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# **The Works of Guy de Maupassant, Volume 4**

Guy de Maupassant

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## THE OLD MAID

Count Eustache d'Etchegorry's solitary country house had the appearance of a poor man's home, where people do not have enough to eat every day in the week, where the bottles are more frequently filled at the pump than in the cellar, and where they wait until it is dark before lighting the candles.

It was an old and sordid building; the walls were crumbling to pieces, the grated, iron gates were eaten away by rust, the holes in the broken windows had been mended with old newspapers, and the ancestral portraits which hung against the walls, showed that it was no tiller of the soil, nor miserable laborer whose strength had gradually worn out and bent his back, who lived there. Great, knotty elm trees sheltered it, as if they had been a tall, green screen, and a large garden, full of wild rose-trees and of straggling plants, as well as of sickly-looking vegetables, which sprang up half-withered from the sandy soil, went down as far as the bank of the river.

From the house, one could hear the monotonous sound of the water, which at one time rushed yellow and impetuous towards the sea, and then again flowed back, as if driven by some invisible force towards the town which could be seen in the distance, with its pointed spires, its ramparts, and its ships at anchor by the side of the quay, and its citadel built on the top of a hill.

A strong smell of the sea came from the offing, mingled with the resinous smell of pine logs, and of the large nets with great pieces of sea-weed clinging to them, which were drying in the sun.

Why had Monsieur d'Etchegorry, who did not like the country, who was of a sociable rather than of a solitary nature, for he never walked alone, but kept step with the retired officers who lived there, and frequently played game after game at *piquet* at the *café*, when he was in town, buried himself in such a solitary place, by the side of a dusty road at Boucau, a village close to the town, where on Sundays the soldiers took off their tunics, and sat in their shirt sleeves in the public-houses, drank the thin wine of the country, and teased the girls.

What secret reasons had he for selling the mansion which he had possessed at Bayonne, close to the bishop's palace, and condemning his daughter, a girl of nineteen, to such a dull, listless, solitary life; counting the minutes far from everybody, as if she had been a nun, no one knew, but most people said that he had lost immense sums in gambling, and had wasted his fortune and ruined his credit in doubtful speculations. They wondered whether he still regretted the tender, sweet woman whom he had lost, who died one evening, after years of suffering, like a church lamp whose oil has been consumed to the last drop. Was he seeking for perfect oblivion, for that soothing repose in nature, in which a man becomes enervated, and which envelopes him like a moist, warm cloth? How could he be satisfied with such an existence? With the bad cooking, and the careless, untidy ways of a char-woman, and with the shabby clothes, that were discolored by use!

His numerous relations had been anxious about it at first, and had tried to cure him of his apparent hypochondria, and to persuade him to employ himself with something, but as he was obstinate, avoided them, rejected their friendly offers with arrogance and self-sufficiency, even his brothers had abandoned him, and almost renounced him. All their affection had been transferred to the poor child who shared his solitude, and who endured all that wretchedness with the resignation of a saint. Thanks to them, she had a few gleams of pleasure in their exile, and was not dressed like a beggar girl, but received invitations, and appeared here and there at some ball, concert or tennis party, and the girl was extremely grateful to them for it all, although she would much have preferred that nobody should have held out a helping hand to her, but have left her to her dull life, without any day dreams or homesickness, so that she might grow used to her lot, and day by day lose all that remained to her of her pride of race and of her youth.

With her sensitive and proud mind, she felt that she was treated exactly like others were in society, that people showed her either too much pity or too much indifference, that they knew all about her side life of undeserved poverty, and that in the folds of her muslin dress they could smell the mustiness of her home. If she was animated, or buoyed up with secret hopes in her heart, if there was a smile on her lips, and her eyes were bright when she went out at the

gate, and the horses carried her off to town at a rapid trot, she was all the more low-spirited and tearful when she returned home, and she used to shut herself up in her room and find fault with her destiny, declared to herself that she would imitate her father, show relations and friends politely out, with a passive and resigned gesture, and make herself so unpleasant and embarrassing that they would grow tired of it in the end, leave long intervals between their visits, and finally would not come to see her at all, but would turn away from her, as if from a hospital where incurable patients were dying.

