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With an Introduction and Notes by F. C. Green
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MAUPASSANT

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Choix de Contes

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES
BY

F. C. GREEN

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EDITORIAL NOTE

This selection of Maupassant's tales is not primarily designed for educational use. It contains, however, a few notes for the benefit of readers who might otherwise be held up by the occasional elusive word or idiom.

F. C. G.

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INTRODUCTION

Guy de Maupassant was born on 5 August 1850 at the château de Miromesnil, which is near Dieppe and in the commune of Tourville-sur-Arques. His birthplace was not, however, the ancestral home of the Maupassant family, the origin of which is, indeed, obscure, though one biographer claims that, by virtue of a patent granted by the Emperor of Austria in 1752 to one of his forbears, Guy was entitled to the *particule nobiliaire*. Really, his father, Gustave de Maupassant, was extremely poor and but for the fact that his wife had some means the boy would not have been born in the château de Miromesnil, which the family only rented for two or three years. Guy's boyhood, until he was thirteen, was spent in a charming house, Les Verguies, at Étretat on the road to Fécamp. This belonged to his mother, Laure de Maupassant, whose relations with her husband were most unhappy. Indeed, after the birth of the second child, Hervé, Gustave de Maupassant rarely appeared in the family circle and then only to keep people from gossiping. Whether his conduct was entirely responsible for this domestic situation we do not know, though he seems to have been rather a weakling. Laure de Maupassant, on the other hand, was an energetic and imaginative woman and to her Guy owed his early schooling except for Latin, which he learned from the *vicaire* of Étretat, the abbé Aubourg. Madame de Maupassant was the sister of the writer, Alfred Le Poittevin, the close friend of the great novelist Flaubert, a circumstance which was to have a deep influence on Guy's career. Meanwhile, at Étretat and at his grandmother's house in Fécamp, the youngster led a care-free, delightful existence, playing and squabbling with the peasant boys, helping in the fields or, more often, out with the fishermen. To the end of his life Maupassant passionately loved rowing and was an excellent oarsman. Though not very tall, he was wiry and extremely fond of every kind of sport involving violent exercise out of doors.

Very naturally, when in 1863 Maupassant was sent as a boarder to the seminary of Yvetot, he conceived a strong dislike for this establishment. He seems to have been a bright though recalcitrant

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pupil, fond of practical jokes and contemptuous of his fellow-boarders, most of whom were destined for the Church. To judge from some precocious verses composed about this time he regarded the seminary as a prison, *un cloître solitaire*, loathing its ecclesiastical atmosphere, its ritual and discipline. No doubt because of this poem he was expelled in 1866, though his doting mamma wrote to Flaubert that she had withdrawn her poor sensitive boy because the harsh priests would not let him eat meat in Lent. It seems clear that what Guy needed most at this stage was a little paternal supervision. Probably about this time the family moved to Rouen, where Laure placed her two sons as day boarders in a private school, the Institution Leroy-Petit, which Guy later described in *La Question du Latin* under the name of the Institution Robineau. At any rate, he did not attend the lycée Corneille until the autumn of 1868. Here the boy did well and in July 1869 passed his *baccalauréat*. His father was then a clerk in a stock-broker's office earning a mere pittance, whilst his wife's fortune had been much reduced. However, the immediate problem of Guy's future was shelved when France declared war against Prussia.

Though several of Maupassant's *contes*, including the famous *Boule de Suif* and *Mademoiselle Fifi*, are tales of the Franco-Prussian campaign, the author was not himself a fighting soldier. He was called up with his class in 1870 and, after some training, was attached in September 1871 to the *Intendance* or, as we should say, the "Q" branch of the Second Division at Le Havre. After the armistice Gustave exerted himself considerably and, by pulling wires, managed to get his son a very junior and ill-paid clerkship in the Ministère de la Marine. Here he remained until January 1879, when he got himself transferred to the Ministère de l'Instruction Publique or Education Department.

When Maupassant settled in Paris, his mother wrote about him to Gustave Flaubert, who invited the lad to his flat in the rue Murillo. Here, at the celebrated Sunday *matinées*, he met some of the greatest French men of letters, Alphonse Daudet, Heredia, Huysmans, Goncourt, Zola, Mendès and also the famous Russian novelist, Tourgueneff, whom he much admired. However, it was some time before Maupassant began to visualise himself as an author, in spite of Flaubert's patient tuition. Writing to Guy's mother in 1873 about her son's future, Flaubert described him as

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a "bit of a loafer and only middlingly keen on work". Probably the veteran novelist, who was a very sedentary individual, failed to remember that his pupil was still very young and, moreover, still passionately fond of rowing and sailing. Every morning in the summer he used to get up early and snatch an hour or two on the river before returning to the office and the daily grind. Thus, until 1880, apart from a gruesome story printed in a provincial journal and a few articles to the big Parisian dailies, Maupassant had published nothing. To Flaubert, however, he had submitted several poems which the master declared as good as anything turned out by the Parnassians. In 1880 he published a collection of verse and in Zola's *Soirées de Médan* a tale about the war called *Boule de Suif*. This was in January, and in May of the same year Maupassant's beloved friend and mentor died. But he had no misgivings about his disciple now, for *Boule de Suif* was a masterpiece. Maupassant, from that moment, never looked back, and for ten years worked hard contributing some three hundred short stories to *Le Gaulois*, *Gil Blas* and other periodicals. He also wrote six novels, three volumes of travel impressions and four plays. In spite of his robust appearance Maupassant was a very sick man, having contracted in his youth a sexual disease which was then incurable. As a result he died of general paralysis in a nursing home at Passy on 6 July 1893.

