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# Introduction

The reader opening this anthology will quickly realise that short stories come in different shapes and sizes. I mention this at the outset because short stories have been the subject of many theories and definitions over the centuries, often considerably longer than the stories themselves. These theories and definitions prescribe on matters of length, of subject, of voice and point of view, or on how the short story should handle time, place and action. We are told that the short story explores a single mood or situation; that it aims for a single effect; that it must finish with a click, like a box snapping shut; or we are told the opposite – that it must end on ambiguity or tension. The short story should resolve. It should refuse resolution. It must tie up its loose ends, it must close on suspenseful ellipses . . .

Luckily, it is easier – as well as more enjoyable – to read short stories than to define them. This is just as well, because the French short story tradition is rich and innovative and contains as many classic examples of the genre as it does oddballs, eccentrics and radical misfits. While there are plenty of both in these pages, it is nonetheless useful to establish some parameters – if only to see how far writers can stretch, blur or subvert them.

Though the words ‘short’ and ‘story’ impose basic requirements and raise basic expectations, these are, fortunately, permissive. They are also dependent on period and culture: a thirty-page short story in the nineteenth century reads very differently from a thirty-page short story in the twenty-first. There are also practical questions: at what point does a short story edge over into a novella? Or, at the other end of the scale, how to differentiate between a very short short story and a prose poem, or what we call today ‘microfiction’ or ‘flash fiction’, forms which existed long before the names arrived to bed them down among our literary categories? And who decides on these labels? Is it the author? The publisher? The marketing department?

Rather than focusing on ‘page count’ and ‘word limit’ as undifferentiated

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slabs of matter from which the short story hews its duration, it would better serve to think of it as a genre that puts the reader in a unique relationship with time. Stories are woven into our lives, but not all stories weave in the same way. Whether it's a medieval audience listening to a tale that has been transmitted orally over generations, or a commuter reading a piece of fiction among the advertisements and lifestyle features in their magazine, the short story fits in and around a day made up of different kinds of time, attention and activity.

In 1966, the Hungarian writer István Örkény published a volume of what he called 'one-minute stories'. In his preface – which he described, with demystifying practicality, as 'handling instructions' – he writes:

While the soft-boiled egg is boiling or the number you are dialing answers (provided it is not engaged, of course) you have ample time to read one of these short stories which, because of their brevity, I have come to think of as one-minute stories.

Though each age imagines itself busier than the last, the short story is the genre that has most ingeniously adapted to the competing claims on our time and attention. It can insert itself into the cracks in our timetables and infiltrate our slack hours. The most productive thinking about short stories starts out from the question of time rather than the fact of length or size. Thirty pages will always be thirty pages, but one minute is never just one minute.

More than half a century before Örkény, Félix Fénéon had gone even further: his 'three-line novellas', several of which are included in this anthology, are masterpieces of suggestive compression. They can be read in a matter of seconds, though their effect is much harder to measure. Decanted from the 'fait divers' or the 'news in brief' section of regional newspapers, and then rewritten with wit and waspish aplomb, these brisk, lapidary tales expand in inverse proportion to the number of words they contain.

Fénéon's skill lies in showing us how much irony, social observation, pathos and drama a writer can fit into a few words. One of his most barbed 'novellas' goes as follows: 'Verniot, septuagenarian beggar from Clichy, has died of hunger. 2000 francs were hidden in his mattress. But let's not generalize.' At twenty words long, we have a novel's worth of plotlines and psychological questions, and a narrative voice whose ironic final observation leaves us at once amused and uncomfortably implicated. Fénéon is an

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extreme example, but he shows us that the best short stories use their length as a resource, rather than just inhabiting it as a limit: they combine the immediacy of theatre, the compression of a poem and the latitude of a novel.

A further advantage of the short story is uninterruptedness, the way it can be read (or heard) in one sitting. Although some people can sit for longer than others, we all know what we mean by ‘a sitting’: an arrangement between the mind and the body, between the limits of our attention span and the moment pins and needles set in. The playwright August Strindberg claimed that the one-act play was the most effective kind of drama because it lacked intervals, and because, as he put it, the audience was ‘prisoner’ for the duration. Something similar can be said of the short story: that it shares with the one-act play the pressure of an imminent ending as it bears down upon the *nowness* of reading or listening.

Fénéon’s three-line novellas appeared in the daily newspaper *Le Matin* between 1903 and 1937 and remind us that everyday life is a mine of scenarios as full of drama, mystery, absurdity and plot twists as the most *outré* fiction. They also remind us that the literary short story – a piece of artistically-designed and mostly (but not exclusively) fictional prose – is just one strand of narrative in a world saturated with stories. It is no coincidence that the high point of the modern short story – the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – is also a high point in print media, in news and reportage, and in an experience of speed and connectivity that, despite changes in technology, remains remarkably consistent with today’s. Newspapers and magazines were hospitable to the short story and the first readers of many of the stories in this anthology encountered them in a patchwork of different kinds of narrative: news stories, court reports, ‘true crime’, gossip columns, journalistic scoops, political commentary and philosophical tales. They will also have picked them out from the mixed page: advertisements, recipes (which are also stories), polemics, letters, puzzles, notices and personal ads. The short story is a pragmatic, nimble genre, responsive and topical, reaching the parts of a culture other genres cannot, and reaching them fast. Where the novel stretches across our days and accompanies us through them, the short story thrives in the busy ecosystem of everyday narratives and everyday reading habits. Several of the stories in this anthology reflect that: there are stories in the form of news items, political or philosophical parables, topical polemics, dialogues and monologues, letters, psychological case



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studies, dream-notation and even a multiple-choice questionnaire. There are fine-tuned classics of the ‘well-made’ tale and works that seem to conform to no genre, or sit proudly and unfazed between genres.

Volume One begins with a bawdy, innuendo-laden tale from Philippe de Laon’s *One Hundred New Tales*, written between 1464 and 1467. The final story in Volume Two dates from the early 2000s, written by Virginie Despentes, one of the most thrilling and taboo-breaking contemporary French writers.

Laon’s *One Hundred New Tales* have been described both as ‘the first French literary work in prose’ and as ‘a museum of obscenities’. Although only the first of these judgments was a compelling argument for their inclusion, the second reminds us that the short story is not some remote high-cultural object to be entombed in a university syllabus, but a diversion and an entertainment. Both *One Hundred New Tales* and Marguerite de Navarre’s *The Heptameron*, from which the story ‘The Substitute’ is taken, are inspired (like Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*) by Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*. They follow their model in setting stories told by diverse voices into an overarching frame narrative. In *The Decameron*, travellers who have been thrown together by circumstances tell stories as they escape the Black Death. In *The Canterbury Tales*, they are travelling on a pilgrimage. In *The Heptameron*, they are in an abbey, waiting for the bridge that will bear them to safety to be completed. What these early examples of storytelling have in common is sophistication and playfulness, tricky narrators and slippery perspectives. From the very start, the short story is testing its limits, pushing the boundaries, defying expectations.