Nevertheless, the older the count grew, the more the supplies in the small country house diminished, and the more painful and harder existence became. If a morsel of bread was left uneaten on the table, if an unexpected dish was served up at table, if she put a piece of ribbon into her hair, he used to heap violent, spiteful reproaches on her, torrents of rage which defile the mouth, and violent threats like those of a madman, who is tormented by some fixed idea. Monsieur d'Etchegorry had dismissed the servant and engaged a char-woman, whom he intended to pay, merely by small sums on account, and he used to go to market with a basket on his arm.

He locked up every morsel of food, used to count the lumps of sugar and charcoal, and bolted himself in all day long in a room that was larger than the rest, and which for a long time had served as a drawing-room. At times he would be rather more gentle, as if he were troubled by vague thoughts, and used to say to his daughter, in an agonized voice, and trembling all over: "You will never ask me for any accounts, I say?... You will never demand your mother's fortune?"

She always gave him the required promise, did not worry him with any questions, nor give vent to any complaints, and thinking of her cousins, who would have good dowries, who were growing up happily and peacefully, amidst careful and affectionate surroundings and beautiful old furniture, who were certain to be loved, and to get married some day, and she asked herself why fate was so cruel to some, and so kind to others, and what she had done to deserve such disfavor.

Marie-des-Anges d'Etchegorry, without being absolutely pretty, possessed all the charm of her age, and everybody liked her. She was as tall and slim as a lily, with beautiful, fine, soft fair hair, eyes of a dark, undecided color, which reminded one of those springs in the depths of the forests, in which a ray of the sun is but rarely reflected—mirrors which changed now to violet, then to the color of leaves, but most frequently of a velvety blackness—and her whole being exhaled a freshness of childhood, and something that could not be described, but which was pleasant, wholesome and frank.

She lived on through a long course of years, growing old, faithful to the man who might have given her his name, honorable, having resisted temptations and snares, worthy of the motto which used to be engraved on the tombs of Roman matrons before the Cæsars: "*She spun wool, and kept at home.*"

When she was just twenty-one, Marie-des-Anges fell in love, and her beautiful, dark, restless eyes for the first time became illuminated with a look of dreamy happiness. For someone seemed to have noticed her; he waltzed with her more frequently than he did with the other girls, spoke to her in a low voice, dangled at her petticoats, and discomposed her so much, that she flushed deeply as soon as she heard the sound of his voice.

His name was André de Gèdrè; he had just returned from Sénégal, where after several months of daily fighting in the desert, he had won his sub-lieutenant's epaulets.

With his thin, surnburnt, yellow face, looking awkward in his tight coat, in which his broad shoulders could not distend themselves comfortably, and in which his arms, which had formerly been used to cut right and left, were cramped in their tight sleeves, he looked like one of those pirates of old, who used to scour the seas, pillaging, killing, hanging their prisoners to the yard-arms, who were ready to engage a whole fleet, and who returned to the port laden with booty, and occasionally with waifs and strays picked up at sea.

He belonged to a race of buccaneers or of heroes, according to the breeze which swelled his sails and carried him North or South. Over head and ears in debt, reduced to discounting doubtful legacies, to gambling at Casinos, and to mortgaging the few acres of

land that he had remaining at much below their value, he nevertheless managed to make a pretty good figure in his hand to mouth existence; he never gave in, never showed the blows that he had received, and waited for the last struggle in a state of blissful inactivity, while he sought for renewed strength and philosophy from the caressing lips of women.

Marie-des-Anges seemed to him to be a toy which he could do with as he liked. She had the flavor of unripe fruit; left to herself, and sentimental as she was, she would only offer a very brief resistance to his attacks, and would soon yield to his will, and when he was tired of her and threw her off, she would bow to the inevitable, and would not worry him with violent scenes, nor stand in his way, with threats on her lips. And so he was kind, and used to wheedle her, and by degrees enveloped her in the meshes of a net, which continually hemmed her in closer and closer. He gained entire possession of her heart and confidence, and without expressing any wish or making any promises, managed so to establish his influence over her, that she did nothing but what he wished.