Ever since the Middle Ages, the *conte* or short story, in verse or in prose, has been a favourite with French authors. Chaucer and Boccaccio, it will be remembered, drew generously on the *fabliaux* of medieval France, alert and carefree little tales which narrate, for the most part, the comic misadventures of amorous monks and ridiculous cuckolds. Written in simple, vigorous language, their prevailing tone reflects the qualities of the *esprit gaulois*. Witty, ribald and frankly sensual or unromantic in their attitude to love, the *jongleurs* who composed these *fabliaux* wrote, in a spirit of disillusioned realism, for the entertainment of the ordinary man. They are satirists but their satire is neither political nor anti-social: its sole object is to raise a laugh by portraying the foibles and stupidities common to men and women of all classes and professions. This spirit, though it gradually acquires more elegant expression, persists in the prose tales of Antoine de la Salle and even in the *contes* of that sceptic, Bonaventure des

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Périers, whose hand may be detected, according to some critics, in the more sophisticated *Heptaméron*, though this collection of stories is more usually attributed to Queen Margaret of Navarre.

In the seventeenth century, the popularity of the *conte* was threatened by the vogue for long-winded, idealistic romances. Perrault, however, gave it a new direction and a fresh lease of life with his immortal *contes de fées*, whilst La Fontaine, animated by the spirit of the medieval *fabliaux*, invested these old tales with the magic and lustre of his incomparable verse. Perrault and La Fontaine had many imitators throughout the eighteenth century but, during the Regency, the *esprit nouveau* which was soon to pervade every form of literature began to influence the *conteurs* of this age of enlightenment. The short story rapidly became an instrument of political, economic and social propaganda and, until the eve of the Revolution, this admirable art-form was systematically exploited and often prostituted by ideologues, political malcontents and by the enemies of the various religious orders. It degenerated, in fact, into a kind of pamphlet. The *contes allégoriques* of the school of Crébillon and Voisenon travestied the fairy tale in order to attack, in veiled fashion, the king's ministers and mistresses and to satirise the Unigenitus Bull. Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* instituted a craze for exotic *contes* with a subversive thesis and these were intercalated in the numerous imitations of Montesquieu's masterpiece. Voltaire, deferring to the prevailing mode, wrote his *Zadig*, *Micromégas*, *Candide* and numerous other *contes* which have been saved from oblivion only by the brilliance of the author's style and the disruptive force of his ideas. The wave of sensibility that swept over France in the reign of Louis XVI produced a vogue for a type of short story, the *conte moral*, which, from the point of view of situation and characterization, was as remote from reality as the philosophic tales I have just mentioned. These mawkish productions, instituted by Marmontel, were imitated by dozens of writers in France and throughout Europe. They survived the Revolution, and not until the advent of Mérimée did the short story begin to regain contact with the actual world of men and things. Thanks to to the talent of Mérimée, the *conte* began once more to narrate, in clear, forceful and concise terms, an interesting event arising from the behaviour of real people and affecting their destiny. Merimée's

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characters are not mere algebraic symbols of ideas or, as in the *contes moraux*, of vices or virtues so exaggerated as to appear inhuman. They move very often in a dramatic, highly exciting or romanesque ambience; but their thoughts and actions and speech are completely natural. Of the Romantics, perhaps Vigny is the best *conteur*. The short stories of Balzac and of Stendhal are of mediocre interest, since, apparently, these giants were unable to move with freedom in a circumscribed zone. With the emergence of the Realists, the detrimental influences which had affected the artistic integrity of the *conte* were quickly abolished. Flaubert wrote three tales, one of which, *Un Cœur simple*, is a classic, whilst Zola proved at least once that he could write a good short story, *L'Attaque du Moulin*. Nevertheless, his *Soirées de Médan* are remembered chiefly because they included *Boule de Suif*, described by some connoisseurs as the perfect *conte*. On this opinions may differ, but few, I imagine, will deny that its author, Guy de Maupassant, is the greatest of all *conteurs*.

The art of short-story writing is a difficult art in which, by comparison with the novel, relatively few have achieved distinction. A first-rate short story, like a well-made play, is a miracle of condensation. Its author must be able to curb his imagination and, in observing the panorama of life, he must acquire a flair for what is truly significant and essential to his immediate purpose. His descriptions, whether of persons or of their natural environment, have to be rigorously curtailed, and a similar economy must be observed in the choice of dialogue. Above all, the situation that forms the core of the story must be clear-cut, interesting and credible. Now, these are qualities which, at least in French literature, are Classic rather than Romantic. Moreover, they closely resemble the technique of the dramatist whom the *conteur*, working in a similarly restricted cadre, is impelled to imitate so as to lend definite contours to his story. No doubt there are many writers, especially in English, who publish what they call short stories, with no recognizable beginning, middle or end. But these productions, which usually attempt to capture a mood or a state of soul, are not really *contes*: they are isolated fragments of unborn novels, *pages choisies*, often beautifully written yet lacking the integrity of a complete work of art.

Maupassant's tales, practically without exception, have an ex-

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position, a peripeteia and a dénouement. Above all, he always tells a story, and that is the primary function of the *conteur*. Yet, in the telling of it, Maupassant, like all creative artists of genius, invests his work, unconsciously, with a power of suggestion which outranges the immediate theme of his tale. In this connection it is interesting to observe the dénouement of a *conte* by Maupassant. Not only does it complete the action and illuminate, retrospectively, the behaviour of the characters or the true meaning of their problem, but it awakens also in the mind of the intelligent reader a fresh curiosity about life, making him suddenly aware of what is really vital and critical in human relations. The ordinary short story, the chief interest of which depends upon the spinning and unravelling of the plot, has no such repercussions. Maupassant compels one to meditate, to read between the lines, to pass from the sensation of intellectual or aesthetic enjoyment inspired by his art to a mood of philosophic reflection.

