

Misti

by Guy de Maupassant

translated by Albert M.C. McMaster

I was very much interested at that time in a droll little woman. She was married, of course, as I have a horror of unmarried flirts. What enjoyment is there in making love to a woman who belongs to nobody and yet belongs to any one? And, besides, morality aside, I do not understand love as a trade. That disgusts me somewhat.

The especial attraction in a married woman to a bachelor is that she gives him a home, a sweet, pleasant home where every one takes care of you and spoils you, from the husband to the servants. One finds everything combined there, love, friendship, even fatherly interest, bed and board, all, in fact, that constitutes the happiness of life, with this incalculable advantage, that one can change one's family from time to time, take up one's abode in all kinds of society in turn: in summer, in the country with the workman who rents you a room in his house; in winter with the townsfolk, or even with the nobility, if one is ambitious.

I have another weakness; it is that I become attached to the husband as well as the wife. I acknowledge even that some husbands, ordinary or coarse as they may be, give me a feeling of disgust for their wives, however charming they may be. But when the husband is intellectual or charming I invariably become very much attached to him. I am careful if I quarrel with the wife not to quarrel with the husband. In this way I have made some of my best friends, and have also proved in many cases the incontestable superiority of the male over the female in the human species. The latter makes all sorts of trouble-scenes, reproaches, etc.; while the former, who has just as good a right to complain, treats you, on the contrary, as though you were the special Providence of his hearth.

Well, my friend was a quaint little woman, a brunette, fanciful, capricious, pious, superstitious, credulous as a monk, but charming. She had a way of kissing one that I never saw in any one else--but that was not the attraction--and such a soft skin! It gave me intense delight merely to hold her hands. And an eye--her glance was like a slow caress, delicious and unending. Sometimes I would lean my head on

her knee and we would remain motionless, she leaning over me with that subtle, enigmatic, disturbing smile that women have, while my eyes would be raised to hers, drinking sweetly and deliciously into my heart, like a form of intoxication, the glance of her limpid blue eyes, limpid as though they were full of thoughts of love, and blue as though they were a heaven of delights.

Her husband, inspector of some large public works, was frequently away from home and left us our evenings free. Sometimes I spent them with her lounging on the divan with my forehead on one of her knees; while on the other lay an enormous black cat called "Misti," whom she adored. Our fingers would meet on the cat's back and would intertwine in her soft silky fur. I felt its warm body against my cheek, trembling with its eternal purring, and occasionally a paw would reach out and place on my mouth, or my eyelid, five unsheathed claws which would prick my eyelids, and then be immediately withdrawn.

Sometimes we would go out on what we called our escapades. They were very innocent, however. They consisted in taking supper at some inn in the suburbs, or else, after dining at her house or at mine, in making the round of the cheap cafes, like students out for a lark.

We would go into the common drinking places and take our seats at the end of the smoky den on two rickety chairs, at an old wooden table. A cloud of pungent smoke, with which blended an odor of fried fish from dinner, filled the room. Men in smocks were talking in loud tones as they drank their petits verres, and the astonished waiter placed before us two cherry brandies.

She, trembling, charmingly afraid, would raise her double black veil as far as her nose, and then take up her glass with the enjoyment that one feels at doing something delightfully naughty. Each cherry she swallowed made her feel as if she had done something wrong, each swallow of the burning liquor had on her the affect of a delicate and forbidden enjoyment.

Then she would say to me in a low tone: "Let us go." And we would leave, she walking quickly with lowered head between the drinkers who watched her going by with a look of displeasure. And as soon as

we got into the street she would give a great sigh of relief, as if we had escaped some terrible danger.

Sometimes she would ask me with a shudder:

"Suppose they, should say something rude to me in those places, what would you do?" "Why, I would defend you, parbleu!" I would reply in a resolute manner. And she would squeeze my arm for happiness, perhaps with a vague wish that she might be insulted and protected, that she might see men fight on her account, even those men, with me!

One evening as we sat at a table in a tavern at Montmartre, we saw an old woman in tattered garments come in, holding in her hand a pack of dirty cards. Perceiving a lady, the old woman at once approached us and offered to tell my friend's fortune. Emma, who in her heart believed in everything, was trembling with longing and anxiety, and she made a place beside her for the old woman.

