

## **The Magic Couch**

by Guy de Maupassant

translated by Albert M.C. McMaster

The Seine flowed past my house, without a ripple on its surface, and gleaming in the bright morning sunlight. It was a beautiful, broad, indolent silver stream, with crimson lights here and there; and on the opposite side of the river were rows of tall trees that covered all the bank with an immense wall of verdure.

The sensation of life which is renewed each day, of fresh, happy, loving life trembled in the leaves, palpitated in the air, was mirrored in the water.

The postman had just brought my papers, which were handed to me, and I walked slowly to the river bank in order to read them.

In the first paper I opened I noticed this headline, "Statistics of Suicides," and I read that more than 8,500 persons had killed themselves in that year.

In a moment I seemed to see them! I saw this voluntary and hideous massacre of the despairing who were weary of life. I saw men bleeding, their jaws fractured, their skulls cloven, their breasts pierced by a bullet, slowly dying, alone in a little room in a hotel, giving no thought to their wound, but thinking only of their misfortunes.

I saw others seated before a tumbler in which some matches were soaking, or before a little bottle with a red label.

They would look at it fixedly without moving; then they would drink and await the result; then a spasm would convulse their cheeks and draw their lips together; their eyes would grow wild with terror, for they did not know that the end would be preceded by so much suffering.

They rose to their feet, paused, fell over and with their hands pressed to their stomachs they felt their internal organs on fire, their entrails devoured by the fiery liquid, before their minds began to grow dim.

I saw others hanging from a nail in the wall, from the fastening of the window, from a hook in the ceiling, from a beam in the garret, from a branch of a tree amid the evening rain. And I surmised all that had happened before they hung there motionless, their tongues hanging out of their mouths. I imagined the anguish of their heart, their final hesitation, their attempts to fasten the rope, to determine that it was secure, then to pass the noose round their neck and to let themselves fall.

I saw others lying on wretched beds, mothers with their little children, old men dying of hunger, young girls dying for love, all rigid, suffocated, asphyxiated, while in the center of the room the brasier still gave forth the fumes of charcoal.

And I saw others walking at night along the deserted bridges. These were the most sinister. The water flowed under the arches with a low sound. They did not see it . . . they guessed at it from its cool breath! They longed for it and they feared it. They dared not do it! And yet, they must. A distant clock sounded the hour and, suddenly, in the vast silence of the night, there was heard the splash of a body falling into the river, a scream or two, the sound of hands beating the water, and all was still. Sometimes, even, there was only the sound of the falling body when they had tied their arms down or fastened a stone to their feet. Oh, the poor things, the poor things, the poor things, how I felt their anguish, how I died in their death! I went through all their wretchedness; I endured in one hour all their tortures. I knew all the sorrows that had led them to this, for I know the deceitful infamy of life, and no one has felt it more than I have.

How I understood them, these who weak, harassed by misfortune, having lost those they loved, awakened from the dream of a tardy compensation, from the illusion of another existence where God will finally be just, after having been ferocious, and their minds disabused of the mirages of happiness, have given up the fight and desire to put an end to this ceaseless tragedy, or this shameful comedy.

Suicide! Why, it is the strength of those whose strength is exhausted, the hope of those who no longer believe, the sublime courage of the conquered! Yes, there is at least one door to this life we can always open and pass through to the other side. Nature had an impulse of pity; she did not shut us up in prison. Mercy for the despairing!

As for those who are simply disillusioned, let them march ahead with free soul and quiet heart. They have nothing to fear since they may take their leave; for behind them there is always this door that the gods of our illusions cannot even lock.

I thought of this crowd of suicides: more than eight thousand five hundred in one year. And it seemed to me that they had combined to send to the world a prayer, to utter a cry of appeal, to demand something that should come into effect later when we understood things better. It seemed to me that all these victims, their throats cut, poisoned, hung, asphyxiated, or drowned, all came together, a frightful horde, like citizens to the polls, to say to society:

"Grant us, at least, a gentle death! Help us to die, you who will not help us to live! See, we are numerous, we have the right to speak in these days of freedom, of philosophic independence and of popular suffrage. Give to those who renounce life the charity of a death that will not be repugnant nor terrible."

I began to dream, allowing my fancy to roam at will in weird and mysterious fashion on this subject.

I seemed to be all at once in a beautiful city. It was Paris; but at what period? I walked about the streets, looking at the houses, the theaters, the public buildings, and presently found myself in a square where I remarked a large building; very handsome, dainty and attractive. I was surprised on reading on the facade this inscription in letters of gold, "Suicide Bureau."

Oh, the weirdness of waking dreams where the spirit soars into a world of unrealities and possibilities! Nothing astonishes one, nothing shocks one; and the unbridled fancy makes no distinction between the comic and the tragic.

I approached the building where footmen in knee-breeches were seated in the vestibule in front of a cloak-room as they do at the entrance of a club.