This is not meant to imply for one moment that Maupassant was "a writer with a purpose"—a social reformer disguised as a literary artist. On the contrary, his horror of anything resembling subjective writing incurred the reproaches of many critics who accused him of *impassibilité*, or of callousness to human evil and suffering. Yet the effect of his greatest stories is to shatter complacency and smugness. Take, for instance, the tale about Boule de Suif which ends with an unforgettable impression of the little prostitute sobbing in a corner of the coach, shunned by the passengers for whom she has just sacrificed herself whilst Cornudet savagely whistles his interminable *Marseillaise*, that glorious hymn inspired by the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Technically, here the story concludes, since Boule de Suif will go back to her *maison close* and quickly forget the whole episode. Not so the reader, who lays down the book with a profound sense of disquiet, even of despair. Maupassant's account of the cruelty, the selfishness and ingratitude of Boule de Suif's fellow-travellers is terribly convincing precisely because it is narrated with restraint and detachment. Yet these are average people, drawn from various walks of life. Is this, then, average human nature? Does self-interest, as La Rochefoucauld used to maintain, always suppress, at critical moments, the nobler human qualities or can it be that the latter are merely superimposed uneasily upon a permanent

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substratum of ruthless egoism? Only a very great artist can arouse such questionings: they are never provoked by the moral reformer masquerading as an artist.

The closing scene of *La Maison Tellier* is also pregnant with suggestion. "Ça n'est pas tous les jours fête," says Madame when her favourite client exclaims at the modesty of her charges for champagne. One's mind travels back over the story, recalling the sordid, animal monotony of the lives led by Madame Tellier's girls, the bar downstairs seething with drunken sailors, the inevitable tawdry salon above, reeking of foul air and cheap perfume. What a contrast to that brief interlude in the fresh, flower-scented Norman countryside, the *première communion*, evoking fragrant and intolerable memories of early girlhood! No, indeed! "Ça n'est pas tous les jours fête." Yet why should this be so? Why is it inevitable, after nearly two thousand years of Christian civilization, that young peasant girls should be drafted into the semi-slavery of establishments like La Maison Tellier and, what is perhaps worse, that they should be content to stay there? Maupassant nowhere formulates such views, yet somehow contrives to inspire them in his readers whilst he himself refrains from comment. I think it is this classic quality of aloofness, this refusal to abandon the rôle of *conteur* for that of moralist, which lends to his work the cachet of truth and produces such an impact on the sensibility of the reader.

Maupassant had not, of course, the Balzacian type of imagination which plays upon observed experience until the situations and characters of everyday life acquire almost epic stature. Certain tales, indeed, such as *Le Horla*, *Lui* and *La Morte*, possess a hallucinatory quality, and it has been suggested by experts that these reflect critical moments in the progress of the malady which ended in the total collapse of the author's reason. Others, however, like *Sur l'Eau* and *La Main d'Écorché*, are clearly essays in the macabre or in the supernatural, composed by a versatile artist in the full possession of his creative powers. They are, in any case, exceptions. In the great *contes*, where his art finds most natural expression, Maupassant's imagination is well under control. As a rule, he deals with very ordinary people involved in a critical situation. His characters, unlike those of Balzac, are not projected against the background of society as a whole. Nor does

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he attempt, by a profound analysis of their actions and passions, to endow these people with demonic potentialities. Certainly, however, he shows that the stress of ambition, hate or jealousy will produce surprising transformations in unremarkable natures. Yet, even in such crises, his men and women never remotely approach the emotional plane inhabited by Balzac's mighty creations. Maupassant's people are deliberately presented in relation to a particular situation. This, of course, is in keeping with the limited cadre of the *conte* which also precludes the subtle analysis of individual traits. As a result, it is often difficult to evoke a Maupassant character in the way, for instance, that one can recall a Vautrin, a Charlus, a Julien Sorel or an Emma Bovary. Actually, the creations of Maupassant almost always tend to sink their individuality in the general idea they typify: the cunning or cupidity of the Norman peasant, the philistinism of the *épicier du coin*, the vanity of the petty *fonctionnaire*, the terrible frustration of the unhappily married man or, more generally, the repressed though ineradicable primary instincts which are to be found in any class of society. Always, however, their particular problem is localized. Maupassant, unlike Balzac, does not offer a panoramic vision of society nor does he conceive the latter as a vast, complicated organism where the behaviour of one person may have the most baleful and incalculable social consequences. The society mirrored in his pages is largely composed of individuals preoccupied with the drab, matter-of-fact business of earning a living or of killing time. Their desires and passions are neither grandiose nor spectacular, though sometimes they are extremely tenacious. Their tragedies are usually confined to the domestic circle. The Balzacian world of crime and intrigue, of long-matured and cunningly engineered bankruptcies and political disasters, of meteoric ascents from poverty or mediocrity to wealth and fame, the world in which the happiness of whole families or even of communities is ruthlessly sacrificed to the inordinate passion of an individual, simply does not exist for Maupassant. This is not because he was blind to the dramatic element in life—nearly every single one of his *contes* is a drama in miniature. But, in his view, tragedy can affect the destiny of an individual or of a family without necessarily dislocating the general order of society. On the contrary, Maupassant implies

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that since every individual is powerfully insulated by self-interest, vanity, apathy, secretiveness or some other form of egoism, the social network is thereby rendered immune against large-scale breakdowns. Most of the evil generated in the world is, therefore, quickly short-circuited or localized. This is not, however, the only reason why the social organism called France remains intact, surviving the most violent attempts to smash its fabric.

