

The bed

Guy de Maupassant¹

On a hot afternoon during last summer, the large auction rooms seemed asleep, and the auctioneers were knocking down the various lots in a listless manner. In a back room, on the first floor, two or three lots of old silk, ecclesiastical vestments, were lying in a corner.

They were copes for solemn occasions, and graceful chasubles on which embroidered flowers surrounded symbolic letters on a yellowish ground, which had become cream-colored, although it had originally been white. Some second-hand dealers were there, two or three men with dirty beards, and a fat woman with a big stomach, one of those women who deal in second-hand finery, and who also manage illicit love affairs, who are brokers in old and young human flesh, just as much as they are in new and old clothes.

Presently a beautiful Louis XV chasuble was put up for sale, which was as pretty as the dress of a marchioness of that period; it had retained all its colours, and was embroidered with lilies of the valley round the cross, and long blue iris, which came up to the foot of the sacred emblem, and wreaths of roses in the corners. When I had bought it, I noticed that there was a faint scent about it, as if it were permeated with the remains of incense, or rather, as if it were still pervaded by those delicate, sweet scents of by-gone years, which seemed to be only the memory of perfumes, the soul of evaporated essences.

When I got it home, I wished to have a small chair of the same period covered with it; and as I was handling it in order to take the necessary measures, I felt some paper beneath my fingers, and when I cut the lining, some letters fell at my feet. They were yellow with age, and the faint ink was the colour of rust, and outside the sheet, which was folded in the fashion of years long past, it was addressed in a delicate hand: To Monsieur l'Abbe d'Argence.

The first three lines merely settled places of meeting, but here is the third:

“My Friend; I am very unwell, ill in fact, and I cannot leave my bed. The rain is beating against my windows, and I lie dreaming comfortably and warmly on my eider-down

coverlet. I have a book of which I am very fond, and which seems as if it really applied to me. Shall I tell you what it is? No, for you would only scold me. Then, when I have read a little, I think, and will tell you what about.

“Having been in bed for three days, I think about my bed, and even in my sleep I meditate on it still, and I have come to the conclusion that the bed constitutes our whole life; for we were born in it, we live in it, and we shall die in it. If, therefore, I had Monsieur de Crebillon’s pen, I should write the history of a bed, and what exciting and terrible, as well as delightful moving occurrences would not such a book contain! What lessons and what subjects for moralizing could one not draw from it, for everyone?

“You know my bed, my friend, but you will never guess how many things I have discovered in it within the last three days, and how much more I love it, in consequence. It seems to me to be inhabited, haunted, if I may say so, by a number of people I never thought of, who, nevertheless, have left something of themselves in that couch.

“Ah! I cannot understand people who buy new beds, beds to which no memories or cares are attached. Mine, ours, which is so shabby, and so spacious, must have held many existences in it, from birth to the grave. Think of that, my friend; think of it all; review all those lives, a great part of which was spent between these four posts, surrounded by these hangings embroidered by human figures, which have seen so many things. What have they seen during the three centuries since they were first put up?

“Here is a young woman lying on this bed. From time to time she sighs, and then she groans and cries out; her mother is with her, and presently a little creature that makes a noise like a cat mewing, and which is all shrivelled and wrinkled, comes from her. It is a male child to which she has given birth, and the young mother feels happy in spite of her pain; she is nearly suffocated with joy at that first cry, and stretches out her arms, and those around her shed tears of pleasure; for that little morsel of humanity which has come from her means the continuation of the family, the perpetuation of the blood, of the heart, and of the soul of the old people, who are looking on, trembling with excitement.

“And then, here are two lovers, who for the first time are flesh to flesh together in that tabernacle of life. They tremble; but transported with delight, they have the delicious sensation of being close together, and by degrees their lips meet. That divine kiss makes them one, that kiss, which is the gate of a terrestrial heaven, that kiss which speaks of human delights, which continually promises them, announces them, and precedes them. And their bed is agitated like the tempestuous sea, and it bends and murmurs, and itself seems to become animated and joyous, for the maddening mystery of love is being accomplished on it. What is there sweeter, what more perfect in this world than those embraces, which make one single being out of two, and which give to both of them at the same moment the same thought, the same expectation, and the same maddening pleasure, which descends upon them like a celestial and devouring fire?

“Do you remember those lines from some old poet, which you read to me last year? I do not remember who wrote them, but it may have been Rousard:

When you and I in bed shall lie,
Lascivious we shall be,
Enlaced, playing a thousand tricks,
Of lovers, gamesomely.

“I should like to have that verse embroidered on the top of my bed, where Pyramus and Thisbe are continually looking at me out of their tapestry eyes.

“And think of death, my friend; of all those who have breathed out their last sigh to God in this bed. For it is also the tomb of hopes ended, the door which closes everything, after having been the one which lets in the world. What cries, what anguish, what sufferings, what groans, how many arms stretched out towards the past; what appeals to happiness that has vanished for ever; what convulsions, what death-rattles, what gaping lips and distorted eyes have there not been in this bed, from which I am writing to you, during the three centuries that it has sheltered human beings!

“The bed, you must remember, is the symbol of life; I have discovered this within the last three days. There is nothing good except the bed, and are not some of our best moments spent in sleep?

“But then again, we suffer in bed! It is the refuge of those who are ill and suffering; a place of repose and comfort for worn-out bodies, and, in a word, the bed is part and parcel of humanity.

“The bed is man. It seems that Our Lord Jesus never needed a bed, thus proving that He was not a human being. He was born in a manger with straw and died on the cross. To us, human creatures, He left that soft resting place.²

“Many other thoughts have struck me, but I have no time to note them down for you, and then, should I remember them all? Besides that, I am so tired that I mean to retire to my pillows, stretch myself out at full length, and sleep a little. But be sure and come to see me at three o’clock to-morrow; perhaps I may be better, and able to prove it to you.

“Good-bye, my friend; here are my hands for you to kiss, and I also offer you my lips.”

Notes

- 1 This translation of “Le Lit” was found on the Internet at the Project Gutenberg Europe: <http://pge.rastko.net/dirs/1/7/3/7/17376/17376-8.txt>. The bibliographic reference and the name of the translator could not be traced.
- 2 This paragraph was missing in the Internet text and added by Sjaak van der Geest (his translation).



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‘Gewone’ bedden / ‘Ordinary’ beds