I entered out of curiosity. One of the men rose and said:

"What does monsieur wish?"

"I wish to know what building this is."

"Nothing more?"

"Why, no."

"Then would monsieur like me to take him to the Secretary of the Bureau?"

I hesitated, and asked:

"But will not that disturb him?"

"Oh, no, monsieur, he is here to receive those who desire information."

"Well, lead the way."

He took me through corridors where old gentlemen were chatting, and finally led me into a beautiful office, somewhat somber, furnished throughout in black wood. A stout young man with a corporation was writing a letter as he smoked a cigar, the fragrance of which gave evidence of its quality.

He rose. We bowed to each other, and as soon as the footman had retired he asked:

"What can I do for you?"

"Monsieur," I replied, "pardon my curiosity. I had never seen this establishment. The few words inscribed on the facade filled me with astonishment, and I wanted to know what was going on here."

He smiled before replying, then said in a low tone with a complacent air:

"Mon Dieu, monsieur, we put to death in a cleanly and gentle--I do not venture to say agreeable manner those persons who desire to die."

I did not feel very shocked, for it really seemed to me natural and right. What particularly surprised me was that on this planet, with its low, utilitarian, humanitarian ideals, selfish and coercive of all true freedom, any one should venture on a similar enterprise, worthy of an emancipated humanity.

"How did you get the idea?" I asked.

"Monsieur," he replied, "the number of suicides increased so enormously during the five years succeeding the world exposition of 1889 that some measures were urgently needed. People killed themselves in the streets, at fetes, in restaurants, at the theater, in railway carriages, at the receptions held by the President of the Republic, everywhere. It was not only a horrid sight for those who love life, as I do, but also a bad example for children. Hence it became necessary to centralize suicides."

"What caused this suicidal epidemic?"

"I do not know. The fact is, I believe, the world is growing old. People begin to see things clearly and they are getting disgruntled. It is the same to-day with destiny as with the government, we have found out what it is; people find that they are swindled in every direction, and they just get out of it all. When one discovers that Providence lies, cheats, robs, deceives human beings just as a plain Deputy deceives his constituents, one gets angry, and as one cannot nominate a fresh Providence every three months as we do with our privileged representatives, one just gets out of the whole thing, which is decidedly bad."

"Really!"

"Oh, as for me, I am not complaining."

"Will you inform me how you carry on this establishment?"

"With pleasure. You may become a member when you please. It is a club."

"A club!"

"Yes, monsieur, founded by the most eminent men in the country, by men of the highest intellect and brightest intelligence. And," he added, laughing heartily, "I swear to you that every one gets a great deal of enjoyment out of it."

"In this place?"

"Yes, in this place."

"You surprise me."

"Mon Dieu, they enjoy themselves because they have not that fear of death which is the great killjoy in all our earthly pleasures."

"But why should they be members of this club if they do not kill themselves?"

"One may be a member of the club without being obliged for that reason to commit suicide."

"But then?"

"I will explain. In view of the enormous increase in suicides, and of the hideous spectacle they presented, a purely benevolent society was formed for the protection of those in despair, which placed at their disposal the facilities for a peaceful, painless, if not unforeseen death."

"Who can have authorized such an institution?"

"General Boulanger during his brief tenure of power. He could never refuse anything. However, that was the only good thing he did. Hence, a society was formed of clear-sighted, disillusioned skeptics who desired to erect in the heart of Paris a kind of temple dedicated to the contempt for death. This place was formerly a dreaded spot that no one ventured to approach. Then its founders, who met together here, gave a grand inaugural entertainment with Mmes. Sarah Bernhardt, Judic, Theo, Granier, and twenty others, and Mme. de Reske, Coquelin, Mounet-Sully, Paulus, etc., present, followed by concerts, the comedies of Dumas, of Meilhac, Halevy and Sardon. We had only one thing to mar it, one drama by Becque which seemed sad, but

which subsequently had a great success at the Comedie-Francaise. In fact all Paris came. The enterprise was launched."

"In the midst of the festivities! What a funereal joke!"

"Not at all. Death need not be sad, it should be a matter of indifference. We made death cheerful, crowned it with flowers, covered it with perfume, made it easy. One learns to aid others through example; one can see that it is nothing."

"I can well understand that they should come to the entertainments; but did they come to . . . Death?"

"Not at first; they were afraid."

"And later?"

"They came."

"Many of them?"

"In crowds. We have had more than forty in a day. One finds hardly any more drowned bodies in the Seine."

"Who was the first?"

"A club member."

"As a sacrifice to the cause?"

"I don't think so. A man who was sick of everything, a 'down and out' who had lost heavily at baccarat for three months."

"Indeed?"

"The second was an Englishman, an eccentric. We then advertised in the papers, we gave an account of our methods, we invented some attractive instances. But the great impetus was given by poor people."

"How do you go to work?"