Long before Monsieur de Gèdrè had addressed any passionate words to her, or any avowal which immediately introduces warmth and danger into a flirtation, Marie-des-Anges had betrayed herself with the candor of a little girl, who does not think she is doing any wrong, and cannot hide what she thinks, what she is dreaming about, and the tenderness which lies hidden at the bottom of her heart, and she no longer felt that horror of life which had formerly tortured her. She no longer felt herself alone, as she had done formerly—so alone, so lost, even among her own people, that everything had become indifferent to her.

It was very pleasant and soothing to love and to think that she was loved, to have a furtive and secret understanding with another heart, to imagine that he was thinking of her at the same time that she was thinking of him, to shelter herself timidly under his protection, to feel more unhappy each time she left him, and to experience greater happiness every time they met.

She wrote him long letters, which she did not venture to send him when they were written, for she was timid and feared that he would make fun of them, and she sang the whole day through, like a lark

that is intoxicated with the sun, so that Monsieur d'Etchegorry scarcely recognized her any longer.

Soon they made appointments together in some secluded spot, meeting for a few minutes in the aisles of the cathedral and behind the ramparts, or on the promenade of the *Alleés-Marinès*, which was always dark, on account of the dense foliage.

And at last, one evening in June, when the sky was so studded with stars that it might have been taken for a triumphal route of some sovereign, strewn with precious stones and rare flowers, Monsieur de Gèdrè went into the large, neglected garden.

Marie-des-Anges was waiting for him in a somber walk with witch elms on either side and listening for the least noise, looking at the closed windows of the house, and nearly fainting, as much from fear as from happiness. They spoke in a low voice. She was close to him and he must have heard the beating of her heart, into which he had cast the first seeds of love, and he put his arms around her and clasped her gently, as if she had been some little bird that he was afraid of hurting, but which he did not wish to allow to escape.

She no longer knew what she was doing, but was in a state of entire intense, supreme happiness. She shivered, and yet something burning seemed to permeate her whole being under her skin, from the nape of her neck to her feet, like a stream of burning spirit, and she would not have had the strength to disengage herself or to take a step forward, so she leant her head instinctively and very tenderly against André's shoulder. He kissed her hair, touched her forehead with his lips, and at last put them against hers. The girl felt as if she were going to die, and remained inert and motionless, with her eyes full of tears.

He came nearly every evening for two months. She had not the courage to repel him and to speak to him seriously of the future, and could not understand why he had not yet asked her father for her hand and had not fulfilled his former promises, until, one Sunday, as she was coming from High Mass, walking on before her cousins, Marie-des-Anges heard the following words, from a group in which André was standing, and he was the speaker: "Oh! no," he said, "you are altogether mistaken; I should never do anything so

foolish.... One does not marry a girl without a halfpenny; one takes her for one's mistress."

The unhappy girl mastered her feelings, went down the steps of the porch quite steadily, but feeling utterly crushed, as if by the news of some terrible disaster, and joined the servant, who was waiting for her, to accompany her back to Boucau. The effects of what she had heard were to give her a serious illness and for some time she hovered between life and death, consumed and wasted by a violent fever; and when after a fortnight's suffering, she grew convalescent, and looked at herself in the glass, she recoiled, as if she had been face to face with an apparition, for there was nothing left of her former self.

Her eyes were dull, her cheeks pale and hollow, and there were white streaks in her silky, light hair. Why had she not succumbed to her illness? Why had destiny reserved her for such a trial, and increased her unhappy lot, that of disappointed hopes, thus? But when that rebellious feeling was over, she accepted her cross, fell into a state of ardent devotion and became crystallized in the torpor of an old woman, tried with all her might to rid her memory of any recollections that had become incrustated in it, and to put a thick black veil between herself and the past.

She never walked in the garden now, and never went to Bayonne, and she would have liked to have choked herself, and to have beaten herself, when, in spite of her efforts and of her will, she remembered her lost happiness, and when some sensual feeling and a longing for past pleasures agitated her body afresh.

