

The Marquis de Fumerol

Guy de Maupassant

Roger de Tourneville was whiffing a cigar and blowing out small clouds of smoke every now and then, as he sat astride a chair amid a party of friends. He was talking.

"We were at dinner when a letter was brought in which my father opened. You know my father, who thinks that he is king of France ad interim. I call him Don Quixote, because for twelve years he has been running a tilt against the windmill of the Republic, without quite knowing whether it was in the cause of the Bourbons or the Orleanists. At present he is bearing the lance in the cause of the Orleanists alone, because there is no one else left. In any case, he thinks himself the first gentleman of France, the best known, the most influential, the head of the party; and as he is an irremovable senator, he thinks that the thrones of the neighboring kings are very insecure.

"As for my mother, she is my father's soul, she is the soul of the kingdom and of religion, and the scourge of all evil-thinkers.

"Well, a letter was brought in while we were at dinner, and my father opened and read it, and then he said to mother: 'Your brother is dying.' She grew very pale. My uncle was scarcely ever mentioned in the house, and I did not know him at all; all I knew from public talk was, that he had led, and was still leading, a gay life. After having spent his fortune in fast living, he was now in small apartments in the Rue des Martyrs.

"An ancient peer of France and former colonel of cavalry, it was said that he believed in neither God nor devil. Not believing, therefore, in a future life he had abused the present life in every way, and had become a live wound in my mother's heart.

"'Give me that letter, Paul,' she said, and when she read it, I asked for it in my turn. Here it is:

Monsieur le Comte, I think I ought to let you know that your brother-in-law, the Comte Fumerol, is going to die. Perhaps you would like to make some arrangements, and do not forget I told you. Your servant,
MELANIE.

"'We must take counsel,' papa murmured. 'In my position, I ought to watch over your brother's last moments.'

"Mamma continued: 'I will send for Abbe Poivron and ask his advice, and then I will go to my brother with the abbe and Roger. Remain here, Paul, for you must not compromise yourself; but a woman can, and ought to do these things. For a politician in your position, it is another matter. It would be a fine thing for one of your opponents to be able to bring one of your most laudable actions up against you.' 'You are right,' my father said. 'Do as you think best, my dear wife.'

"A quarter of an hour, later, the Abbe Poivron came into the drawing-room, and the

situation was explained to him, analyzed and discussed in all its bearings. If the Marquis de Fumerol, one of the greatest names in France, were to die without the ministrations of religion, it would assuredly be a terrible blow to the nobility in general, and to the Count de Tourneville in particular, and the freethinkers would be triumphant. The liberal newspapers would sing songs of victory for six months; my mother's name would be dragged through the mire and brought into the prose of Socialistic journals, and my father's name would be smirched. It was impossible that such a thing should be.

"A crusade was therefore immediately decided upon, which was to be led by the Abbe Poivron, a little, fat, clean, priest with a faint perfume about him, a true vicar of a large church in a noble and rich quarter.

"The landau was ordered and we all three set out, my mother, the cure and I, to administer the last sacraments to my uncle.

"It had been decided first of all we should see Madame Melanie who had written the letter, and who was most likely the porter's wife, or my uncle's servant, and I dismounted, as an advance guard, in front of a seven-story house and went into a dark passage, where I had great difficulty in finding the porter's den. He looked at me distrustfully, and I said:

"'Madame Melanie, if you please.' 'Don't know her!' 'But I have received a letter from her.' 'That may be, but I don't know her. Are you asking for a lodger?' 'No, a servant probably. She wrote me about a place.' 'A servant?--a servant? Perhaps it is the marquis'. Go and see, the fifth story on the left.'

"As soon as he found I was not asking for a doubtful character he became more friendly and came as far as the corridor with me. He was a tall, thin man with white whiskers, the manners of a beadle and majestic gestures.

"I climbed up a long spiral staircase, the railing of which I did not venture to touch, and I gave three discreet knocks at the left-hand door on the fifth story. It opened immediately, and an enormous dirty woman appeared before me. She barred the entrance with her extended arms which she placed against the two doorposts, and growled:

"'What do you want?' 'Are you Madame Melanie?' 'Yes.' 'I am the Visconte de Tourneville.' 'Ah! All right! Come in.' 'Well, the fact is, my mother is downstairs with a priest.' 'Oh! All right; go and bring them up; but be careful of the porter.'

"I went downstairs and came up again with my mother, who was followed by the abbe, and I fancied that I heard other footsteps behind us. As soon as we were in the kitchen, Melanie offered us chairs, and we all four sat down to deliberate.

"'Is he very ill?' my mother asked. 'Oh! yes, madame; he will not be here long.' 'Does he seem disposed to receive a visit from a priest?' 'Oh! I do not think so.' 'Can I see him?' 'Well--yes madame--only-- only--those young ladies are with him.' 'What young ladies?' 'Why--why --his lady friends, of course.' 'Oh!' Mamma had grown scarlet, and the Abbe Poivron had lowered his eyes.

"The affair began to amuse me, and I said: 'Suppose I go in first? I shall see how he receives

me, and perhaps I shall be able to prepare him to receive you.'

"My mother, who did not suspect any trick, replied: 'Yes, go, my dear.' But a woman's voice cried out: 'Melanie!'