Maupassant served his apprenticeship to letters in a *milieu* where it was the fashion to jeer at conventional or middle-class taste and morality, and this influence is reflected in the early *contes*. He also imitated Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* in a rather feeble satire called *Les Dimanches d'un Bourgeois de Paris*. Yet, curiously enough, the general impression produced by his tales is one of deep respect for the existing social order. This is no paradox, nor is it incompatible with Maupassant's low opinion of human nature. His men and women are all secretly haunted by the fear of public opinion. They surrender without a struggle to their weaknesses and abandon themselves furiously to their lusts or mean ambitions. Yet all are convinced that outside the pale of society there is no salvation, no peace of mind, no true existence. This lurking veneration of the established social order is their substitute for religion, and Maupassant's adulterers, fornicators and prostitutes would be profoundly indignant, and with no sense of inconsistency, at any attempt to tamper with old-established institutions such as the family, marriage or the property laws. You will therefore find in his varied repertoire of sinners no rebels like Saint-Preux, La Dame aux Camélias, Jean Valjean or Vautrin. Romantics do not interest Maupassant, presumably because in real life they are not very common and, outside literature, do little to change the pattern of human existence. You will find, no doubt, in his stories quite a number of individuals dissatisfied with their humdrum lot, who sigh for adventure and colour in their lives. Yet at heart they are very reasonable and their ideals are usually of a material order. Theirs are the day-dreams of clerks, tradesmen and peasants: the *légion d'honneur* or the *palmes académiques*; the clubs, the theatres and ballrooms of fashionable Paris; the rustic *pied à terre* on the banks of the Seine, the coveted few extra pasture fields, the unexpected inheritance safely invested in government bonds. For these people,

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Romance spells economic security and an assured social position. It is certainly not revolt against traditional morality and usage.

Maupassant's world, if we ignore his occasional essays in *le merveilleux*, rests on a solid rational basis. It is organized to protect the integrity of the French family, and this, in the last analysis, is the master theme of his *contes*. In *Boule de Suif* it explains the cruelty of all save Cornudet towards the *fille de joie*. She has no family and must therefore submit to the harsh, inexorable law which ostracises social pariahs. According to orthodox morality, the ending of *Hautot Père et Fils* is immoral. Actually, in the circumstances, it is the only conceivable *dénouement*. César accepts little Émile and Mlle Donet just as he accepted his father's pipe, as part and parcel of an inheritance and trust. The orthodox code does not come into the matter. César settles his father's debt and family honour is satisfied. So is local public opinion, which would have been profoundly shocked, however, if César had taken his illegitimate brother and Mlle Donet into his house. In the peasant stories we discover a level where the question of family honour is less of a problem. Old Amable refuses to allow his son to marry a woman who has had an illegitimate son by a farm-hand. His motive is not family pride but possessiveness. And in the end he hangs himself, preferring death to the intolerable torture of seeing his property pass into the hands of strangers. The situation described in *Le Diable* is unusual and grimly comic. Yet, in this story, Maupassant interprets convincingly the terrible anxiety of the French peasant when money is at stake. These rustics have no education in the ordinary sense, but self-interest sharpens their perceptions to an incredible degree so that the smallest transaction becomes the occasion for a remarkable display of cunning and shrewdness. No one who has ever lived in a Norman village will accuse Maupassant of exaggeration. If, however, his country folk are ignorant, brutal and avaricious, it is, he implies, because the virtues described as the Christian virtues depend for their existence largely on economic circumstances. In the rustic tales, for instance, he takes us into a world where illegitimacy is not regarded as a sin unless it involves expense or the loss of working days. When Maupassant writes of the peasant drudge and describes the brutalities to which she is exposed, his prose vibrates with suppressed indignation and sympathy, as, for example, in *Rosalie*

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Prudent, where he tells the story of a girl-mother on trial for infanticide. Accused of doing away with one child she confesses, however, that she had really caused the death of twins. One child she might, perhaps, have managed to bring up, but knew despairingly that it was hopeless, on twenty francs a month, to maintain two babies. Expressed in very simple and direct language, Rosalie's tragic dilemma is such as to require no sentimental embroidery, and Maupassant, as a sensitive artist, is quick to realize this fact.

Perhaps the greatest, as it is the most poignant of all such tales, is *L'Histoire d'une Fille de Ferme*. It needed the genius of a Maupassant to express, in a convincing idiom, the emotional crisis of an inarticulate peasant girl tortured by the thought that it is dishonest to accept her employer's offer of marriage yet conscious also of her inability to escape the swift current of events that sweeps her along from misery to misery. Only a superb craftsman could have imagined the scene where Rose, in a frenzy of panic, tries to get away from her agony of soul. The anti-climax of this mad, blind flight, when at break of day she finds herself standing, thigh deep, in the stagnant pool, stung by hundreds of leeches, is a *tour de force* because it is so unexpected and yet so admirably credible. In this *conte*, the author set himself the difficult task of describing a spiritual conflict which, in its way, is just as tragic as anything pictured by the dramatists of the great classic period. Maupassant had to convince his readers that his simple rustic heroine could harbour the emotions he portrays so vividly and, moreover, that she would react to them as he has imagined. Yet at no point in the narrative does the tension relax: the action moves swiftly to its inevitable term, and the whole episode, when viewed in retrospect, seems pitifully human and profoundly true.

In *Le Crime du Père Boniface*, *Une Vente* and *Le Lapin*, Maupassant shows how delightfully alive he is to the comic aspect of French rustic life and character. When he writes in this vein, we are taken back to the medieval *fabliaux*, and this is perfectly natural. For if anything has resisted the march of civilization it is peasant humour, springing as it does from the primitive human functions of eating, drinking and sex. But even in Maupassant's most depressing tales of country life, the sordid