That lasted for four years, which finished her and altogether destroyed her good looks and she had the figure and the appearance of an old maid, when her father suddenly died, just as he was going to sit down to dinner; and when the lawyer, who was summoned immediately, had ransacked the cupboards and drawers, discovered a mass of securities, of bank-notes, and of gold, which Count d'Etchegorry, who was eaten up with avarice, had amassed eagerly, and hidden away, it was found that Mademoiselle Marie-des-Anges, who was his sole heiress, possessed an income of fifty thousand francs.

She received the news without any emotion, for of what use was such a fortune to her now, and what should she do with it? Her eyes, alas! had been too much opened by all the tears that had fallen from them for her to delude herself with visionary hopes, and her heart had been too cruelly wounded to warm itself by lying illusions, and she was seized by melancholy when she thought that in future she would be coveted, she who had been kept at arm's length, as if she had been a leper; that men would come after her money with odious impatience, that now that she was worn out and ugly, tired of everything and everybody, she would most certainly have plenty of suitors to refuse, and that perhaps he would come back to her, attracted by that amount of money, like a hawk hovering over its prey, that he would try to re-ignite the dead cinders, to revive some spark in them and to obtain pardon for his cowardice.

Oh! With what bitter pleasure she could have thrown those millions into the road to the ragged beggars, or scattered them about like manna to all who were suffering and dying of hunger, and who had neither roof nor hearth! She naturally soon became the target at which everyone aimed, the goal for which all those who had formerly disdained her most, now eagerly tried.

Monsieur de Gèdrè was not long before he was in the ranks of her suitors, as she had foreseen, and caused her that last heart-burning of seeing him humble, kneeling at her feet, acting a comedy, trying every means of overcoming her resistance, and to regain possession of that heart, which was closed against him, after having been entirely his, in all its adorable virginity.

And Marie-des-Anges had loved him so deeply that his letters in which he recalled the past, and stirred up all the recollections of their love, their kisses, and their dreams, softened her in spite of herself, and came across her profound, incurable sadness, like a factitious light, the reflection of a bonfire, which, from a distance, illuminates a prison cell for a moment.

He was poor himself and had not wished, so he said, to drag her into his life of privation and shifts, and she thought to herself that perhaps he had been right; and thus sensibly, like a mother or an elder sister, who has become indulgent and wishes to close her eyes and her ears against everything, to forgive again, to forgive always,

she excused him, and tried to remember nothing but those months of tenderness and of ecstasy, those months of happiness, and that he had been the first, the only man who, in the course of her unhappy, wasted life, had given her a moment's peace, had caused her to dream, and had made her happy, and youthful and loving.

He had been charitable towards her and she would be so a hundred fold towards him; and so she grew happy again, when she said to herself that she would be his benefactress, that even with his hard heart, he could not accept the sacrifice from a woman, who, like so many others, might have returned him evil for evil, but who preferred to be kind and maternal, after having been in love with him, without some feelings of gratitude and emotion.

And that resolution transfigured her, restored to her temporarily, something of her youth, which had so soon fled away, and a poor, heroic saint amongst all the saints, she took refuge in a Carmelite convent, so as to escape from this returning temptation, and to bequeath everything of which she could lawfully dispose, to Monsieur de Gèdrè.

## THE AWAKENING

During the three years that she had been married, she had not left the *Val de Ciré*, where her husband possessed two cotton-mills. She led a quiet life, and although she had no children, she was quite happy in her house among the trees, which the work-people called the *château*.

Although Monsieur Vasseur was considerably older than she was, he was very kind. She loved him, and no guilty thought had ever entered her mind.

Her mother came and spent every summer at Ciré, and then returned to Paris for the winter, as soon as the leaves began to fall.

Jeanne coughed a little every autumn, for the narrow valley through which the river wound, grew foggy for five months. First of all, slight mists hung over the meadows, making all the low-lying ground look like a large pond, out of which the roof of the houses rose.

Then that white vapor, which rose like a tide, enveloped everything, and turned the valley into a land of phantoms, through which men moved about like ghosts, without recognizing each other ten yards off, and the trees, wreathed in mist, and dripping with moisture, rose up through it.

