deep sigh. The men formed a circle about them. As for me, I stamped around the place, not knowing what to do and unable to make up my mind to leave them so, that man and that child. Suddenly, one of my soldiers, a Parisian whose name was "Pratique," spoke up: "Come, fellows, we must carry the young lady, or we're no Frenchmen, *nom d'un chien!*"

I believe, *ma foi*, that I swore with joy.

"*Nom d'un nom!* that's right boys, and I'll do my part."

We saw vaguely, in the darkness on the left, the trees of a little wood. Several men went off and presently returned with a lot of branches tied together to form a litter.

"Who'll lend his cloak?" cried Pratique inquiringly. "It is for a pretty girl, brothers."

Ten cloaks tumbled at his feet. In a second the young girl was snuggled in the warm garments and lifted upon six shoulders. I placed myself at the head on the right, and was content, *ma foi*, to have my charge.

They started off as if they had had

a drink of wine, more briskly, with more life. I even heard them cracking jokes. A woman is enough, you see, to electrify Frenchmen. The soldiers were all but marching in line, warmed and refreshed. An old sharpshooter, who followed the litter, waiting his turn to replace the first bearer that faltered, murmured to a comrade, but loud enough for me to hear:

"I'm not young any more, but it's all the same. A woman's the thing to put heart into my heart!"

Until three o'clock in the morning, they marched almost without rest. Then, suddenly, the scouts returned once more, and in a moment the whole detachment had crouched down in the snow, making only a vague shadow on the ground. I gave the orders in a low voice and behind me I heard the dry metallic click of the loading of pieces. For down there in the middle of the plain, a strange thing was moving. You would have said a great beast that ran, lengthened itself out like a serpent, or gathered itself in a ball, leaped quickly now to the right, now to the left, stopped and then moved forward again. Suddenly, the moving thing drew nearer and I saw approaching, at a good pace, one behind the other, twelve Prussian lancers who had lost their way.

They were so close now that I heard perfectly the loud snorting of the horses, the clanging of arms, and the creaking of saddles.

"Fire!" I cried.

And the report of fifteen guns broke the stillness of the night. Four or five shots followed, then one all by itself, and when the smoke cleared away we saw that the twelve men, with nine horses, had fallen. Three horses fled at a furious gallop and one dragged behind him, hanging by the foot to the stirrup and rebounding madly, the dead body of his rider.

A soldier behind me laughed, a terrible laugh. Another said:

"Long live the widows!"

A third added: "He was married, perhaps."

"Not too long!"

A head was raised from the litter.

"What is it?" said she. "Are they fighting?"

I answered:

"It's nothing; we've killed a dozen Prussians!"

"Poor men!" she murmured; but because she was cold she disappeared again beneath the cloaks.

We went on. For a long time we marched. At last the sky paled. The snow became clear, luminous, glistening; and a rosy glow showed itself in the East. A distant voice cried:

"Who goes there?"

All the detachment halted; and I advanced to tell who we were. We had reached the French lines.

As my men filed past the guard, a mounted officer, whom I had told, asked in a loud voice as the litter went by:

"What is that you have in there?"

Then a little blond head appeared disheveled and smiling, with the ready answer:

"It's me, sir."

A laugh went up from the men and their hearts were gay. Then Pratique,

who was marching beside the stretcher, flung up his cap and shouted, "*Vive la France!*"

And, though I don't know why, I was deeply moved; it was so kind and brave. It seemed to me that we had saved our country, that we had done something that other men could not do, something simple-hearted and truly patriotic.

That little face, you know, I shall never forget it; and if I were to give my opinion on the suppression of drums and bugles, I'd propose to replace them in each legion by a pretty girl. That would do more good than to play the "*Marseillaise*." *Nom d'un nom!* How that would put life into a trooper to have a madonna like that, a living madonna, riding beside the colonel.

He was silent for a few seconds, then added with an air of conviction, nodding his head:

That's it, we love women well, we Frenchmen.

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