These classic tales also show us that once we are together, around a table or in a room, and once we have assured ourselves of food and shelter, we want stories. The earliest storytellers show us that stories are our first non-physical need, and what medieval and Renaissance audiences have in common with today’s readers and listeners is the understanding that we are narrative creatures: that whatever our ends and goals, however full our agendas and busy our days, there will always be time for stories.

The advantage of beginning the anthology with *The Heptameron* is that it opens up the field to include more than just the classics from the Golden Age of the short story. To have started with Voltaire or Diderot, and moved smoothly to Colette and Marcel Aymé via Maupassant and Balzac, would have been to impose an artificial beginning on a thrillingly messy and hybrid

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tradition. Diverging from the familiar path, this anthology contains hitherto untranslated sixteenth-century stories by Jean-Pierre Camus and François de Rosset. These garish, sensational narratives, nicknamed ‘histoires sanglantes’ or ‘bloody tales’, are the ancestors of today’s ‘true crime’ genre.

As we move through the centuries, we encounter works, many of them little-known in English, that might be considered to stretch the definition of a story. But the short story has never been a pure, clear-cut genre, and I have been fascinated by the way in which classic stories share so much of their narrative DNA with other forms of writing: the prose poem, for instance, with Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Charles Cros, who are included here; or with strange dream-narratives such as Xavier Forneret’s ‘A Dream’. In Forneret’s short tale, the nineteenth century’s fascination with the unconscious, and with the sleeping mind’s bizarre connectivity, is distilled into a single, surreal text. As Forneret claimed: ‘Since I write while I’m dreaming, you can read me while you’re sleeping.’ No wonder the surrealists claimed him as a trailblazing predecessor. Closer to the twenty-first century, Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘Monologue’ or Béatrix Beck’s ‘The Adam Affair’, a dialogue between God and a particularly obtuse Adam, give the short story the dynamism of drama.

The question is not ‘what is a short story?’ but ‘what can a short story *be*?’. French thought has a reputation for classifying and defining, and French literary history is the home of ‘-isms’: Naturalism, Symbolism, Surrealism, Existentialism, to name just a few movements that enjoyed worldwide influence. This fondness for categorizing has the unexpected and paradoxical effect of giving writers more categories to blur. When Diderot titled his story ‘This Is Not a Story’ and included ‘a character whose role is more or less that of the reader’, he was breaking down the fourth wall. When, 200 years later, Raymond Queneau wrote ‘A Tale for Your Shaping’ as a questionnaire in which the reader chooses outcomes, he was playing with the complex interrelationship between formal structure and readerly expectation in a similar spirit. That playfulness can be seen in the work of OuLiPo, or ‘Ouvroir de littérature potentielle’ (Workshop of Potential Literature), a group of writers that included Queneau, Italo Calvino and Georges Perec, who exploited the inventive licence granted by writing to particular rules and constraints. It can also be seen in the more ludic strains of French literary theory, in the work of Roland Barthes and in that other dominant ‘-ism’, Structuralism: an understanding that the rules themselves are the best route to subverting the rules.

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It would not be too much to say that the fondness for categorizing is exactly what makes the French literary tradition so varied and experimental.

With Voltaire, Diderot and Sade, the short story is both a self-aware genre, sophisticated and amusing, and a place to think – an opportunity for reflection, to test political and social ideas. In Voltaire's 'Micromégas', an early science-fiction story that is also a philosophical parable, an extra-terrestrial character is used to make us see ourselves from the outside. Funny, absurd, by turns intellectually playful and serious, Voltaire gives humanity – or at any rate French humanity – the sort of cultural out-of-body experience that enables it to scrutinize itself. Seriousness and play are not incompatible, and the French short story from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries has often directly or obliquely engaged in philosophical and social concerns.

Of the many continuities in this anthology, the reader will notice how the French short story is imbricated in its culture, in the febrile politics of its time. It has addressed injustice and discrimination, and often intervened publicly in the big debates. From Voltaire testing the tolerance of the French state and official religion to Victor Hugo's 'Claude Gueux', about the barbarism of the death penalty, writers have used the short story not just for its brevity but for the ways in which it circulates. More widely and quickly disseminated than novels and more easily digested than political tracts, it blends the efficacy of polemic with the attractions of entertainment.

Another continuity the reader will notice is the relationship between the ordinary and extraordinary, and the French short story's attraction to the 'fantastic'. Traditionally understood as a nineteenth-century speciality, its roots lie earlier and its offshoots extend into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This anthology contains classics such as Gautier's 'The Mummy's Foot' and Mérimée's 'The Venus of Ille', along with lesser-known masterpieces such as Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's moving story 'Véra', in which, through a sustained refusal to believe in his wife's death, a widower succeeds in returning her to life (or does he . . . ?). The '*fantastique*' is one of the dominant genres and thrives on bringing the everyday and the extraordinary into explosive contact. In Marcel Aymé's 'The Man who Walked Through Walls' and Jacques Sternberg's 'The Execution', fantastical events are told in such matter-of-fact, deadpan prose that the flatness of the narration accentuates rather than dulls the narrative. Meanwhile, writers such as Renée Vivien and Claude Cahun are the heirs of Perrault and his fairy

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tales, and Jules Verne's science fiction is in the lineage of Voltaire's space travel. While all this speaks to a desire for escapism and supernatural thrill, it reflects something more serious in all of us: the feeling that there is more to life than just the here and now. We may think of the 'fantastic' and related genres – science fiction, horror, gothic – as expressions of our need for an '*au-delà*', a 'beyond', in a utilitarian and post-religious age.

The short story is also a place where authors experiment with themes and styles that are at an angle to the work for which they are best known. Thus Apollinaire, the great modern poet of *Calligrammes* and *Alcools*, appears here with a short story about a man with the gift of blending in with his surroundings. Émile Zola, the Naturalist author of the twenty-novel Rougon Macquart cycle, features with a sharp and prescient story about advertising and the media. His fellow one-time Naturalist, Joris-Karl Huysmans, the decadent-turned-catholic author of *Against Nature*, is represented by the bleakly comic tale of Mr Bougran, a sacked bureaucrat who cannot bear to retire. A taste of the *fin de siècle* and decadent period is offered in a range of stories, from the erotic and depraved tales of Rachilde and Jean Lorrain to Marcel Schwob's harrowing war story, 'The *Sans Gueules*'.

