

## A Dead Woman's Secret

Guy de Maupassant

She had died painlessly, tranquilly, like a woman whose life was irreproachable, and she now lay on her back in bed, with closed eyes, calm features, her long white hair carefully arranged as if she had again made her toilet ten minutes before her death, all her pale physiognomy so composed, now that she had passed away, so resigned that one felt sure a sweet soul had dwelt in that body, that this serene grandmother had spent an untroubled existence, that this virtuous woman had ended her life without any shock, without any remorse.

On his knees, beside the bed, her son, a magistrate of inflexible principles, and her daughter Marguerite, in religion, Sister Eulalie, were weeping distractedly. She had from the time of their infancy armed them with an inflexible code of morality, teaching them a religion without weakness and a sense of duty without any compromise. He, the son, had become a magistrate, and, wielding the weapon of the law, he struck down without pity the feeble and the erring. She, the daughter, quite penetrated with the virtue that had bathed her in this austere family, had become the spouse of God through disgust with men.

They had scarcely known their father; all they knew was that he had made their mother unhappy without learning any further details. The nun passionately kissed one hand of her dead mother, which hung down, a hand of ivory like that of Christ in the large crucifix which lay on the bed. At the opposite side of the prostrate body, the other hand seemed still to grasp the rumpled sheet with that wandering movement which is called the fold of the dying, and the lines had retained little wavy creases as a memento of those last motions which precede the eternal motionlessness. A few light taps at the door caused the two sobbing heads to rise up, and the priest who had just dined, entered the apartment. He was flushed, a little puffed, from the effects of the process of digestion which had just commenced; for he had put a good dash of brandy into his coffee in order to counteract the fatigue caused by the last nights he had remained up and that which he anticipated from the night that was still in store for him. He had put on a look of sadness, that simulated sadness of the priest to whom death is a means of livelihood. He made the sign of the cross, and coming over to them with his professional gesture said:

“Well, my poor children, I have come to help you to pass these mournful hours.”

But Sister Eulalie suddenly rose up.

“Thanks, father, but my brother and I would like to be left alone with her. These are the last moments that we now have for seeing her; so we want to feel ourselves once more, the three of us, just as we were years ago when we — we — we were only children, and our poor — poor mother — ”

She was unable to finish with the flood of tears that gushed from her eyes, and the sobs that were choking her.

But the priest bowed, with a more serene look on his face, for he was thinking of his bed. “Just as you please, my children.”

Then, he knelt down, again crossed himself, prayed, rose up, and softly stole away murmuring as he went: “She was a saint.”

They were left alone, the dead woman and her children. A hidden timepiece kept regularly ticking in its dark corner, and through the open window the soft odors of hay and of woods penetrated with faint gleams of moonlight. No sound in the fields outside, save the wandering notes of toads and now and then the humming of some nocturnal insect darting into like a ball, and knocking itself against the wall.

An infinite peace, a divine melancholy, a silent serenity surrounded this dead woman, seemed to emanate from her, to evaporate from her into the atmosphere outside and to calm Nature itself.

Then the magistrate, still on his knees, his head pressed against the bed-clothes, in a far-off, heart-broken voice that pierced through the sheets and the coverlet, exclaimed:

“Mamma, mamma, mamma!” And the sister, sinking down on the floor, striking the wood with her forehead fanatically, twisting herself about and quivering like a person in an epileptic fit, groaned: “Jesus, Jesus — mamma — Jesus!”

And both of them shaken by a hurricane of grief panted with a rattling in their throats.

Then the fit gradually subsided, and they now wept in a less violent fashion, like the rainy calm that follows a squall on a storm-beaten sea. Then, after some time, they rose, and fixed their glances on the beloved corpse. And memories, those

memories of the past, so sweet, so torturing today, came back to their minds with all those little forgotten details, those little details so intimate and familiar, which make the being who is no more live over again. They recalled circumstances, words, smiles, certain intonations of voice which belonged to one whom they should hear speaking to them again. They saw her once more happy and calm, and phrases she used in ordinary conversation rose to their lips. They even remembered a little movement of the hand peculiar to her, as if she were keeping time when she was saying something of importance.

And they loved her as they had never before loved her. And by the depth of their despair they realized how strongly they had been attached to her, and how desolate they would find themselves now.

She had been their mainstay, their guide, the best part of their youth, of that happy portion of their lives which had vanished; she had been the bond that united them to existence, the mother, the mamma, the creative flesh, the tie that bound them to their ancestors. They would henceforth be solitary, isolated; they would have nothing on earth to look back upon.

The nun said to her brother:

“You know how mamma used always to read over her old letters. They are all there in her drawer. Suppose we read them in our turn, and so revive all her life this night by her side? It would be like a kind of road of the cross, like making the acquaintance of her mother, of grandparents whom we never knew, whose letters are there, and of whom she has so often talked to us, you remember?”

And they drew forth from the drawer a dozen little packets of yellow paper, carefully tied up and placed close to one another. They flung these relics on the bed, and selecting one of them on which the word “Father” was written, they opened and read what was in it.

It consisted of those very old letters which are to be found in old family writing-desks, those letters which have the flavor of another century. The first said, “My darling,” another “My beautiful little girl,” then others “My dear child,” and then again “My dear daughter.” And suddenly the nun began reading aloud, reading for the dead her own history, all her tender souvenirs. And the magistrate listened, while he leaned on the bed, with his eyes on his mother’s face. And the motionless corpse seemed happy.

Sister Eulalie, interrupting herself, said: “We ought to put them into the grave with her, to make a winding-sheet of them, and bury them with her.”

And then she took up another packet, on which the descriptive word did not appear.

And in a loud tone she began: “My adored one, I love you to distraction. Since yesterday I have been suffering like a damned soul burned by the recollection of you. I feel your lips on mine, your eyes under my eyes, your flesh under my flesh. I love you! I love you! You have made me mad! My arms open! I pant with an immense desire to possess you again. My whole body calls out to you, wants you. I have kept in my mouth the taste of your kisses.”

The magistrate rose up; the nun stopped reading. He snatched the letter from her, and sought for the signature. There was none, save under the words, “He who adores you,” the name “Henry.” Their father’s name was René. So then he was not the man.

Then, the son, with rapid fingers, fumbled in the packet of letters took another of them, and read: “I can do without your caresses no longer.”

And, standing up, with the severity of a judge passing sentence, he gazed at the impassive face of the dead woman.

The nun, straight as a statue, with teardrops standing at each corner of her eyes, looked at her brother, waiting to see what he meant to do. Then he crossed the room, slowly reached the window, and looked out thoughtfully into the night.

When he turned back, Sister Eulalie, her eyes now quite dry, still remained standing near the bed, with a downcast look.

He went over to the drawer and flung in the letters which he had picked up from the floor. Then he drew the curtains round the bed.

And when the dawn made the candles on the table look pale, the son rose from his armchair, and without even a parting glance at the mother whom he had separated from them and condemned, he said slowly:

“Now, my sister, let us leave the room.”