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misery of existence is nearly always relieved by a marvellous sense of natural beauty. Of all his generation only Daudet, I think, rivals Maupassant in the art of recapturing the *joie de vivre*, the fragrance, the lilial quality that is inseparable from a spring morning or a summer noon in Normandy—what Mallarmé calls "le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui". "What reader", asked Marcel Prévost, "has ever skipped over a single description by Maupassant?" And how true that is of the passages where he interprets "l'inexprimable sensation dont la toute puissante et mystérieuse beauté du monde sait émouvoir la chair par les yeux". Maupassant was not a Romantic, and his attitude to external nature is pagan rather than Romantic. He rarely attributes his own emotions to nature and he communicates, not the sentiments, but the sensations evoked in him by sensual contact with natural beauty. Maupassant is seldom dominated or oppressed by the grandeur of the scenes he describes or by the terrific forces unleashed by nature in her savage moods. Occasionally, as in *Amour*, he deliberately surrenders himself to the influence of nature, but then, one feels, he is in search of a *frisson*, a new sensation. "Rien n'est plus troublant, plus inquiétant, plus effrayant parfois qu'un marécage. Pourquoi cette peur qui plane sur ces plaines basses couvertes d'eau? Sont-ce les vagues rumeurs des roseaux, les étranges feux follets, le silence profond qui les enveloppe dans les nuits calmes, ou bien les brumes bizarres qui traînent sur les joncs commes des robes de mortes, ou bien encore l'imperceptible clapotement, si léger, si doux, et plus terrifiant parfois que le canon des hommes ou que le tonnerre du ciel, qui fait ressembler les marais à des pays de rêve, à des pays redoutables cachant un secret inconnaissable et dangereux...."

All through Maupassant's work there are traces of the irritation of the artist and genuine nature lover for the blindness and ignorance of the philistine, of the *petit bourgeois* or fashionable Parisian for whom the countryside does not exist or is merely an amusing and novel playground or restaurant. In *Une Partie de Campagne* he alludes wickedly to "cet amour bête de la campagne" which haunts the shopkeeper behind his counter and attains its consummation in two or three annual excursions to some village on the upper reaches of the Seine where the in-

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evitable restaurant advertises its "matelotes et fritures, cabinets de société, bosquets et balançoires". And, to quote the ineffable remark of Mme Dufour after she has approvingly inspected one of these establishments: "et puis, il y a de la vue." Nowhere has Maupassant more brutally contrasted the adorable beauty of nature with human stupidity than in his terrible and Proustian *La Femme de Paul.* Himself an ardent rowing man, he knew every charming backwater of the Seine and was also familiar with those floating estaminets to which, on Sundays, the Parisians make their way in a weird assortment of craft and costumes. Here, until the small hours, they defile the lovely environs by their presence. "Dans l'établissement flottant, c'était une cohue furieuse et hurlante. Les tables de bois, où les consommations répandues faisaient de minces ruisseaux poisseux, étaient couvertes de verres à moitié vides et entourées de gens à moitié gris. Toute cette foule criait, chantait, braillait. Les hommes, le chapeau en arrière, la face rougie, avec des yeux luisants d'ivrognes, s'agitaient en vociférant par un besoin de tapage naturel aux brutes. Les femmes, cherchant une proie pour le soir, se faisaient payer à boire en attendant; et, dans l'espace libre entre les tables dominait le public ordinaire du lieu, un bataillon de canotiers *chahuteurs* avec leurs compagnes en courtes jupes de flanelle." To accentuate this prostitution, Maupassant pauses at certain moments to draw our attention to the charming, tranquil scene across the river, the heights of Mont Valérien bathed in the crude light of a July sun, the graceful and gleaming curve of the Seine as it skirts the slopes of Louveciennes, the masses of dark verdure surrounding the white villas on its banks. Then evening comes. "Les grands foins, prêts à être fauchés, étaient remplis de fleurs. Le soleil qui baissait étalait dessus une nappe de lumière rousse, et dans la chaleur adoucie du jour finissant, les flottantes exhalaisons de l'herbe se mêlaient aux humides senteurs du fleuve, imprégnaient l'air d'une langueur tendre, d'un bonheur léger, comme d'une vapeur de bien-être."

Maupassant's *contes*, though written half a century ago, retain their actuality: in other words, they are classics. Their picture of human nature is still valid because its interest does not depend upon the superficial and rapidly changing elements which compose man's social and economic environment. The local colour of the

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nineties is unobtrusive, probably because in the creation of *décor* Maupassant aims at general impressions, avoiding the wealth of detail which characterises Balzac's descriptions of costume and interiors. When he wants to fix the atmosphere of a particular *milieu* in a more specific manner it is because this is essential to the development of the action, as for instance in *L'Ami Patience*, where his malicious description of the salon at No. 17, rue du Coq-qui-chante, prepares one for the shock of the final revelation: *Et dire que j'ai commencé avec rien...ma femme et ma belle-sœur!* The same selective motive operates in all his tales: Maupassant is never tempted to prolong a descriptive passage beyond the point where it ceases to subserve the development of his story. Take, for example, *Duchoux*, that little masterpiece in disillusionment. The contrast between the baron's dead mistress and the oafish product of his liaison with that fragile and charming woman is cruelly thrown into relief in the description of young Duchoux's *ménage*. Yet here Maupassant exercises the most rigid economy in his use of detail—the slatternly maid, the inevitable clothes line flaunting the family wash, the hopeless disorder of the architect's study, and, hovering over all, the mephitic and inescapable odour of garlic. In these few strokes he destroys the baron's romantic dream.

Maupassant chose as his medium the short story, in which it is extremely difficult to achieve a profound and detailed analysis of character and, therefore, as I have remarked, his men and women do not stand out in the reader's memory as clear-cut and forceful individuals. There is, however, another reason. The essence of a short story is its situation and not its characters, its *milieu* or its atmosphere. Maupassant shows to a remarkable degree how situation is employed by the *conteur* in order to elucidate character, to illuminate traits which by no other technique could have been so convincingly revealed or rendered credible. His men and women, it must be observed, are ordinary people. Unlike the creations of Balzac, Flaubert and Stendhal, they do not, by sheer force of individuality, dominate fashion or circumstances. However, when an unexpected combination of events affects their destiny, when they find themselves in the grip of a critical situation, these very ordinary people display their true nature. Thus Boule de Suif suddenly becomes the key figure in a dilemma

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which, in turn, arises from a Prussian officer's caprice. It is only then that we discover that this little *fille de joie* is an individual, a Frenchwoman whose degrading profession has not entirely obliterated her sense of human dignity. Observe, however, that Maupassant is careful not to force the note. Boule de Suif is not a Jeanne d'Arc. It is not just patriotism that makes her resist so long. In her brothel, she would probably have reacted in much the same way to the overbearing demands of an arrogant client; for at heart she is the French woman of the people, quick to resent *le ton de maître*, equally ready, on the other hand, to respond to cajolery or persuasion.