Some of the major twentieth century writers I would have wished to include – notably Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Georges Simenon and Jean Giono – were unavailable for reasons of copyright, but I have also sought to expand the range of authors traditionally available to the English-speaking audience. As well as the canonical and the classic (Colette, Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Yourcenar, Georges Perec, Françoise Sagan), I have included authors who are less familiar to readers in the anglosphere. These include Emmanuel Bove, Béatrix Beck, Charles-Albert Cingria, Jacqueline Harpman, Madeleine Bourdouxhe and Thomas Owen, as well as contemporary writers such as Gilles Ortlieb, Ananda Devi and Christian Garcin. In the works of Birago Diop, Boualem Sansal, Leïla Sebbar and Assia Djebar, among others, the short story brings its unique focus to bear on the legacies of colonialism and the cultural, linguistic and religious fault lines of contemporary France and its former colonies. Many authors are translated here for the first time; their work enriches not just the French literary tradition, but the range of French writing available in English.

I think of every story not just as a standalone fiction, but as part of a whole, a busy, imbricated set of contexts. In theatrical terms, I like to

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imagine the ‘noises off’ behind and to the side of them. They may be free-standing works of art but they are not sealed off from the worlds that produced them. They are also little keys to their cultures, their times and places: from Renaissance France to the multicultural global *francophonie* of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

My aim in this selection has been to entertain, to provide variety and to reveal the unexpected continuities between different periods and different literary traditions. I have aimed for variety among the stories and diversity among the authors. The pluralism of my definition of the short story is matched by the pluralism of my definition of French, and I include many writers from the francophone world. I have chosen writers substantially published in France, or resident there, or writers who are part of the literary culture in terms of their publishing houses, their eligibility for prizes, or their media presence. Here, too, I have been permissive: though they have all written French short stories, none of the authors in these pages has been required to show their passport or provide proof of residence.

## Acknowledgments

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# COLETTE

## *Green Sealing Wax*

Around fifteen, I was at the height of a mania for ‘desk furniture’. In this I was only imitating my father, whose mania for it lasted in full force all his life. At the age when every kind of vice gets its claws into adolescence, like the hundred little hooks of a burr sticking into one’s hair, a girl of fifteen runs plenty of risks. My glorious freedom exposed me to all of them and I believed it to be unbounded, unaware that Sido’s maternal instinct, which disdained any form of spying, worked by flashes of intuition and leaped telepathically to the danger point.

When I had just turned fifteen, Sido gave me a dazzling proof of her second sight. She guessed that a man above suspicion had designs on my little pointed face, the plaits that whipped against my calves, and my well-made body. Having entrusted me to this man’s family during the holidays, she received a warning as clear and shattering as the gift of sudden faith and she cursed herself for having sent me away to strangers. Promptly she put on her little bonnet that tied under the chin, got into the clanking, jolting train – they were beginning to send antique coaches along a brand-new line – and found me in a garden, playing with two other little girls, under the eyes of a taciturn man, leaning on his elbow like the meditative Demon on the ledge of Notre-Dame.

Such a spectacle of peaceful family life could not deceive Sido. She noticed, moreover, that I looked prettier than I did at home. That is how girls blossom in the warmth of a man’s desire, whether they are fifteen or thirty. There was no question of scolding me and Sido took me away with her without the irreproachably respectable man’s having dared to ask the reason for her arrival or for our departure. In the train, she fell asleep before my eyes, worn out like someone who had won a battle. I remember that

lunchtime went by and I complained of being hungry. Instead of flushing, looking at her watch, promising me my favourite delicacies – wholemeal bread, cream cheese and pink onions – all she did was to shrug her shoulders. Little did she care about my hunger pangs, she had saved the most precious thing of all.

I had done nothing wrong, nor had I abetted this man, except by my torpor. But torpor is a far graver peril for a girl of fifteen than all the usual excited giggling and blushing and clumsy attempts at flirtation. Only a few men can induce that torpor from which girls awake to find themselves lost. That, so to speak, surgical intervention of Sido's cleared up all the confusion inside me and I had one of those relapses into childishness in which adolescence revels when it is simultaneously ashamed of itself and intoxicated by its own ego.

My father, a born writer, left few pages behind him. At the actual moment of writing, he dissipated his desire in material arrangements, setting out all the objects a writer needs and a number of superfluous ones as well. Because of him, I am not proof against this mania myself. As a result of having admired and coveted the perfect equipment of a writer's worktable, I am still exacting about the tools on my desk. Since adolescence does nothing by halves, I stole from my father's work table, first a little mahogany set square that smelled like a cigar box, then a white metal ruler. Not to mention the scolding, I received full in my face the glare of a small, blazing grey eye, the eye of a rival, so fierce that I did not risk it a third time. I confined myself to prowling, hungrily, with my mind full of evil thoughts, around all these treasures of stationery. A pad of virgin blotting paper; an ebony ruler; one, two, four, six pencils, sharpened with a penknife and all of different colours; pens with medium nibs and fine nibs, pens with enormously broad nibs, drawing pens no thicker than a blackbird's quill; sealing wax, red, green, and violet; a hand blotter; a bottle of liquid glue, not to mention slabs of transparent amber-coloured stuff known as 'mouth glue'; the minute remains of a spahi's cloak reduced to the dimensions of a pen wiper with scalloped edges; a big ink pot flanked by a small ink pot, both in bronze; and a lacquer bowl filled with a golden powder to dry the wet page; another bowl containing sealing wafers of all colours (I used to eat the white ones); to right and left of the table, reams of paper, cream-laid, ruled, watermarked; and, of course, that little

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stamping machine that bit into the white sheet, and, with one snap of its jaws, adorned it with an embossed name: *J.-J. Colette*. There was also a glass of water for washing paintbrushes, a box of watercolours, an address book, the bottles of red, black and violet ink, the mahogany set square, a pocket case of mathematical instruments, the tobacco jar, a pipe, the spirit lamp for melting the sealing wax.

A property owner tries to extend his domain; my father therefore tried to acclimatize adventitious subjects on his vast table. At one time there appeared on it a machine that could cut through a pile of a hundred sheets, and some frames filled with a white jelly on which you laid a written page face downward and then, from this looking-glass original, pulled off blurred, sticky, anaemic copies. But my father soon wearied of such gadgets and the huge table returned to its serenity, to its classical style that was never disturbed by inspiration with its disorderly litter of crossed-out pages, cigarette butts, and 'roughs' screwed up into paper balls. I have forgotten, heaven forgive me, the paper-knife section, three or four boxwood ones, one of imitation silver, and the last of yellowed ivory, cracked from end to end.

