

Madame Hermet

by Guy de Maupassant

translated by Albert M.C. McMaster

Crazy people attract me. They live in a mysterious land of weird dreams, in that impenetrable cloud of dementia where all that they have witnessed in their previous life, all they have loved, is reproduced for them in an imaginary existence, outside of all laws that govern the things of this life and control human thought.

For them there is no such thing as the impossible, nothing is improbable; fairyland is a constant quantity and the supernatural quite familiar. The old rampart, logic; the old wall, reason; the old main stay of thought, good sense, break down, fall and crumble before their imagination, set free and escaped into the limitless realm of fancy, and advancing with fabulous bounds, and nothing can check it. For them everything happens, and anything may happen. They make no effort to conquer events, to overcome resistance, to overturn obstacles. By a sudden caprice of their flighty imagination they become princes, emperors, or gods, are possessed of all the wealth of the world, all the delightful things of life, enjoy all pleasures, are always strong, always beautiful, always young, always beloved! They, alone, can be happy in this world; for, as far as they are concerned, reality does not exist. I love to look into their wandering intelligence as one leans over an abyss at the bottom of which seethes a foaming torrent whose source and destination are both unknown.

But it is in vain that we lean over these abysses, for we shall never discover the source nor the destination of this water. After all, it is only water, just like what is flowing in the sunlight, and we shall learn nothing by looking at it.

It is likewise of no use to ponder over the intelligence of crazy people, for their most weird notions are, in fact, only ideas that are already known, which appear strange simply because they are no longer under the restraint of reason. Their whimsical source surprises us because we do not see it bubbling up. Doubtless the dropping of a little stone into the current was sufficient to cause these ebullitions. Nevertheless crazy people attract me and I always return to them, drawn in spite of myself by this trivial mystery of dementia.

One day as I was visiting one of the asylums the physician who was my guide said:

"Come, I will show you an interesting case."

And he opened the door of a cell where a woman of about forty, still handsome, was seated in a large armchair, looking persistently at her face in a little hand mirror.

As soon as she saw us she rose to her feet, ran to the other end of the room, picked up a veil that lay on a chair, wrapped it carefully round her face, then came back, nodding her head in reply to our greeting.

"Well," said the doctor, "how are you this morning?"

She gave a deep sigh.

"Oh, ill, monsieur, very ill. The marks are increasing every day."

He replied in a tone of conviction:

"Oh, no; oh, no; I assure you that you are mistaken."

She drew near to him and murmured:

"No. I am certain of it. I counted ten pittings more this morning, three on the right cheek, four on the left cheek, and three on the forehead. It is frightful, frightful! I shall never dare to let any one see me, not even my son; no, not even him! I am lost, I am disfigured forever."

She fell back in her armchair and began to sob.

The doctor took a chair, sat down beside her, and said soothingly in a gentle tone:

"Come, let me see; I assure you it is nothing. With a slight cauterization I will make it all disappear."

She shook her head in denial, without speaking. He tried to touch her veil, but she seized it with both hands so violently that her fingers went through it.

He continued to reason with her and reassure her.

"Come, you know very well that I remove those horrid pits every time and that there is no trace of them after I have treated them. If you do not let me see them I cannot cure you."

"I do not mind your seeing them," she murmured, "but I do not know that gentleman who is with you."

"He is a doctor also, who can give you better care than I can."

She then allowed her face to be uncovered, but her dread, her emotion, her shame at being seen brought a rosy flush to her face and her neck, down to the collar of her dress. She cast down her eyes, turned her face aside, first to the right; then to the left, to avoid our gaze and stammered out:

"Oh, it is torture to me to let myself be seen like this! It is horrible, is it not? Is it not horrible?"

I looked at her in much surprise, for there was nothing on her face, not a mark, not a spot, not a sign of one, nor a scar.

