

His Avenger

Guy de Maupassant

When M. Antoine Leuillet married the widow, Madame Mathilde Souris, he had already been in love with her for ten years.

M. Souris has been his friend, his old college chum. Leuillet was very much attached to him, but thought he was somewhat of a simpleton. He would often remark: "That poor Souris who will never set the world on fire."

When Souris married Miss Mathilde Duval, Leuillet was astonished and somewhat annoyed, as he was slightly devoted to her, himself. She was the daughter of a neighbor, a former proprietor of a draper's establishment who had retired with quite a small fortune. She married Souris for his money.

Then Leuillet thought he would start a flirtation with his friend's wife. He was a good-looking man, intelligent and also rich. He thought it would be all plain sailing, but he was mistaken. Then he really began to admire her with an admiration that his friendship for the husband obliged him to keep within the bounds of discretion, making him timid and embarrassed. Madame Souris believing that his presumptions had received a wholesome check now treated him as a good friend. This went on for nine years.

One morning a messenger brought Leuillet a distracted note from the poor woman. Souris had just died suddenly from the rupture of an aneurism. He was dreadfully shocked, for they were just the same age. But almost immediately a feeling of profound joy, of intense relief, of emancipation filled his being. Madame Souris was free.

He managed, however, to assume the sad, sympathetic expression that was appropriate, waited the required time, observed all social appearances. At the end of fifteen months he married the widow.

This was considered to be a very natural, and even a generous action. It was the act of a good friend of an upright man.

He was happy at last, perfectly happy.

They lived in the most cordial intimacy, having understood and appreciated each other from the first. They had no secrets from one another and even confided to each other their most secret thoughts. Leuillet loved his wife now with a quiet and trustful affection; he loved her as a tender, devoted companion who is an equal and a confidante. But there lingered in his mind a strange and inexplicable bitterness towards the defunct Souris, who had first been the husband of this woman, who had had the flower of her youth and of her soul, and had even robbed her of some of her poetry. The memory of the dead husband marred the happiness of the living husband, and this posthumous jealousy tormented his heart by day and by night.

The consequence was he talked incessantly of Souris, asked about a thousand personal and

secret minutia, wanted to know all about his habits and his person. And he sneered at him even in his grave, recalling with self-satisfaction his whims, ridiculing his absurdities, dwelling on his faults.

He would call to his wife all over the house:

"Hallo, Mathilde!"

"Here I am, dear."

"Come here a moment."

She would come, always smiling, knowing well that he would say something about Souris and ready to flatter her new husband's inoffensive mania.

"Tell me, do you remember one day how Souris insisted on explaining to me that little men always commanded more affection than big men?"

And he made some remarks that were disparaging to the deceased, who was a small man, and decidedly flattering to himself, Leuillet, who was a tall man.

Mme. Leuillet allowed him to think he was right, quite right, and she laughed heartily, gently ridiculing her former husband for the sake of pleasing the present one, who always ended by saying:

"All the same, what a ninny that Souris was!"

They were happy, quite happy, and Leuillet never ceased to show his devotion to his wife.

One night, however, as they lay awake, Leuillet said as he kissed his wife:

"See here, dearie."

"Well?"

"Was Souris--I don't exactly know how to say it--was Souris very loving?"

She gave him a kiss for reply and murmured "Not as loving as you are, mon chat."

He was flattered in his self-love and continued:

"He must have been--a ninny--was he not?"

She did not reply. She only smiled slyly and hid her face in her husband's neck.

"He must have been a ninny and not--not--not smart?"

She shook her head slightly to imply, "No--not at all smart."

He continued:

"He must have been an awful nuisance, eh?"

This time she was frank and replied:

"Oh yes!"

He kissed her again for this avowal and said:

"What a brute he was! You were not happy with him?"

"No," she replied. "It was not always pleasant."

Leuillet was delighted, forming in his mind a comparison, much in his own favor, between his wife's former and present position. He was silent for a time, and then with a burst of laughter he asked:

"Tell me?"

"What?"

"Will you be frank, very frank with me?"

"Why yes, my dear."

"Well then, tell me truly did you never feel tempted to--to--to deceive that imbecile Souris?"

Mme. Leuillet said: "Oh!" pretending to be shocked and hid her face again on her husband's shoulder. But he saw that she was laughing.

"Come now, own up," he persisted. "He looked like a ninny, that creature! It would be funny, so funny! Good old Souris! Come, come, dearie, you do not mind telling me, me, of all people."

He insisted on the "me" thinking that if she had wished to deceive Souris she would have chosen him, and he was trembling in anticipation of her avowal, sure that if she had not been a virtuous woman she would have encouraged his own attentions.

But she did not answer, laughing still, as at the recollection of something exceedingly comical.

Leuillet, in his turn began to laugh, thinking he might have been the lucky man, and he muttered amid his mirth: "That poor Souris, that poor Souris, oh, yes, he looked like a fool!"

Mme. Leuillet was almost in spasms of laughter.

"Come, confess, be frank. You know I will not mind."

Then she stammered out, almost choking with laughter: "Yes, yes."

"Yes, what?" insisted her husband. "Come, tell all."

She was quieter now and putting her mouth to her husband's ear, she whispered: "Yes, I did deceive him."

He felt a chill run down his back and to his very bones, and he stammered out, dumfounded: "You--you--deceived him--criminally?"

She still thought he was amused and replied: "Yes--yes, absolutely."

He was obliged to sit up to recover his breath, he was so shocked and upset at what he had heard.

She had become serious, understanding too late what she had done.

"With whom?" said Leuillet at length.

She was silent seeking some excuse.

"A young man," she replied at length.

He turned suddenly toward her and said drily:

"I did not suppose it was the cook. I want to know what young man, do you hear?"

She did not answer.

He snatched the covers from her face, repeating:

"I want to know what young man, do you hear?"

Then she said sorrowfully: "I was only in fun." But he was trembling with rage. "What? How? You were only in fun? You were making fun of me, then? But I am not satisfied, do you hear? I want the name of the young man!"

She did not reply, but lay there motionless.

He took her by the arm and squeezed it, saying: "Do you understand me, finally? I wish you to reply when I speak to you."

"I think you are going crazy," she said nervously, "let me alone!"

He was wild with rage, not knowing what to say, exasperated, and he shook her with all his might, repeating:

"Do you hear me, do you hear me?"

She made an abrupt effort to disengage herself and the tips of her fingers touched her husband's nose. He was furious, thinking she had tried to hit him, and he sprang upon her holding her down; and boxing her ears with all his might, he cried: "Take that, and that, there, there, wretch!"

When he was out of breath and exhausted, he rose and went toward the dressing table to prepare a glass of eau sucrée with orange flower, for he felt as if he should faint.

She was weeping in bed, sobbing bitterly, for she felt as if her happiness was over, through her own fault.

Then, amidst her tears, she stammered out:

"Listen, Antoine, come here, I told you a lie, you will understand, listen."

And prepared to defend herself now, armed with excuses and artifice, she raised her disheveled head with its nightcap all awry.

Turning toward her, he approached, ashamed of having struck her, but feeling in the bottom of his heart as a husband, a relentless hatred toward this woman who had deceived the former husband, Souris.