From the age of ten I had never stopped coveting those material goods, invented for the glory and convenience of a mental power, which come under the general heading of 'desk furniture'. Children only delight in things they can hide. For a long time I secured possession of one wing, the left one, of the great four-doored double bookcase (it was eventually sold by order of the court). The doors of the upper part were glass-fronted, those of the lower, solid and made of beautiful figured mahogany. When you opened the lower left-hand door at a right angle, the flap touched the side of the chest of drawers, and as the bookcase took up nearly the whole of one panelled wall, I would immure myself in a quadrangular nook formed by the side of the chest of drawers, the wall, the left section of the bookcase and its wide-open door. Sitting on a little footstool, I could gaze at the three mahogany shelves in front of me, on which were displayed the objects of my worship, ranging from cream-laid paper to a little cup of the golden powder. 'She's a chip off the old block,' Sido would say teasingly to my father. It was ironical that, equipped with every conceivable tool for writing, my father rarely committed himself to putting pen to paper, whereas Sido – sitting at any old table, pushing aside an invading



cat, a basket of plums, a pile of linen, or else just putting a dictionary on her lap by way of a desk – Sido really did write. A hundred enchanting letters prove that she did. To continue a letter or finish it off, she would tear a page out of her household account book or write on the back of a bill.

She therefore despised our useless altars. But she did not discourage me from lavishing care on my desk and adorning it to amuse myself. She even showed anxiety when I explained that my little house was becoming too small for me . . . ‘Too small. Yes, much too small,’ said the grey eyes. ‘Fifteen . . . Where is Pussy Darling going, bursting out of her nook like a hermit crab driven out of its borrowed shell by its own growth? Already, I’ve snatched her from the clutches of that man. Already, I’ve had to forbid her to go dancing on the “Ring” on Low Sunday. Already, she’s escaping and I shan’t be able to follow her. Already, she wants a long dress, and if I give her one, the blindest will notice that she’s a young girl. And if I refuse, everyone will look below the too-short skirt and stare at her woman’s legs. Fifteen . . . How can I stop her from being fifteen, then sixteen, then seventeen years old?’

Sometimes, during that period, she would come and lean over the mahogany half door that isolated me from the world. ‘What are you doing?’ She could see perfectly well what I was doing but she could not understand it. I refused her the answer given her so generously by everything else she observed, the bee, the caterpillar, the hydrangea, the ice plant. But at least she could see I was there, sheltered from danger. She indulged my mania. The lovely pieces of shiny coloured wrapping paper were given me to bind my books and I made the gold string into book-markers. I had the first penholder sheathed in a glazed turquoise-coloured substance, with a moiré pattern on it, that appeared in Reumont’s, the stationers.

One day my mother brought me a little stick of sealing wax and I recognized the stub of green wax, the prize jewel of my father’s desk. No doubt I considered the gift too overwhelming, for I gave no sign of ecstatic joy. I clutched the sealing wax in my hand, and as it grew warm, it gave out a slightly Oriental fragrance of incense.

‘It’s very old sealing wax,’ Sido told me, ‘and as you can see, it’s powdered with gold. Your father already had it when we were married; he’d

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been given it by his mother and his mother assured him that it was a stick of wax that had been used by Napoleon I. But you've got to remember that my mother-in-law lied every time she opened her mouth, so . . .'

'Is he giving it to me or have you taken it?'

Sido became impatient; she always turned irritable when she thought she was going to be forced to lie and was trying to avoid lying.

'When *will* you stop twisting a lock of hair around the end of your nose?' she cried. 'You're doing your best to have a red nose with a blob at the tip like a cherry! That sealing wax? Let's say your father's lending it to you and leave it at that. Of course, if you don't want . . .'

My wild clutch of possession made Sido laugh again, and she said, with pretended lightness: 'If he wanted it, he'd ask you to give it back, of course!'

But he did not ask me to give it back. For a few months, gold-flecked green sealing wax perfumed my narrow empire bounded by four mahogany walls; then my pleasure gradually diminished, as do all pleasures to which no one disputes our right. Besides, my devotion to stationery temporarily waned in favour of a craze to be glamorous. I asserted my right to wear a 'bustle', that is to say, I enlarged my small, round behind with a horsehair cushion, which, of course, made my skirts much shorter at the back than in front. In our village, the frenzy of adolescence turned girls between thirteen and fifteen into madwomen who stole horsehair, cotton and wool, stuffed rags in a bag, and tied on the hideous contraption known as a 'false bottom' on dark staircases, out of their mothers' sight. I also longed for a thick, frizzy fringe, leather belts so tight I could hardly breathe, high boned collars, violet scent on my handkerchief . . .

From that phase, I relapsed once more into childhood, for a feminine creature has to make several attempts before it finally hatches out. I revelled in being a Plain Jane, with my hair in pigtails and straight wisps straggling over my cheeks. I gladly renounced all my finery in favour of my old school pinafores with their pockets stuffed with nuts and string and chocolate. Paths edged with brambles, clumps of bulrushes, liquorice 'shoelaces', cats – in short, everything I still love to this day – became dear to me again. There are no words to hymn such times in one's life, no clear memories to illuminate them; looking back on them, I can only compare them to the depths of blissful sleep. The smell of haymaking sometimes brings them back to me, perhaps because, suddenly tired, as growing

creatures are, I would drop for an hour into a dreamless sleep among the new-mown hay.

It was at this point there occurred the episode known for long afterwards as 'the Hervouët will affair'. Old Monsieur Hervouët died and no will could be found. The provinces have always been rich in fantastic figures. Somewhere, under old tiled roofs, yellow with lichen, in icy drawing rooms and dining rooms dedicated to eternal shade, on waxed floors strewn with death traps of knitted rugs, in kitchen-garden paths between the hard-headed cabbages and the curly parsley, queer characters are always to be found. A little town or a village prides itself on possessing a mystery. My own village acknowledged placidly, even respectfully, the rights of young Gatreau to rave unmolested. This admirable example of a romantic madman, a wooden cigar between his lips, was always wildly tossing his streaming black curls and staring fixedly at young girls with his long, Arab eyes. A voluntary recluse used to nod good morning through a windowpane and passers would say of her admiringly: 'That makes twenty-two years since Madame Sibile left her room! My mother used to see her there, just as you see her now. And, you know, there's nothing the matter with her. In one way, it's a fine life!'

But Sido used to hurry her quick step and pull me along when we passed level with the aquarium that housed the lady who had not gone out for twenty-two years. Behind her clear glass pane the prisoner would be smiling. She always wore a linen cap; sometimes her little yellow hand held a cup. A sure instinct for what is horrible and prohibited made Sido turn away from that ground-floor window and that bobbing head. But the sadism of childhood made me ask her endless questions.