She turned towards me, her eyes still lowered, and said:

"It was while taking care of my son that I caught this fearful disease, monsieur. I saved him, but I am disfigured. I sacrificed my beauty to him, to my poor child. However, I did my duty, my conscience is at rest. If I suffer it is known only to God."

The doctor had drawn from his coat pocket a fine water-color paint brush.

"Let me attend to it," he said, "I will put it all right."

She held out her right cheek, and he began by touching it lightly with the brush here and there, as though he were putting little points of

paint on it. He did the same with the left cheek, then with the chin, and the forehead, and then exclaimed:

"See, there is nothing there now, nothing at all!"

She took up the mirror, gazed at her reflection with profound, eager attention, with a strong mental effort to discover something, then she sighed:

"No. It hardly shows at all. I am infinitely obliged to you."

The doctor had risen. He bowed to her, ushered me out and followed me, and, as soon as he had locked the door, said:

"Here is the history of this unhappy woman."

Her name is Mme. Hermet. She was once very beautiful, a great coquette, very much beloved and very much in-love with life.

She was one of those women who have nothing but their beauty and their love of admiration to sustain, guide or comfort them in this life. The constant anxiety to retain her freshness, the care of her complexion, of her hands, her teeth, of every portion of body that was visible, occupied all her time and all her attention.

She became a widow, with one son. The boy was brought up as are all children of society beauties. She was, however, very fond of him.

He grew up, and she grew older. Whether she saw the fatal crisis approaching, I cannot say. Did she, like so many others, gaze for hours and hours at her skin, once so fine, so transparent and free from blemish, now beginning to shrivel slightly, to be crossed with a thousand little lines, as yet imperceptible, that will grow deeper day by day, month by month? Did she also see slowly, but surely, increasing traces of those long wrinkles on the forehead, those slender serpents that nothing can check? Did she suffer the torture, the abominable torture of the mirror, the little mirror with the silver handle which one cannot make up one's mind to lay down on the table, but then throws down in disgust only to take it up again in order to look more closely, and still more closely at the hateful and insidious approaches of old age? Did she shut herself up ten times,

twenty times a day, leaving her friends chatting in the drawing-room, and go up to her room where, under the protection of bolts and bars, she would again contemplate the work of time on her ripe beauty, now beginning to wither, and recognize with despair the gradual progress of the process which no one else had as yet seemed to perceive, but of which she, herself, was well aware. She knows where to seek the most serious, the gravest traces of age. And the mirror, the little round hand-glass in its carved silver frame, tells her horrible things; for it speaks, it seems to laugh, it jeers and tells her all that is going to occur, all the physical discomforts and the atrocious mental anguish she will suffer until the day of her death, which will be the day of her deliverance.

Did she weep, distractedly, on her knees, her forehead to the ground, and pray, pray, pray to Him who thus slays his creatures and gives them youth only that he may render old age more unendurable, and lends them beauty only that he may withdraw it almost immediately? Did she pray to Him, imploring Him to do for her what He has never yet done for any one, to let her retain until her last day her charm, her freshness and her gracefulness? Then, finding that she was imploring in vain an inflexible Unknown who drives on the years, one after another, did she roll on the carpet in her room, knocking her head against the furniture and stifling in her throat shrieks of despair?

Doubtless she suffered these tortures, for this is what occurred:

One day (she was then thirty-five) her son aged fifteen, fell ill.

He took to his bed without any one being able to determine the cause or nature of his illness.

His tutor, a priest, watched beside him and hardly ever left him, while Mme. Hermet came morning and evening to inquire how he was.

She would come into the room in the morning in her night wrapper, smiling, all powdered and perfumed, and would ask as she entered the door:

"Well, George, are you better?"

The big boy, his face red, swollen and showing the ravages of fever, would reply:

"Yes, little mother, a little better."

She would stay in the room a few seconds, look at the bottles of medicine, and purse her lips as if she were saying "phew," and then would suddenly exclaim: "Oh, I forgot something very important," and would run out of the room leaving behind her a fragrance of choice toilet perfumes.