"Would you like to see? I can explain at the same time."

"Yes, indeed."

He took his hat, opened the door, allowed me to precede him, and we entered a card room, where men sat playing as they play in all gambling places. They were chatting cheerfully, eagerly. I have seldom seen such a jolly, lively, mirthful club.

As I seemed surprised, the secretary said:

"Oh, the establishment has an unheard of prestige. All the smart people all over the world belong to it so as to appear as though they held death in scorn. Then, once they get here, they feel obliged to be cheerful that they may not appear to be afraid. So they joke and laugh and talk flippantly, they are witty and they become so. At present it is certainly the most frequented and the most entertaining place in Paris. The women are even thinking of building an annex for themselves."

"And, in spite of all this, you have many suicides in the house?"

"As I said, about forty or fifty a day. Society people are rare, but poor devils abound. The middle class has also a large contingent.

"And how . . . do they do?"

"They are asphyxiated . . . very slowly."

"In what manner?"

"A gas of our own invention. We have the patent. On the other side of the building are the public entrances--three little doors opening on small streets. When a man or a woman present themselves they are interrogated. Then they are offered assistance, aid, protection. If a client accepts, inquiries are made; and sometimes we have saved their lives."

"Where do you get your money?"

"We have a great deal. There are a large number of shareholders. Besides it is fashionable to contribute to the establishment. The names



of the donors are published in Figaro. Then the suicide of every rich man costs a thousand francs. And they look as if they were lying in state. It costs the poor nothing."

"How can you tell who is poor?"

"Oh, oh, monsieur, we can guess! And, besides, they must bring a certificate of indigency from the commissary of police of their district. If you knew how distressing it is to see them come in! I visited their part of our building once only, and I will never go again. The place itself is almost as good as this part, almost as luxurious and comfortable; but they themselves . . . they themselves!!! If you could see them arriving, the old men in rags coming to die; persons who have been dying of misery for months, picking up their food at the edges of the curbstone like dogs in the street; women in rags, emaciated, sick, paralyzed, incapable of making a living, who say to us after they have told us their story: 'You see that things cannot go on like that, as I cannot work any longer or earn anything.' I saw one woman of eighty-seven who had lost all her children and grandchildren, and who for the last six weeks had been sleeping out of doors. It made me ill to hear of it. Then we have so many different cases, without counting those who say nothing, but simply ask: 'Where is it?' These are admitted at once and it is all over in a minute."

With a pang at my heart I repeated:

"And . . . where is it?"

"Here," and he opened a door, adding:

"Go in; this is the part specially reserved for club members, and the one least used. We have so far had only eleven annihilations here."

"Ah! You call that an . . . annihilation!"

"Yes, monsieur. Go in."

I hesitated. At length I went in. It was a wide corridor, a sort of greenhouse in which panes of glass of pale blue, tender pink and delicate green gave the poetic charm of landscapes to the inclosing walls. In this pretty salon there were divans, magnificent palms,

flowers, especially roses of balmy fragrance, books on the tables, the Revue des Deuxmondes, cigars in government boxes, and, what surprised me, Vichy pastilles in a bonbonniere.

As I expressed my surprise, my guide said:

"Oh, they often come here to chat." He continued: "The public corridors are similar, but more simply furnished."

In reply to a question of mine, he pointed to a couch covered with creamy crepe de Chine with white embroidery, beneath a large shrub of unknown variety at the foot of which was a circular bed of mignonette.

The secretary added in a lower tone:

"We change the flower and the perfume at will, for our gas, which is quite imperceptible, gives death the fragrance of the suicide's favorite flower. It is volatilized with essences. Would you like to inhale it for a second?"

"No, thank you," I said hastily, "not yet . . . ."

He began to laugh.

"Oh, monsieur, there is no danger. I have tried it myself several times."

I was afraid he would think me a coward, and I said:

"Well, I'll try it."

"Stretch yourself out on the 'endormeuse.'"

A little uneasy I seated myself on the low couch covered with crepe de Chine and stretched myself full length, and was at once bathed in a delicious odor of mignonette. I opened my mouth in order to breathe it in, for my mind had already become stupefied and forgetful of the past and was a prey, in the first stages of asphyxia, to the enchanting intoxication of a destroying and magic opium.

Some one shook me by the arm.

"Oh, oh, monsieur," said the secretary, laughing, "it looks to me as if you were almost caught."

But a voice, a real voice, and no longer a dream voice, greeted me with the peasant intonation:

"Good morning, m'sieu. How goes it?"

My dream was over. I saw the Seine distinctly in the sunlight, and, coming along a path, the garde champetre of the district, who with his right hand touched his kepi braided in silver. I replied:

"Good morning, Marinel. Where are you going?"

"I am going to look at a drowned man whom they fished up near the Morillons. Another who has thrown himself into the soup. He even took off his trousers in order to tie his legs together with them."