Of all the stories in this collection, *Miss Harriet* least depends for its characterization on situation. This is partly because it is narrated by one of the protagonists, the artist, Léon Chenal, with whom the grotesque and fanatical English spinster falls in love. Of course, in this tale, which is an essay in abnormal psychology, Maupassant is really attempting something outside the scope of a *conte*. In a novel he could have traced the genesis of Miss Harriet's queer repressions and of her religious mania, that odd farrago of pantheism and Calvinism. The fact is, however, that no situation, even if it were very powerful and very unusual, could illuminate these dark recesses of the human spirit. Actually, the central situation portrayed by Maupassant in this story is neither powerful nor unusual, whilst the incidents that compose the fabric of the action are trivial. It is because Miss Harriet is abnormal that her meeting with Chénal produces any drama at all. Only indirectly, therefore, can this situation be said to illuminate the psychology of the heroine. We know her really because Chénal happens to be a psychologist as well as an artist, and very plausibly dissects for our benefit the character of a pitiful and lonely woman. That Maupassant here abandons his usual technique does not, I hasten to say, detract in the least from the interest or artistic value of his story.

L'Héritage shows how this great craftsman exploits a fertile situation. Having adumbrated his characters, by means of alert and natural dialogue, and portrayed in a few strokes of the pen their habitual *milieu*, Maupassant exposes their situation, the *nœud* of his drama. From this moment the action sweeps forward, and simultaneously the true characters of Lesable, Cora and

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Cachelin emerge with startling clarity. The veneer of conventional politeness, of morality and decency cracks and peels off. We are now confronted with a hideous spectacle—the baleful effect of thwarted cupidity on the behaviour of three ordinary people. All that is base and hateful in their nature is released: the miserable weakness of Lesable, the vicious shrewishness of his wife and the cynical grossness of Cachelin. The atmosphere is poisoned with hatred, contempt and suspicion. This is sufficiently appalling, but less so than the hypocrisy and the loathsome self-satisfaction which take their place once the coveted million is at last secured. Cora may face the future without anxiety: there will be no recriminations, no jealous after-thoughts from her husband. In the eyes of the world theirs will be an exemplary *ménage*, and Lesable, as Monsieur le Directeur, a supremely happy man.

What might have supervened is the theme of another story, *Monsieur Parent*. Once again, a clear-cut and even more powerful situation directly governs the action and illuminates the psychology of the characters. The author, however, employs this technique rather differently. The story falls into two phases or movements. From the outset, the reader knows of Mme Parent's adultery and understands why she despises and hates the man she has betrayed. Her character, therefore, remains almost static. Her function is to precipitate, by her recklessness, the tragic *éclaircissement*, the scene where Parent, on the evidence of his own eyes, realizes the truth hinted at by his servant. Then comes the gradual revelation of the unsuspected depths in Parent's nature, his jealousy, outraged pride and finally, after the divorce, the passion for revenge. The monstrous scene which closes the story, the revelation made by Parent to his wife's illegitimate son, is not, of course, an inevitable sequel to the situation presented by the author. But when one remembers the circumstances accompanying the betrayal, the character of Parent and his doting love for the boy he imagined to be his son, the final and shameful act appears terribly logical and natural. It is difficult to conceive of any other *dénouement*.

Maupassant's *contes*, almost without exception, reflect and interpret his intimate and personal knowledge of life. He rarely writes about people, events or places that lie outside this zone of experience, which is, however, extensive and varied. It embraces

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nearly every class of rural and urban society with one notable omission. The author, whose boyhood in the country had familiarized him with the *mœurs* of the peasant, gives no corresponding picture of the character and habits of the industrial workers. On the other hand, there is nothing in French literature to rival Maupassant's gallery of *ronds de cuir* or *fonctionnaires*. They are, of course, types rather than individuals precisely because their profession is apt to breed types. The latter, however, are so numerous and varied as to afford full scope for the author's powers of observation and to throw into sharp relief the transformation which occurs when a Lesable or a Caravan is jolted out of the rut of daily habit by an unforeseen situation. Maupassant's six years in the French Civil Service left him with a rich fund of impressions which were spun into the tissue of his best stories. *En Famille*, *La Parure* and *L'Héritage* betray no doubt something of the author's personal loathing for a profession of which the very essence is a deadly, soul-destroying routine. But one can also detect a certain sympathy for the mass of petty officials whose life is a constant struggle to keep up an appearance of bourgeois respectability on a miserable salary. They are victims of a system which, in the long run, brings out the unlovely traits in human nature, the toadyism of the ambitious few, the dull apathy and envy of the resigned majority, the petty tyranny and pedantic vanity of the *chefs*, and—as an aftermath to the publication of the annual list of awards and promotions—the endless domestic post-mortems. Yet, as Maupassant is fair enough to suggest, the services rendered by these officials are indispensable and they are conscientiously performed. Living frugally, the *fonctionnaire* is content with little: a week-end on the river, an occasional reception at the Ministry and, to crown thirty years of labour, the coveted violet or scarlet ribbon with a pension which, although small, confers a sense of security.