'How old do you think she is, Madame Sibile? At night does she sleep by the window in her armchair? Do they undress her? Do they wash her? And how does she go to the lavatory?'

Sido would start as if she had been stung.

'Be quiet. I forbid you to think about those things.'

Monsieur Hervouët had never passed for one of those eccentrics to whom a market town extends its slightly derisive protection. For sixty years he had been well-off and ill dressed, first a 'big catch' to marry, then a big catch married. Left a widower, he had remarried. His second wife was a former postmistress, thin and full of fire.

## *Green Sealing Wax*

When she struck her breastbone, exclaiming, '*That's* where I can feel it burning!' her Spanish eyes seemed to make the person she was talking to responsible for this unquenchable ardour. 'I am not easily frightened,' my father used to say; 'but heaven preserve me from being left alone with Mademoiselle Matheix!'

After his second marriage, Monsieur Hervouët no longer appeared in public. As he never left his home, no one knew exactly when he developed the gastric trouble that was to carry him off. He was a man dressed, in all weathers, in black, including a cap with earflaps. Smothered in fleecy white hair and a beard like cotton wool, he looked like an apple tree attacked by woolly aphis. High walls and a gateway that was nearly always closed protected his second season of conjugal bliss. In summer a single rosebush clothed three sides of his one-storeyed house and the thick fringe of wisteria on the crest of the wall provided food for the first bees. But we had never heard anyone say that Monsieur Hervouët was fond of flowers, and if we now and then caught sight of his black figure pacing to and fro under the pendants of the wisteria and the showering roses, he struck us as being neither responsible for nor interested in all this wealth of blossom.

When Mademoiselle Matheix became Madame Hervouët, the ex-postmistress lost none of her resemblance to a black-and-yellow wasp. With her sallow skin, her squeezed-in waist, her fine, inscrutable eyes and her mass of dark hair, touched with white and restrained in a knot on the nape of her neck, she showed no surprise at being promoted to middle-class luxury. She appeared to be fond of gardening. Sido, the impartial, thought it only fair to show some interest in her; she lent her books, and in exchange accepted cuttings and also roots of tree violets whose flowers were almost black and whose stem grew naked out of the ground like the trunk of a tiny palm tree. To me, Madame Hervouët-Matheix was an anything but sympathetic figure. I was vaguely scandalized that, when making some assertions of irreproachable banality, she did so in a tone of passionate and plaintive supplication.

'What do you expect?' said my mother. 'She's an old maid.'

'But, Mamma, she's married!'

'Do you really imagine,' retorted Sido acidly, 'people stop being old maids for a little thing like that?'

One day, my father, returning from the daily 'round of the town', by

which this man who had lost one leg kept himself fit, said to my mother: 'A piece of news! The Hervouët relatives are attacking the widow.'

'No!'

'And going all out for her, too! People are saying the grounds of the accusation are extremely serious.'

'A new Lafarge case?'

'You're demanding a lot,' said my father.

I thrust my sharp little mug between my two parents.

'What's that, the Lafarge case?'

'A horrible business between husband and wife. There's never been a period without one. A famous poisoning case.'

'Ah!' I exclaimed excitedly. 'What a piece of luck!'

Sido gave me a look that utterly renounced me.

'There you are,' she muttered. 'That's what they're all like at that age . . . A girl ought never to be fifteen.'

'Sido, are you listening to me or not?' broke in my father. 'The relatives, put up to it by a niece of Hervouët's, are claiming that Hervouët didn't die intestate and that his wife has destroyed the will.'

'In that case,' observed Sido, 'you could bring an action against all widowers and all widows of intestates.'

'No,' retorted my father, 'men who have children don't need to make a will. The flames of Hervouët's lady can only have scorched Hervouët from the waist up since . . .'

'Colette,' my mother said to him severely, indicating me with a look.

'Well,' my father went on. 'So there she is in a nice pickle. Hervouët's niece says she saw the will, yes, saw it with her very own eyes. She can even describe it. A big envelope, five seals of green wax with gold flecks in it . . .'

'Fancy that!' I said innocently.

' . . . and on the front of it, the instructions: "To be opened after my death in the presence of my solicitor, Monsieur Hourblin or his successor."'

'And suppose the niece is lying?' I ventured to ask.

'And suppose Hervouët changed his mind and destroyed his will?' suggested Sido. 'He was perfectly free to do so, I presume?'

'There you go, the two of you! Already siding with the bull against the bullfighter!' cried my father.

## *Green Sealing Wax*

‘Exactly,’ said my mother. ‘Bullfighters are usually men with fat buttocks and that’s enough to put me against them!’

‘Let’s get back to the point,’ said my father. ‘Hervouët’s niece has a husband, a decidedly sinister gentleman by the name of Pellepuits.’

I soon got tired of listening. On the evidence of such words as ‘The relatives are attacking the widow!’ I had hoped for bloodshed and foul play and all I heard was bits of gibberish such as ‘disposable portion of estate’, ‘holograph will’, ‘charge against X’.

All the same, my curiosity was reawakened when Monsieur Hervouët’s widow paid us a call. Her little mantle of imitation Chantilly lace worn over hock-bottle shoulders, her black mittens from which protruded unusually thick, almost opaque nails, the luxuriance of her black-and-white hair, a big black taffeta pocket suspended from her belt that dangled over the skirt of her mourning, her ‘hourly eyes’, as she called them; all these details, which I seemed to be seeing for the first time, took on a new, sinister significance.

Sido received the widow graciously, took her into the garden, and offered her a thimbleful of Frontignan and a wedge of homemade cake. The June afternoon buzzed over the garden, russet caterpillars dropped about us from the walnut tree, not a cloud floated in the sky. My mother’s pretty voice and Madame Hervouët’s imploring one exchanged tranquil remarks; as usual, they talked about nothing but salpiglossis, gladiolus, and the misdemeanours of servants. Then the visitor rose to go and my mother escorted her. ‘If you don’t mind,’ said Madame Hervouët, ‘I’ll come over in a day or two and borrow some books; I’m so lonely.’

‘Would you like to take them now?’ suggested Sido.

‘No, no, there’s no hurry. Besides, I’ve noted down the titles of some adventure stories. Goodbye for the time being, and thank you.’

As she said this, Madame Hervouët, instead of taking the path that led to the house, took the one that circled the lawn and walked twice around the plot of grass.

‘Good gracious, whatever am I doing? Do forgive me.’

She allowed herself a modest laugh and eventually reached the hall, where she groped too high and to the left of the two sides of the folding door for a latch she had twenty times found on the right. My mother

opened the front door for her and, out of politeness, stood for a moment at the top of the steps. We watched Madame Hervouët go off, keeping at first very close to the house, then crossing the road very hurriedly, picking up her skirts as if she were fording a river.