The latter, old, wrinkled, her eyes with red inflamed rings round them, and her mouth without a single tooth in it, began to deal her dirty cards on the table. She dealt them in piles, then gathered them up, and then dealt them out again, murmuring indistinguishable words. Emma, turning pale, listened with bated breath, gasping with anxiety and curiosity.

The fortune-teller broke silence. She predicted vague happenings: happiness and children, a fair young man, a voyage, money, a lawsuit, a dark man, the return of some one, success, a death. The mention of this death attracted the younger woman's attention. "Whose death? When? In what manner?"

The old woman replied: "Oh, as to that, these cards are not certain enough. You must come to my place to-morrow; I will tell you about it with coffee grounds which never make a mistake."

Emma turned anxiously to me:

"Say, let us go there to-morrow. Oh, please say yes. If not, you cannot imagine how worried I shall be."

I began to laugh.

"We will go if you wish it, dearie."

The old woman gave us her address. She lived on the sixth floor, in a wretched house behind the Buttes-Chaumont. We went there the following day.

Her room, an attic containing two chairs and a bed, was filled with strange objects, bunches of herbs hanging from nails, skins of animals, flasks and phials containing liquids of various colors. On the table a stuffed black cat looked out of eyes of glass. He seemed like the demon of this sinister dwelling.

Emma, almost fainting with emotion, sat down on a chair and exclaimed:

"Oh, dear, look at that cat; how like it is to Misti."

And she explained to the old woman that she had a cat "exactly like that, exactly like that!"

The old woman replied gravely:

"If you are in love with a man, you must not keep it."

Emma, suddenly filled with fear, asked:

"Why not?"

The old woman sat down familiarly beside her and took her hand.

"It was the undoing of my life," she said.

My friend wanted to hear about it. She leaned against the old woman, questioned her, begged her to tell. At length the woman agreed to do so.

"I loved that cat," she said, "as one would love a brother. I was young then and all alone, a seamstress. I had only him, Mouton. One of the tenants had given it to me. He was as intelligent as a child, and gentle as well, and he worshiped me, my dear lady, he worshiped me more

than one does a fetish. All day long he would sit on my lap purring, and all night long on my pillow; I could feel his heart beating, in fact.

"Well, I happened to make an acquaintance, a fine young man who was working in a white-goods house. That went on for about three months on a footing of mere friendship. But you know one is liable to weaken, it may happen to any one, and, besides, I had really begun to love him. He was so nice, so nice, and so good. He wanted us to live together, for economy's sake. I finally allowed him to come and see me one evening. I had not made up my mind to anything definite; oh, no! But I was pleased at the idea that we should spend an hour together.

"At first he behaved very well, said nice things to me that made my heart go pit-a-pat. And then he kissed me, madame, kissed me as one does when they love. I remained motionless, my eyes closed, in a paroxysm of happiness. But, suddenly, I felt him start violently and he gave a scream, a scream that I shall never forget. I opened my eyes and saw that Mouton had sprung at his face and was tearing the skin with his claws as if it had been a linen rag. And the blood was streaming down like rain, madame.

"I tried to take the cat away, but he held on tight, scratching all the time; and he bit me, he was so crazy. I finally got him and threw him out of the window, which was open, for it was summer.

"When I began to bathe my poor friend's face, I noticed that his eyes were destroyed, both his eyes!

"He had to go to the hospital. He died of grief at the end of a year. I wanted to keep him with me and provide for him, but he would not agree to it. One would have supposed that he hated me after the occurrence.

"As for Mouton, his back was broken by the fall, The janitor picked up his body. I had him stuffed, for in spite of all I was fond of him. If he acted as he did it was because he loved me, was it not?"

The old woman was silent and began to stroke the lifeless animal whose body trembled on its iron framework.

Emma, with sorrowful heart, had forgotten about the predicted death-- or, at least, she did not allude to it again, and she left, giving the woman five francs.

As her husband was to return the following day, I did not go to the house for several days. When I did go I was surprised at not seeing Misti. I asked where he was.

She blushed and replied:

"I gave him away. I was uneasy."

I was astonished.

"Uneasy? Uneasy? What about?"

She gave me a long kiss and said in a low tone:

"I was uneasy about your eyes, my dear."

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