In his rustic *contes*, Maupassant makes no attempt to gloss over what is ugly and brutal in the character and habits of the Norman peasant. I cannot, however, agree with M. Paul Morand, his latest biographer, who notes approvingly that his country folk are "avares, incestueux, superstitieux, cruels envers les animaux, impitoyables pour les vieux". This is a very sweeping and inaccurate generalization. In stories like *Un Baptême*, *Le Papa de*

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Simon and *La Martine*, the author shows the reverse of the medal and, without lapsing into the bucolic insipidities of George Sand, writes of the sensibility and generosity and integrity of the French peasant. Many of his *contes grivois*, too, reveal a Merrie France with its fêtes, fairs, weddings and other excuses for carousals and junketings. These modern *fabliaux* catch the Norman peasant in jovial, holiday mood, no longer worrying about his sous or oppressed by anxieties as to the fate of his crops, but abandoning himself to his penchant for sly or rowdy practical jokes, those *farces normandes* which form the substance of many an incredible and Rabelaisian anecdote. We must not forget that Maupassant, although his general picture of peasant *mœurs* is objective, was himself a Norman from Caux, a *conteur* with a keen dramatic sense, writing for the benefit of a public who preferred to be shocked by occasional impressions of the more primitive aspects of peasant life rather than bored by the recital of the everyday, humdrum virtues. They could, for instance, read a *conte* like *Le Port*, which pivots on a strange and terrible coincidence, without absurdly concluding, as does M. Paul Morand, that incest is one of the habitual vices of the Norman peasant. Maupassant was an artist, quick to observe, not only what is typical of human behaviour, but also what is queer or unusual and, therefore, interesting. His picture of rustic manners is remarkably true to life, but it must not be judged as if it were a carefully documented chapter of French social history.

When Maupassant writes about the fashionable society of Paris his stories lose actuality. Very often, it is true, the interest is upheld by a strong central situation, but that does not make up for the lack of that almost indefinable quality we call atmosphere. As M. Paul Morand rightly observes, Maupassant was never really at home in the salons of his fashionable admirers. A provincial, he was ill at ease in the company of the clubmen and *gommeux* of the period. And, despite his old association with Flaubert and the Zola clique, he was uncomfortable in the presence of intellectuals whose conversation simply did not interest him. To parody Balzac's remark about the town of Tours, one might say of Maupassant that he was "l'écrivain le moins littéraire de France". As a result, what Proust would have called *le côté Guermantes* and *le côté Verdurin* of his work is almost

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colourless. That is why, in tales like *Rose*, *La Fenêtre*, *Le Bonheur*, *Sauvée*, *Joseph* and *Le Rendez-vous*, he is driven back upon the attraction presented by an unusual and, very often, a piquant situation. Conscious of his limitations, Maupassant made these stories very brief. This wisdom deserted him when he sat down to write *Notre Cœur*, a novel of fashionable Parisian life which first appeared in the *Revue des deux Mondes* of 1890. It is less than mediocre—artificial in theme and characterization. This is not because he could not write a novel. *Pierre et Jean* is nearly a masterpiece, but here Maupassant is on familiar terrain; for the scene is laid in Le Havre and the characters drawn from the class to which the author himself belonged. In *Notre Cœur* he floundered badly out of his depth. *Bel-Ami*, however, is a classic precisely because the hero is not a *mondain* but a gigolo. This word did not of course exist in 1883, but the type it connotes is international and eternal. Marivaux immortalized him two hundred years ago in *La Paysan parvenu*. Maupassant's adventurer is not, however, a peasant but a free-lance journalist, and the really vivid passages in this novel are those which recreate the atmosphere of a *journal de chantage* camouflaged as a daily newspaper, the type of periodical which makes its profits on what it does not print, keeps a *commissaire de police* on its pay-roll, and has ramifications in the world of clandestine finance and politics. *Bel-Ami*, in short, confirms the impression we have gleaned from the *contes*. Maupassant's imagination only functioned perfectly within the zone of his intimate experience of life. This is evident also in the few short stories inspired by the author's three visits to Algeria. Like his book of Algerian travel impressions entitled *Au Soleil*, they smell of the lamp. *Allouma*, the best of them, reveals a Maupassant racking his brain for similes in a painful effort to interpret the *exotisme* of the Algerian scene and the *mystère* of the Oriental woman. Even his genius cannot disguise the intrinsic banality of a story which centres round the cliché of a liaison between a French colonist and an Arab girl who deserts him for a ragged shepherd lad.

There is, in all Maupassant's great stories, an undercurrent of sadness. Flaubert noticed it in *Boule de Suif* and warned him: "Prenez garde à la tristesse. C'est un vice." Since then, most of Maupassant's critics have commented on his pessimism and

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tried to discover its cause. It is tempting, yet it would be false, to ascribe the pessimism of the *contes* to the atmosphere of humiliation and bitterness which pervaded France after the catastrophe of Sedan. Military disasters rarely exercise a direct influence upon the form or spirit of a nation's art. French Naturalism was not the aftermath of the Prussian invasion: whether the moral and political factors that led to the *débâcle* generated the disillusionment of works like *L'Éducation sentimentale* and *Thérèse Raquin* is quite another question and a very complex one. Maupassant, in his tales about the war, notably in *Boule de Suif* and *Mademoiselle Fifi*, interprets the conflicting emotions which ravaged the soul of every good Frenchman in those dark days of the occupation. And since it is the peculiar function of great art to isolate and conserve for all time what is essential and durable in human behaviour, the tragedy unfolded in the opening pages of *Boule le Suif* anticipates with uncanny precision the recent crucifixion of the French soul. Art, like religion, has its miracles, yet it is difficult to imagine anything more convincing than Maupassant's picture of a great and proud country temporarily bereft of a leader, drifting hopelessly at the mercy of events towards an inscrutable destiny. Over everything, seeping into every crevice of everyday life is the intolerable "odeur de l'invasion". The hour of national trial brings forth all that is noble and vital, all that is abject and ugly in the character of the people: the valour and endurance of the ill-equipped troops who realize dimly that they are the victims of political corruption or ineptitude; the dull apathy of the inarticulate peasant masses; the shameful obsequiousness of the propertied bourgeois; the poltroonery and stupid boastings of the *embusqués*; the superb but useless heroism of scattered, unorganized patriots. Yet there is no trace of what is commonly understood as defeatism in these tales of the Franco-Prussian war. Strangely enough, they reveal much less pessimism than the majority of Maupassant's other stories.