My mother shut the door again and saw that I had followed her.

‘She is lost,’ she said.

‘Who? Madame Hervouët? Why do you say that? How d’you mean, lost?’

Sido shrugged her shoulders.

‘I’ve no idea. It’s just my impression. Keep that to yourself.’

I kept silence faithfully. This was all the easier, as continuing my series of metamorphoses like a grub, I had entered a new phase – the ‘enlightened bibliophile’ – and I forgot Madame Hervouët in a grand turnout of my stationery shop. A few days later, I was installing Jules Verne between *Les Fleurs animées* and a relief atlas when Madame Hervouët appeared on the scene without the bell having warned me. For we left the front door open nearly all day so that our dog Domino could go in and out.

‘How nice of a big girl like you to tidy up the bookshelves,’ exclaimed the visitor. ‘What books are you going to lend me today?’

When Madame Hervouët raised her voice, I clenched my teeth and screwed up my eyes very small.

‘Jules Verne,’ she read, in a plaintive voice. ‘You can’t read him twice. Once you know the secret, it’s finished.’

‘There’s Balzac up there, on the big shelves,’ I said, pointing to them.

‘He’s very heavy going,’ said Madame Hervouët.

Balzac, heavy going? Balzac, my cradle, my enchanted forest, my voyage of discovery? Amazed, I looked up at the tall dark woman, a head taller than myself. She was toying with a cut rose and staring into space. Her features expressed nothing which could be remotely connected with opinions on literature. She became aware I was gazing at her and pretended to be interested in my writer’s equipment.

‘It’s charming. What a splendid collection!’

Her mouth had grown older in the last week. She remained stooping over my relics, handling this one and that. Then she straightened herself up with a start.

‘But isn’t your dear mother anywhere about? I’d like to see her.’

## *Green Sealing Wax*

Only too glad to move, to get away from this 'lost' lady, I rushed wildly out into the garden, calling 'Mamma!' as if I were shouting 'Fire!'

'She took a few books away with her,' Sido told me when we were alone. 'But I could positively swear she didn't even glance at their titles.'

The rest of the 'Hervouët affair' is linked, in my memory, with a vague general commotion, a kind of romantic blur. My clearest recollection of it comes to me through Sido, thanks to the extraordinary 'presence' I still have of the sound of her voice. Her stories, her conversations with my father, the intolerant way she had of arguing and refuting, those are the things that riveted a sordid provincial drama in my mind.

One day, shortly after Madame Hervouët's last visit, the entire district was exclaiming 'The will's been found!' and describing the big envelope with five seals that the widow had just deposited in Monsieur Hourblin's study. At once uneasy and triumphant, the Pellepuits-Hervouët couple and another lot, the Hervouët-Guillamats, appeared, along with the widow, at the lawyer's office. There, Madame Hervouët, all by herself, faced up to the solid, pitiless group, to what Sido called those 'gaping, legacy-hunting sharks'. 'It seems,' my mother said, telling the story, 'that she smelled of brandy.' At this point, my mother's voice is superseded by the hunchback's voice of Julia Vincent, a woman who went out ironing by the day and came to us once a week. For I don't know how many consecutive Fridays, I pressed Julia till I wrung out of her all she knew. The precise sound of that nasal voice, squeezed between the throat, the hump and the hollow, deformed chest, was a delight to me.

'The man as was most afeared was the lawyer. To begin with, he's not a tall man, not half so tall as that woman. She, all dressed in black she was, and her veil falling down in front right to her feet. Then the lawyer picked up the envelope, big as that it was' (Julia unfolded one of my father's vast handkerchiefs) 'and he passed it just as it was to the nephews so they could recognize the seals.'

'But you weren't there, Julia, were you?'

'No, it was Monsieur Hourblin's junior clerk who was watching through the keyhole. One of the nephews said a word or two. Then Madame Hervouët stared at him like a duchess. The lawyer coughed, ahem, ahem, he broke the seals, and he read it out.'



In my recollection, it is sometimes Sido talking, sometimes some scandalmonger eager to gossip about the Hervouët affair. Sometimes it seems too that some illustrator, such as Bertall or Tony Johannot, has actually etched a picture for me of the tall, thin woman who never withdrew her Spanish eyes from the group of heirs-at-law and kept licking her lip to taste the *marc* brandy she had gulped down to give herself courage.

So Monsieur Hourblin read out the will. But after the first lines, the document began to shake in his hands and he broke off, with an apology, to wipe his glasses. He resumed his reading and went right through to the end. Although the testator declared himself to be 'sound in body and mind', the will was nothing but a tissue of absurdities, among others, the acknowledgement of a debt of two million francs contracted to Louise-Léonie-Alberte Matheix, beloved spouse of Clovis-Edme Hervouët.

The reading finished in silence and not one voice was raised from the block of silent heirs.

'It seems,' said Sido, 'that, after the reading, the silence was such you could hear the wasps buzzing in the vine arbour outside the window.' The Pellepuits and the various Guillamats did nothing but stare at Madame Hervouët, without stirring a finger. Why aren't cupidity and avarice possessed of second sight? It was a female Guillamat, less stupid than the others, who said afterwards that, before anyone had spoken, Madame Hervouët began to make peculiar movements with her neck, like a hen that's swallowed a hairy caterpillar.

The story of the last scene of that meeting spread like wildfire through the streets, through people's homes, through the cafés, through the fair-grounds. Monsieur Hourblin had been the first to speak above the vibrating hum of the wasps.

'On my soul and conscience, I find myself obliged to declare that the handwriting of the will does not correspond . . .'

A loud yelping interrupted him. Before him, before the heirs, there was no longer any Widow Hervouët but a sombre Fury whirling around and stamping her feet, a kind of black dervish, lacerating herself, muttering and shrieking. To her admissions of forgery, the crazy woman added others, so rich in the names of vegetable poisons, such as buckthorn and hemlock, that the lawyer, in consternation, exclaimed naively: 'Stop, my poor good lady, you're telling us far more than anyone has asked you to!'

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A lunatic asylum engulfed the madwoman, and if the Hervouët affair persisted in some memories, at least, there was no ‘Hervouët case’ at the assizes.

‘Why, Mamma?’ I asked.

‘Mad people aren’t tried. Or else they’d have to have judges who were mad too. That wouldn’t be a bad idea, when you come to think of it . . .’

To pursue her train of thought better, she dropped the task with which her hands were busy; graceful hands that she took no care of. Perhaps, that particular day, she was shelling haricot beans. Or else, with her little finger stuck in the air, she was coating my father’s crutch with black varnish . . .

