

The Impolite Sex

by Guy de Maupassant
translated by Albert M.C. McMaster

Madame de X. to Madame de L.

ETRETAT, Friday. My Dear Aunt:

I am coming to see you without anyone knowing it. I shall be at Les Fresnes on the 2d of September, the day before the hunting season opens, as I do not want to miss it, so that I may tease these gentlemen. You are too good, aunt, and you will allow them, as you usually do when there are no strange guests, to come to table, under pretext of fatigue, without dressing or shaving for the occasion.

They are delighted, of course, when I am not present. But I shall be there and will hold a review, like a general, at dinner time; and, if I find a single one of them at all careless in dress, no matter how little, I mean to send them down to the kitchen with the servants.

The men of to-day have so little consideration for others and so little good manners that one must be always severe with them. We live indeed in an age of vulgarity. When they quarrel, they insult each other in terms worthy of longshoremen, and, in our presence, they do not conduct themselves even as well as our servants. It is at the seaside that you see this most clearly. They are to be found there in battalions, and you can judge them in the lump. Oh! what coarse beings they are!

Just imagine, in a train, a gentleman who looked well, as I thought at first sight, thanks to his tailor, carefully took off his boots in order to put on a pair of old shoes! Another, an old man who was probably some wealthy upstart (these are the most ill-bred), while sitting opposite to me, had the delicacy to place his two feet on the seat quite close to me. This is a positive fact.

At the watering-places the vulgarity is unrestrained. I must here make one admission--that my indignation is perhaps due to the fact that I am not accustomed to associate, as a rule, with the sort of people one comes across here, for I should be less shocked by their manners if I

had the opportunity of observing them oftener. In the office of the hotel I was nearly thrown down by a young man who snatched the key over my head. Another knocked against me so violently without begging my pardon or lifting his hat, coming away from a ball at the Casino, that it gave me a pain in the chest. It is the same way with all of them. Watch them addressing ladies on the terrace; they scarcely ever bow. They merely raise their hands to their headgear. But, indeed, as they are all more or less bald, it is the best plan.

But what exasperates and disgusts me particularly is the liberty they take of talking in public, without any kind of precaution, about the most revolting adventures. When two men are together, they relate to each other, in the broadest language and with the most abominable comments really horrible stories, without caring in the slightest degree whether a woman's ear is within reach of their voices. Yesterday, on the beach, I was forced to leave the place where I was sitting in order not to be any longer the involuntary confidante of an obscene anecdote, told in such immodest language that I felt just as humiliated as indignant at having heard it. Would not the most elementary good-breeding teach them to speak in a lower tone about such matters when we are near at hand. Etretat is, moreover, the country of gossip and scandal. From five to seven o'clock you can see people wandering about in quest of scandal, which they retail from group to group. As you remarked to me, my dear aunt, tittle-tattle is the mark of petty individuals and petty minds. It is also the consolation of women who are no longer loved or sought after. It is enough for me to observe the women who are fondest of gossiping to be persuaded that you are quite right.

The other day I was present at a musical evening at the Casino, given by a remarkable artist, Madame Masson, who sings in a truly delightful manner. I took the opportunity of applauding the admirable Coquelin, as well as two charming vaudeville performers, M----and Meillet. I met, on this occasion, all the bathers who were at the beach. It is no great distinction this year.

Next day I went to lunch at Yport. I noticed a tall man with a beard, coming out of a large house like a castle. It was the painter, Jean Paul Laurens. He is not satisfied apparently with imprisoning the subjects of his pictures, he insists on imprisoning himself.

Then I found myself seated on the shingle close to a man still young, of gentle and refined appearance, who was reading poetry. But he read it with such concentration, with such passion, I may say, that he did not even raise his eyes towards me. I was somewhat astonished and asked the proprietor of the baths, without appearing to be much concerned, the name of this gentleman. I laughed to myself a little at this reader of rhymes; he seemed behind the age, for a man. This person, I thought, must be a simpleton. Well, aunt, I am now infatuated about this stranger. Just fancy, his name is Sully Prudhomme! I went back and sat down beside him again so as to get a good look at him. His face has an expression of calmness and of penetration. Somebody came to look for him, and I heard his voice, which is sweet and almost timid. He would certainly not tell obscene stories aloud in public or knock up against ladies without apologizing. He is assuredly a man of refinement, but his refinement is of an almost morbid, sensitive character, I will try this winter to get an introduction to him.