The pessimism of Maupassant, which finds its most forthright utterance in the book of travels entitled *Sur l'Eau*, was not engendered by patriotic anxiety concerning the fate of France. The immediate effect of the war was to convert Maupassant into an ardent pacificist, and in this book he attacks, in scathing terms,

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Moltke's absurd yet typically German thesis that war is a holy institution designed by God to prevent mankind from degenerating into "the most hideous materialism". *Sur l'Eau* is chiefly interesting, however, because here Maupassant, discarding his customary reticence, attempts to explore the origin of his own pessimism. The mood which emerges from these brief impressions might best be described as one of spiritual defeatism, a poignant and intolerable conviction that for the mass of human beings, true happiness is unattainable. The average man, chained to a drab routine, dies without ever having really lived, though sometimes—and this is the theme of many of the *contes*—some unexpected incident affords him a desolating glimpse of what life might have been, invading his soul with nostalgia and regret. Yet the average man, unlike the artist, is seldom tortured by such moments of terrible and clairvoyant introspection. The artist, cursed by "cette seconde vue qui est en même temps la force et toute la misère des écrivains", the artist whose every moment is devoted to the analysis of human nature and, by an inevitable reflex, to the dissection of his own sensations, is doomed to perpetual unhappiness. To quote Maupassant again, "il vit condamné à être toujours, en toute occasion, un reflet de lui-même et un reflet des autres, condamné à se regarder sentir, agir, penser, aimer, souffrir et à ne jamais souffrir, penser, aimer, sentir comme tout le monde, bonnement, franchement, simplement, sans s'analyser soi-même après chaque joie et chaque sanglot".

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Maupassant when he penned these lines. But they do not explain the true cause of his pessimism. After all, the history of literature reveals the fallacy of his theory that the pursuit of art necessarily results in a pessimistic outlook on life. One might, indeed, maintain with Diderot that, on the contrary, great art postulates in the artist a very high degree of insensibility, or at least, of objectivity. In Maupassant's "confession" there is an illuminating passage where he exclaims involuntarily: "Ah! j'ai tout convoité sans jouir de rien...je porte en moi tous les appétits et toutes les curiosités, et je suis réduit à tout regarder sans rien saisir." Here we are nearer the mark. Maupassant was a hedonist by temperament. He loved with a sensuous ardour the beauty of nature and of women, the bouquet of old wines, the exquisite savour of good

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viands. "On est gourmand comme on est artiste, comme on est instruit, comme on est poète." His *gourmandise*, moreover, comprised all the physical appetites. Indeed, for this strapping young provincial life was a banquet, "interminable et magnifique", like the feast prepared by the good people of Gisors for their *rosier*, Isidore. But whilst still in his twenties, Maupassant realized from certain disquieting symptoms that his constitution was already undermined by disease. Whether, as some maintain, this sexual malady was inherited or, as others assert, both hereditary and acquired, is of little importance except to the clinician. The fact is that, in the flower of youth, Maupassant was already a prey to secret misgivings. In order to escape these, he devoted himself with feverish violence to the cult of 'fitness' and to the satisfaction of his natural appetites for physical enjoyment. Obviously, it would be absurd to picture him during the twelve years which marked the insidious progress of his illness, as one constantly obsessed by dark forebodings. Only by a gradual process was his natural *joie de vivre* distilled into the pessimism which, in 1886, he analysed for the readers of *Sur l'Eau*. Even then, however, Maupassant deluded his public—no doubt because he was trying to delude himself—as to the real cause of his spiritual defeatism. The truth he could not bring himself to divulge, even to his intimate friends, was that for him fame had come just too late. All that he had ever dreamed of as an ill-paid hack in the service of the State was now in his grasp. But he knew very well that, in his case, the fruits of success were Dead Sea apples. That is how we must interpret, I think, the despairing phrase: "j'ai tout convoité sans jouir de rien."

Flaubert need not have feared. This pessimism never became an artistic vice. It is pervasive yet never strident nor lachrymose nor aggressive. The author's style, admirably suited to the purpose for which he designed it, which is to tell a story, is not a favourable medium for the communication of subjective emotion. I have read somewhere that Maupassant's prose is "undistinguished". This is almost as inept as Georges de Porto-Riche's naïve remark after he met Maupassant: "Il n'a pas l'air d'un homme de lettres." Maupassant's style, as Faguet observed, is at once natural and powerful. Faguet might have added, however, that its classic simplicity conceals an uncanny flair for *le mot*

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juste. How true this is can be easily ascertained, though in rather an odd way. Some years ago, even before Basic English was heard of, a group of pedagogues, inspired by the most laudable intentions, proceeded, on the basis of painstaking word-counts and frequencies, to rewrite some of the classics in simplified French. One of their victims was Maupassant, several of whose *contes* were subjected to this unqualifiable process of emendation. *A quelque chose malheur est bon*. For by contrast, this bastard text reveals most strikingly the unsuspected originality of Maupassant's easy style, the richness and variety of his vocabulary, the *justesse* of his epithets. Eschewing neologisms, sparing in his figures of speech, Maupassant creates in the reader's consciousness an image of reality so vivid and so perfect in definition as to be undistinguishable from reality. His language is always in complete harmony with the subject-matter of his tales, and if the flow of the action is momentarily suspended, one is hardly aware of the fact. This is because Maupassant rarely indulges in irrelevant digressions: everything contributes directly or indirectly to the progress of his story. Glance at one of his pages and it will be seen that the word which leaps to the eye (the truly operative word) is the verb. That, in a *conteur*, is the signature of the master craftsman.

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