‘Yes, judges who would be able to assess the element of calculation in madness, who could sift out the hidden grain of lucidity, of deliberate fraud.’

*Translated by Antonia White*

# RENÉE VIVIEN

## *Woman of the Wolf*

Narrated by Monsieur Pierre Lenoir, 69, Rue des Dames, Paris

I do not know why I undertook to court that woman. She was neither beautiful, nor pretty, nor even agreeable. As for myself (and I say this without conceit, dear ladies), there are those who have not been indifferent to me. It is not that I am extraordinarily endowed by nature, physically or mentally, but simply – may I confess it? – that I have been spoiled when it comes to the fairer sex. Oh, do not be alarmed: I am not going to inflict upon you a vain recital of my conquests. I am a modest man. In any case, this story is not about me. It is about a particular woman, or rather, a particular young lady, an Englishwoman, whose strange face enchanted me for an hour or so.

She was a peculiar specimen. When I approached her for the first time, a great beast was sleeping in the trailing folds of her skirt. I had on my lips the amiably banal remarks that break the ice between strangers. Words mean nothing in such cases; the art of pronouncing them is everything . . . But the great beast, lifting its muzzle, growled ominously just as I reached the interesting stranger.

I drew back a step, despite myself. ‘You have quite a vicious dog there, mademoiselle,’ I observed.

‘It is a she-wolf,’ she replied, somewhat sharply. ‘And since she sometimes turns on people, violently and inexplicably, I think you would do well to step back a bit.’ With one stern word, she silenced the wolf: ‘Helga!’

I left, somewhat humiliated. It was a stupid business, you must admit. Fear is foreign to me, but I hate ridicule. The incident bothered me all the more since I thought I had seen a glimmer of liking in the young lady’s

## *Woman of the Wolf*

eye. I certainly pleased her somewhat. She must have been as vexed as I at this regrettable setback. What a pity! A conversation that had been so promising at the outset . . .

I do not know why the frightful animal later ceased its display of hostility. I was able to approach its mistress without fear. I had never seen such a strange face. Her pale grey complexion glowed white under heavy blonde hair, which was both fiery and colourless, like burning ashes. Her emaciated body had the fine and fragile delicacy of a lovely skeleton. (We are all a little artistic in Paris, you see.) This woman radiated an impression of tough and solitary pride, of flight and of fierce recoil. Her yellow eyes resembled those of her she-wolf. They both wore an expression of sly hostility. Her footsteps were so silent that they became disturbing. No one had ever walked so quietly. She was dressed in a thick material which looked like fur. She was neither beautiful, nor pretty, nor charming. But she was the only woman on board the ship.

So, I courted her. I played by rules based on my already extensive experience. She had the intelligence not to let me see the deep pleasure my advances afforded her. Even her yellow eyes maintained their usual mistrustful expression. A remarkable example of feminine wiles! This only made me more violently attracted to her. Drawn-out resistance sometimes leads to a pleasant surprise, rendering the victory all the more brilliant . . . You would not contradict me on this point, would you, gentlemen? We all share the same sentiments to some degree. There is such complete fraternity of spirit between us that conversation is almost impossible. That is why I often flee the monotonous company of men – they are too identical to myself.

Admittedly, the *Woman of the Wolf* attracted me. And furthermore – dare I confess it? – the enforced chastity of that floating jail made my feelings yet more turbulent. She was a woman . . . and my courting of her, respectful until then, became each day more insistent. I built up blazing metaphors. I elegantly elaborated eloquent expressions.

Look at the extent of the woman's deceitfulness! In listening to me, she adopted an air of moonstruck distraction. One would have sworn she was interested only in the foaming wake which looked like steaming snow. (Women are by no means indifferent to flowery similes.) But I, who had long studied the feelings behind the feminine face, understood that her heavy, lowered eyelids concealed vacillating glimmers of love.

One day I was particularly bold, combining flattering gestures with delicate words, when she turned to me with the spring of a she-wolf.

‘Go away,’ she commanded, with almost savage decisiveness. Her teeth, like those of a wild beast, glittered strangely behind lips drawn back in menace.

I smiled, without any anxiety. You must have patience with women, must you not? And you must not believe a single word they say. When they order you to depart, you must remain. Really, gentlemen, I am rather ashamed to give you the same old mediocre banalities.

The lady considered me with her large, yellow eyes. ‘You have not worked me out. You are foolishly running up against my insurmountable contempt. I know neither how to hate nor love. I have not yet met a human worthy of my hatred. Hatred, which is more patient and more tenacious than love, deserves a great adversary.’

She caressed Helga’s heavy head. The wolf looked back at her with the deep eyes of a woman. ‘And love? I know as little about that as you know about concealing your inherent masculine conceit, a technique which is elementary among us Anglo-Saxons. If I were a man, I would have perhaps loved a woman, for women possess the qualities I value: loyalty in passion and selflessness in affection. In general, women are simple and sincere. They give of themselves without restriction and without counting the cost. Their patience is as inexhaustible as their kindness. They are able to forgive. They are able to wait. They possess a superior kind of chastity: constancy.’

I do not lack finesse and I can take a hint. I smiled meaningfully in response to her outburst of enthusiasm. She gave me a distracted look, taking me in.

‘Oh, you are strangely mistaken. I have observed women in passing who are generous in spirit and in heart. But I have never become attached to them. Their very gentleness sets them at a distance from me. My spirit is not sufficiently noble, and so I lose patience in the face of their excessive candour and devotion.’

She was beginning to bore me with her pretentious discourse. A prude and a bluestocking, and a brat too! . . . But she was the only woman on board. And she was only putting on airs of superiority to make her imminent capitulation the more precious.

*Woman of the Wolf*

‘I have affection for Helga alone. And Helga knows it. As for you, you are probably a nice enough little man, but you cannot imagine how much I despise you.’

By hurting my pride, she was trying to make me want her even more. She was succeeding, too, the little hussy! I was red with anger and lust.

‘Men who hover around women, any women, are like dogs sniffing after bitches.’ She gave me one of her long yellow looks. ‘I have for so long breathed the forest air, air that quivers with snow; I have spent so much time amid vast, barren whiteness, that my soul is not unlike the souls of fleeting she-wolves.’

The woman had finally frightened me. She perceived it and changed her tone. ‘I love clarity and freshness,’ she continued, with a little laugh. ‘Thus, the crudeness of men is as off-putting as the stench of garlic, and their dirtiness as repulsive as the waft of a drain. Men,’ she insisted, ‘are only really at home in brothels. They love only courtesans. For in them they discover their own rapacity, their sentimental unintelligence, their stupid cruelty. They live for self-interest and debauchery alone. Morally, they sicken me; physically, I find them repugnant . . . I have seen men kissing women on the lips while obscenely fondling them. A gorilla’s performance would not have been more repellent.’