I have no more news, my dear aunt, and I must finish this letter in haste, as the mail will soon close. I kiss your hands and your cheeks.
Your devoted niece, BERTHE DE X.

P. S.--I should add, however, by way of justification of French politeness, that our fellow-countrymen are, when travelling, models of good manners in comparison with the abominable English, who seem to have been brought up in a stable, so careful are they not to discommode themselves in any way, while they always discommode their neighbors.

Madame de L. to Madame de X.

LES FRESNES, Saturday. My Dear Child:

Many of the things you have said to me are very sensible, but that does not prevent you from being wrong. Like you, I used formerly to feel very indignant at the impoliteness of men, who, as I supposed, constantly treated me with neglect; but, as I grew older and reflected on everything, putting aside coquetry, and observing things without taking any part in them myself, I perceived this much--that if men are not always polite, women are always indescribably rude.

We imagine that we should be permitted to do anything, my darling, and at the same time we consider that we have a right to the utmost respect, and in the most flagrant manner we commit actions devoid of that elementary good-breeding of which you speak so feelingly.

I find, on the contrary, that men consider us much more than we consider them. Besides, darling, men must needs be, and are, what we make them. In a state of society, where women are all true gentlewomen, all men would become gentlemen.

Come now; just observe and reflect.

Look at two women meeting in the street. What an attitude each assumes towards the other! What disparaging looks! What contempt they throw into each glance! How they toss their heads while they inspect each other to find something to condemn! And, if the footpath is narrow, do you think one woman would make room for another, or would beg pardon as she sweeps by? Never! When two men jostle each other by accident in some narrow lane, each of them bows and at the same time gets out of the other's way, while we women press against each other stomach to stomach, face to face, insolently staring each other out of countenance.

Look at two women who are acquaintances meeting on a staircase outside the door of a friend's drawing-room, one of them just leaving, the other about to go in. They begin to talk to each other and block up all the landing. If anyone happens to be coming up behind them, man or woman, do you imagine that they will put themselves half an inch out of their way? Never! never!

I was waiting myself, with my watch in my hands, one day last winter at a certain drawing-room door. And, behind me, two gentlemen were also waiting without showing any readiness, as I did, to lose their temper. The reason was that they had long grown accustomed to our unconscionable insolence.

The other day, before leaving Paris, I went to dine with no less a person than your husband, in the Champs Elysees, in order to enjoy the fresh air. Every table was occupied. The waiter asked us to wait and there would soon be a vacant table.

At that moment I noticed an elderly lady of noble figure, who, having paid for her dinner, seemed on the point of going away. She saw me, scanned me from head to foot, and did not budge. For more than a quarter of an hour she sat there, immovable, putting on her gloves, and calmly staring at those who were waiting like myself. Now, two young men who were just finishing their dinner, having seen me in their turn, hastily summoned the waiter, paid what they owed, and at once offered me their seats, even insisting on standing while waiting for their change. And, bear in mind, my fair niece, that I am no longer pretty, like you, but old and white-haired.

It is we, you see, who should be taught politeness, and the task would be such a difficult one that Hercules himself would not be equal to it. You speak to me about Etretat and about the people who indulged in "tittle-tattle" along the beach of that delightful watering-place. It is a spot now lost to me, a thing of the past, but I found much amusement therein days gone by.

There were only a few of us, people in good society, really good society, and a few artists, and we all fraternized. We paid little attention to gossip in those days.

As we had no monotonous Casino, where people only gather for show, where they whisper, where they dance stupidly, where they succeed in thoroughly boring one another, we sought some other way of passing our evenings pleasantly. Now, just guess what came into the head of one of our husbands? Nothing less than to go and dance each night in one of the farm-houses in the neighborhood.

We started out in a group with a street-organ, generally played by Le Poittevin, the painter, with a cotton nightcap on his head. Two men carried lanterns. We followed in procession, laughing and chattering like a pack of fools.

We woke up the farmer and his servant-maids and farm hands. We got them to make onion soup (horror!), and we danced under the apple trees, to the sound of the barrel-organ. The cocks waking up began to crow in the darkness of the out-houses; the horses began prancing on the straw of their stables. The cool air of the country caressed our cheeks with the smell of grass and of new-mown hay.

How long ago it is! How long ago it is! It is thirty years since then!

I do not want you, my darling, to come for the opening of the hunting season. Why spoil the pleasure of our friends by inflicting on them fashionable toilettes on this day of vigorous exercise in the country? This is the way, child, that men are spoiled. I embrace you. Your old aunt, GENEVIEVE DE L.