In the evening she would appear in a decollete dress, in a still greater hurry, for she was always late, and she had just time to inquire:

"Well, what does the doctor say?"

The priest would reply:

"He has not yet given an opinion, madame."

But one evening the abbe replied: "Madame, your son has got the small-pox."

She uttered a scream of terror and fled from the room.

When her maid came to her room the following morning she noticed at once a strong odor of burnt sugar, and she found her mistress, with wide-open eyes, her face pale from lack of sleep, and shivering with terror in her bed.

As soon as the shutters were opened Mme. Herrnet asked:

"How is George?"

"Oh, not at all well to-day, madame."

She did not rise until noon, when she ate two eggs with a cup of tea, as if she herself had been ill, and then she went out to a druggist's to inquire about prophylactic measures against the contagion of small-pox.

She did not come home until dinner time, laden with medicine bottles, and shut herself up at once in her room, where she saturated herself with disinfectants.

The priest was waiting for her in the dining-room. As soon as she saw him she exclaimed in a voice full of emotion:

"Well?"

"No improvement. The doctor is very anxious:"

She began to cry and could eat nothing, she was so worried.

The next day, as soon as it was light, she sent to inquire for her son, but there was no improvement and she spent the whole day in her room, where little braziers were giving out pungent odors. Her maid said also that you could hear her sighing all the evening.

She spent a whole week in this manner, only going out for an hour or two during the afternoon to breathe the air.

She now sent to make inquiries every hour, and would sob when the reports were unfavorable.

On the morning of the eleventh day the priest, having been announced, entered her room, his face grave and pale, and said, without taking the chair she offered him:

"Madame, your son is very ill and wishes to see you."

She fell on her knees, exclaiming:

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! I would never dare! My God! My God! Help me!"

The priest continued:

"The doctor holds out little hope, madame, and George is expecting you!"

And he left the room.

Two hours later as the young lad, feeling himself dying, again asked for his mother, the abbe went to her again and found her still on her knees, still weeping and repeating:

"I will not I will not. . . . I am too much afraid I will not. . . ."

He tried to persuade her, to strengthen her, to lead her. He only succeeded in bringing on an attack of "nerves" that lasted some time and caused her to shriek.

The doctor when he came in the evening was told of this cowardice and declared that he would bring her in himself, of her own volition, or by force. But after trying all manner of argument and just as he seized her round the waist to carry her into her son's room, she caught hold of the door and clung to it so firmly that they could not drag her away. Then when they let go of her she fell at the feet of the doctor, begging his forgiveness and acknowledging that she was a wretched creature. And then she exclaimed: "Oh, he is not going to die; tell me that he is not going to die, I beg of you; tell him that I love him, that I worship him. . . ."

The young lad was dying. Feeling that he had only a few moments more to live, he entreated that his mother be persuaded to come and bid him a last farewell. With that sort of presentiment that the dying sometimes have, he had understood, had guessed all, and he said: "If she is afraid to come into the room, beg her just to come on the balcony as far as my window so that I may see her, at least, so that I may take a farewell look at her, as I cannot kiss her."

The doctor and the abbe, once more, went together to this woman and assured her: "You will run no risk, for there will be a pane of glass between you and him."

She consented, covered up her head, and took with her a bottle of smelling salts. She took three steps on the balcony; then, all at once, hiding her face in her hands, she moaned: "No . . . no . . . I would never dare to look at him . . . never. . . . I am too much ashamed . . . too much afraid No . . . I cannot."

They endeavored to drag her along, but she held on with both hands to the railings and uttered such plaints that the passers-by in the street raised their heads. And the dying boy waited, his eyes turned towards that window, waited to die until he could see for the last time the sweet, beloved face, the worshiped face of his mother.

He waited long, and night came on. Then he turned over with his face to the wall and was silent.

When day broke he was dead. The day following she was crazy.