She ceased for a minute. ‘Even the severest legislator only escapes by a miracle the deplorable consequences of the carnal promiscuity of his youth. I do not understand how even the least sensitive woman could endure your filthy embraces without retching. Indeed, my virgin’s contempt is equal in disgust to the courtesan’s nausea!’

*Really, I thought, she is overdoing it, though she understands her part very well. She is overdoing it.*

(If we were among ourselves, gentlemen, I would tell you that I have not always despised public houses, and have even picked up a few pitiful whores on the street. Parisian women were nonetheless more accommodating than that hypocrite. I am by no means smug, but one must be aware of one’s own worth.)

Deeming that the conversation had gone on long enough, I took dignified leave of the Woman of the Wolf. Helga slyly followed me with her long yellow gaze.

Towering clouds loomed on the horizon. A streak of dull blue-green

sky was winding like a moat beneath them. I felt as though I were being crushed between stone walls . . . And the wind was getting up . . .

I was seized with seasickness – I do beg your pardon for such an inelegant detail, dear ladies. I was horribly indisposed . . . I fell asleep around midnight, feeling more pitiful than I could tell you.

Around two o'clock in the morning, I was awakened by a sinister impact, followed by an even more sinister grinding sound. The darkness emitted an inexpressible terror. I realized that the ship had struck a reef. For the first time in my life, I neglected my clothes. I appeared on deck in extremely skimpy attire.

A confused crowd of half-naked men were already swarming about up there. They were hurriedly launching the lifeboats. Looking at those hairy arms and shaggy chests, I could not help remembering, not without a smile, something the Woman of the Wolf had said: '*A gorilla's performance would not have been more repellent . . .*' I do not know why that unimportant memory came back to mock me in the midst of the common danger.

The waves looked like monstrous volcanoes wreathed in white smoke. Or, rather, they looked like nothing at all. They were themselves – magnificent, terrible, mortal . . . The wind was blowing across their enormous wrath and so increasing their frenzy. The salt bit at my eyes. I shivered in the spray as though in a cold drizzle, and the crashing of the waves obliterated all my thoughts.

The Woman of the Wolf was calmer than ever. And I was faint with terror. I could see death looming before me. I could almost touch it. I distractedly put my fingers to my forehead, where I could feel the bones of my skull bulging frightfully. The skeleton within me terrified me. Idiotically, I started to cry . . .

My flesh would be black and blue, more swollen than a bulging wine-skin. The sharks would snap at my dismembered limbs. And, when I sank beneath the waves, the crabs would climb sideways along my rotten corpse and gluttonously eat their fill.

The wind was blowing over the waters . . .

I relived my past. I repented my idiotic life, my spoiled life, my lost life. I tried to remember one act of kindness I may have performed, either absent-mindedly or inadvertently. Had I ever been good for anything,

## *Woman of the Wolf*

useful to anyone? And the dark side of my conscience cried out, as horrifying as a mute who has miraculously recovered his speech: 'No!'

The wind was blowing over the waters . . .

I vaguely remembered the sacred words which encourage repentance and which promise salvation to the contrite sinner even at the hour of death. I strove to retrieve from my memory, drier now than an empty goblet, a few words of prayer . . . And lustful thoughts came to torment me, like little red devils. I again saw the soiled beds of chance companions. I heard their stupidly obscene cries once more. I re-experienced loveless embraces. I was overwhelmed with the horror of Pleasure . . .

Faced with the terror of the Mysterious Immensity, all that survived in me was the rutting instinct, as powerful for some as the instinct of self-preservation. It was Life, crude, ugly Life, screaming its ferocious protest against Annihilation.

The wind was blowing over the waters . . .

One has peculiar ideas at times like that, all the same . . . There I was – a very decent fellow, admired by all, except for a few who were jealous of me, even loved by some – so bitterly reproaching myself for an existence which was neither better nor worse than anyone else's. I must have succumbed to a moment of madness. We were all a little mad, anyway . . .

The Woman of the Wolf was looking out at the white waves, completely calm . . . Oh! they were whiter than snow at twilight! And, sitting up on her haunches, Helga was howling like a dog. She howled pitifully, like a dog baying at the moon. She *understood*.

I do not know why her howls chilled me even more than the sound of the wind and the waves. She howled at death, that damned devil-wolf. I wanted to knock her senseless just to shut her up, and I looked for a plank, a spar, an iron bar, anything on the deck to beat her with . . . I found nothing.

The lifeboat was finally ready to leave. The men leapt frantically towards salvation. Only the Woman of the Wolf did not move.

'Get in, then,' I shouted at her as I took my turn.

She came slowly over to the boat, followed by Helga.

'Mademoiselle,' said the lieutenant, who was commanding us as well as he could, 'we cannot take that animal with us. There is only enough room for people.'



*The Penguin Book of French Short Stories*

'In that case, I will stay,' she said, stepping back . . .

The terror-stricken men rushed forward with incoherent cries. We had to let her stay behind.

I really couldn't be bothered with such a silly girl. And she had been so insolent to me! You understand that, gentlemen, don't you? You would not have acted any differently.

Finally I was saved, or just about. Dawn broke and, my God, what a dawn! There was a shiver of chilling light, a grey stupor, a swarm of people and unformed shapes in a dusky confusion of limbs . . .

And we saw the blue of distant land . . .

Oh, what joy and comfort to see the trusty, welcoming sun! . . . Since that horrible experience I have only once travelled by sea, and that was to return here. I won't be doing it again, you can be sure of that!

I must not be too egotistical, dear ladies. In the midst of such unspeakable uncertainty, and though I had narrowly escaped Destruction, I was still brave enough to concern myself with the fate of my companions in misfortune. The second lifeboat had been swamped by too many frenzied madmen. With horror, I saw it sink . . . The Woman of the Wolf had taken refuge on a broken mast, along with her obedient animal. I was quite certain that she would be saved, as long as her strength and endurance did not fail her. I hoped so, with all my heart . . . But there was the cold, her slow, fragile improvised raft, which lacked sails and rudder, her fatigue, her feminine weakness!

They were not far from land when the Woman, exhausted, turned to Helga, as if to say, 'I am finished . . .'

And then a most mournful and solemn thing occurred. The she-wolf, *who had understood*, hurled her howl of despair at the close yet inaccessible shore . . . Then, standing up, she put her two front paws on the shoulders of her mistress, who took her in her arms. Together, they disappeared beneath the waves.

*Translated by Karla Jay and Yvonne Klein*