But the people who went along the neighboring hills, and who looked down upon the deep, white depression of the valley, saw the two huge chimneys of Monsieur Vasseur's factories, rising above the mist below. Day and night they vomited forth two long trails of black smoke, and that alone indicated that people were living in that hollow, which looked as if it were filled with a cloud of cotton.

That year, when October came, the medical men advised the young woman to go and spend the winter in Paris with her mother, as the air of the valley was dangerous for her weak chest, and she went. For a month or so, she thought continually of the house which she had left, to which she seemed rooted, and whose well-known furniture and quiet ways she loved so much, but by degrees she grew accustomed to her new life, and got to liking entertainments, dinners and evening parties, and balls.

Till then, she had retained her girlish manners, she had been undecided and rather sluggish; she walked languidly, and had a tired smile, but now she became animated and merry, and was always ready for pleasure. Men paid her marked attentions, and she was amused at their talk, and made fun of their gallantries, as she felt sure that she could resist them, for she was rather disgusted with love, from what she had learned of it in marriage.

The idea of giving up her body to the coarse caresses of such bearded creatures, made her laugh with pity, and shudder a little with ignorance.

She asked herself how women could consent to those degrading contacts with strangers, as they were already obliged to endure them with their legitimate husbands. She would have loved her husband much more if they had lived together like two friends, and had restricted themselves to chaste kisses, which are the caresses of the soul.

But she was much amused by their compliments, by the desire which showed itself in their eyes, and which she did not share, by their declarations of love, which they whispered into her ear as they were returning to the drawing-room after some grand dinner, by their words, which were murmured so low that she almost had to guess them, and which left her blood quite cool, and her heart untouched, while they gratified her unconscious coquetry, while they kindled a flame of pleasure within her, and while they made her lips open, her eyes glow bright, and her woman's heart, to which homage was due, quiver with delight.

She was fond of those *tête-à-têtes* when it was getting dusk, when a man grows pressing, stammers, trembles and falls on his knees. It was a delicious and new pleasure to her to know that they felt that passion which left her quite unmoved, to say *no*, by a shake of the head, and with her lips, to withdraw her hands, to get up and calmly ring for lights, and to see the man who had been trembling at her feet, get up, confused and furious when he heard the footman coming.

She often had a hard laugh, which froze the most burning words, and said harsh things, which fell like a jet of icy water on the most ardent protestations, while the intonations of her voice were enough to make any man who really loved her, kill himself, and there were two especially who made obstinate love to her, although they did not at all resemble one another.

One of them, Paul Péronel, was a tall man of the world, gallant and enterprising, a man who was accustomed to successful love affairs, and who knew how to wait, and when to seize his opportunity.

The other, Monsieur d'Avancelle, quivered when he came near her, scarcely ventured to express his love, but followed her like a shadow, and gave utterance to his hopeless desire by distracted looks, and the assiduity of his attentions to her, and she made him a kind of slave who followed her steps, and whom she treated as if he had been her servant.

She would have been much amused if anybody had told her that she would love him, and yet she did love him, after a singular fashion. As she saw him continually, she had grown accustomed to his

voice, to his gestures, and to his manner, as one grows accustomed to those with whom one meets continually. Often his face haunted her in her dreams, and she saw him as he really was; gentle, delicate in all his actions, humble, but passionately in love, and she awoke full of those dreams, fancying that she still heard him, and felt him near her, until one night (most likely she was feverish), she saw herself alone with him in a small wood, where they were both of them sitting on the grass. He was saying charming things to her, while he pressed and kissed her hands.

She could feel the warmth of his skin and of his breath, and she was stroking his hair, in a very natural manner.

We are quite different in our dreams to what we are in real life. She felt full of love for him, full of calm and deep love, and was happy in stroking his forehead and in holding him against her. Gradually he put his arms round her, kissed her eyes and her cheeks without her attempting to get away from him; their lips met, and she yielded.

When she saw him again, unconscious of the agitation that he had caused her, she felt that she grew red, and while he was telling her of his love, she was continually recalling to mind their previous meeting, without being able to get rid of the recollection.

She loved him, loved him with refined tenderness, which arose chiefly from the remembrance of her dream, although she dreaded the accomplishment of the desires which had arisen in her mind.

At last, he perceived it, and then she told him everything, even to the dread of his kisses, and she made him swear that he would respect her, and he did so. They spent long hours of transcendental love together, during which their souls alone embraced, and when they separated, they were enervated, weak and feverish.

Sometimes their lips met, and with closed eyes they reveled in that long, yet chaste caress; she felt, however, that she could not resist much longer, and as she did not wish to yield, she wrote and told her husband that she wanted to come to him, and to return to her tranquil, solitary life. But in reply, he wrote her a very kind letter, and strongly advised her not to return in the middle of the winter, and so expose herself to a sudden change of climate, and to

the icy mists of the valley, and she was thunderstruck, and angry with that confiding man, who did not guess, who did not understand, the struggles of her heart.

February was a warm, bright month, and although she now avoided being alone with Monsieur Avancelle, she sometimes accepted his invitation to drive round the lake in the *Bois de Boulogne* with him, when it was dusk.

On one of those evenings, it was so warm that it seemed as if the sap in every tree and plant were rising. Their cab was going at a walk; it was growing dusk, and they were sitting close together, holding each others' hands, and she said to herself:

"It is all over, I am lost!" for she felt her desires rising in her again, the imperious want for that supreme embrace, which she had undergone in her dream. Every moment their lips sought each other, clung together and separated, only to meet again immediately.

He did not venture to go into the house with her, but left her at her door, more in love with him than ever, and half fainting.

Monsieur Paul Péronel was waiting for her in the little drawing-room, without a light, and when he shook hands with her, he felt how feverish she was. He began to talk in a low, tender voice, lulling her worn-out mind with the charm of amorous words.

She listened to him without replying, for she was thinking of the other; she thought she was listening to the other, and thought she felt him leaning against her, in a kind of hallucination. She saw only him, and did not remember that any other man existed on earth, and when her ears trembled at those three syllables: "I love you," it was he, the other man, who uttered them, who kissed her hands, who strained her to his breast, like the other had done shortly before in the cab. It was he who pressed victorious kisses on her lips, it was his lips, it was he whom she held in her arms and embraced, whom she was calling to, with all the longings of her heart, with all the over-wrought ardor of her body.

When she awoke from her dream, she uttered a terrible cry. Captain Fracasse was kneeling by her, and thanking her, passionately, while he covered her disheveled hair with kisses, and she almost screamed out: "Go away! go away! go away!"

And as he did not understand what she meant, and tried to put his arm round her waist again, she writhed, as she stammered out:

"You are a wretch, and I hate you! Go away! go away!" And he got up in great surprise, took up his hat, and went.

The next day she returned to *Val de Ciré*, and her husband, who had not expected her for some time, blamed her for a freak.

"I could not live away from you any longer," she said.

He found her altered in character, and sadder than formerly, but when he said to her:

"What is the matter with you? You seem unhappy. What do you want?" she replied:

"Nothing. Happiness exists only in our dreams, in this world."

Avacelle came to see her the next summer, and she received him without any emotion, and without regret, for she suddenly perceived that she had never loved him, except in a dream, from which Paul Péronel had brutally roused her.

But the young man, who still adored her, thought as he returned to Paris:

"Women are really very strange, complicated and inexplicable beings."

## IN THE SPRING

When the first fine spring days come, and the earth awakes and assumes its garment of verdure, when the perfumed warmth of the air blows on our faces and fills our lungs, and even appears to penetrate to our heart, we feel vague longings for undefined happiness, a wish to run, to walk at random, to inhale the spring. As the winter had been very severe the year before, this longing assumed an intoxicating feeling in May; it was like a superabundance of sap.

Well, one morning on waking, I saw from my window the blue sky glowing in the sun above the neighboring houses. The canaries hanging in the windows were singing loudly, and so were the servants on every floor; a cheerful noise rose up from the streets, and I went out, with my spirits as bright as the day was, to go—I did not