"The servant ran out and said: 'What do you want, Mademoiselle Claire?' 'The omelette; quickly.' 'In a minute, mademoiselle.' And coming back to us, she explained this summons.

"They had ordered a cheese omelette at two o'clock as a slight collation. And she at once began to break the eggs into a salad bowl, and to whip them vigorously, while I went out on the landing and pulled the bell, so as to formally announce my arrival. Melanie opened the door to me, and made me sit down in an ante-room, while she went to tell my uncle that I had come; then she came back and asked me to go in, while the abbe hid behind the door, so that he might appear at the first signal.

"I was certainly very much surprised at the sight of my uncle, for he was very handsome, very solemn and very elegant, the old rake.

"Sitting, almost lying, in a large armchair, his legs wrapped in blankets, his hands, his long, white hands, over the arms of the chair, he was waiting for death with the dignity of a patriarch. His white beard fell on his chest, and his hair, which was also white, mingled with it on his cheeks.

"Standing behind his armchair, as if to defend him against me, were two young women, who looked at me with bold eyes. In their petticoats and morning wrappers, with bare arms, with coal black hair twisted in a knot on the nape of their neck, with embroidered, Oriental slippers, which showed their ankles and silk stockings, they looked like the figures in some symbolical painting, by the side of the dying man. Between the easy-chair and the bed, there was a table covered with a white cloth, on which two plates, two glasses, two forks and two knives, were waiting for the cheese omelette which had been ordered some time before of Melanie.

"My uncle said in a weak, almost breathless, but clear voice:

'Good-morning, my child; it is rather late in the day to come and see me; our acquaintanceship will not last long.' I stammered out, 'It was not my fault, uncle.' 'No; I know that,' he replied. 'It is your father and mother's fault more than yours. How are they?' 'Pretty well, thank you. When they heard that you were ill, they sent me to ask after you.' 'Ah! Why did they not come themselves?'

"I looked up at the two girls and said gently: 'It is not their fault if they could not come, uncle. But it would be difficult for my father, and impossible for my mother to come in here.' The old man did not reply, but raised his hand toward mine, and I took the pale, cold hand and held it in my own.

"The door opened, Melanie came in with the omelette and put it on the table, and the two girls immediately sat down at the table, and began to eat without taking their eyes off me. Then I said: 'Uncle, it would give great pleasure to my mother to embrace you.' 'I also,' he murmured, 'should like----' He said no more, and I could think of nothing to propose to him,

and there was silence except for the noise of the plates and that vague sound of eating.

"Now, the abbe, who was listening behind the door, seeing our embarrassment, and thinking we had won the game, thought the time had come to interpose, and showed himself. My uncle was so stupefied at sight of him that at first he remained motionless; and then he opened his mouth as if he meant to swallow up the priest, and shouted to him in a strong, deep, furious voice: 'What are you doing here?'

"The abbe, who was used to difficult situations, came forward into the room, murmuring: 'I have come in your sister's name, Monsieur le Marquis; she has sent me. She would be happy, monsieur--'

"But the marquis was not listening. Raising one hand, he pointed to the door with a proud, tragic gesture, and said angrily and breathing hard: 'Leave this room--go out--robber of souls. Go out from here, you violator of consciences. Go out from here, you pick-lock of dying men's doors!'

"The abbe retreated, and I also went to the door, beating a retreat with the priest; the two young women, who had the best of it, got up, leaving their omelette only half eaten, and went and stood on either side of my uncle's easy-chair, putting their hands on his arms to calm him, and to protect him against the criminal enterprises of the Family, and of Religion.

"The abbe and I rejoined my mother in the kitchen, and Melanie again offered us chairs. 'I knew quite well that this method would not work; we must try some other means, otherwise he will escape us.' And they began deliberating afresh, my mother being of one opinion and the abbe of another, while I held a third.

"We had been discussing the matter in a low voice for half an hour, perhaps, when a great noise of furniture being moved and of cries uttered by my uncle, more vehement and terrible even than the former had been, made us all four jump up.

"Through the doors and walls we could hear him shouting: 'Go out--out-- rascals--humbugs, get out, scoundrels--get out--get out!'

"Melanie rushed in, but came back immediately to call me to help her, and I hastened in. Opposite to my uncle, who was terribly excited by anger, almost standing up and vociferating, stood two men, one behind the other, who seemed to be waiting till he should be dead with rage.

"By his ridiculous long coat, his long English shoes, his manners of a tutor out of a position, his high collar, white necktie and straight hair, his humble face of a false priest of a bastard religion, I immediately recognized the first as a Protestant minister.

"The second was the porter of the house, who belonged to the reformed religion and had followed us, and having seen our defeat, had gone to fetch his own pastor, in hopes that he might meet a better reception. My uncle seemed mad with rage! If the sight of the Catholic priest, of the priest of his ancestors, had irritated the Marquis de Fumerol, who had become a freethinker, the sight of his porter's minister made him altogether beside himself. I therefore took the two men by the arm and threw them out of the room so roughly that they

bumped against each other twice, between the two doors which led to the staircase; and then I disappeared in my turn and returned to the kitchen, which was our headquarters in order to take counsel with my mother and the abbe.

"But Melanie came back in terror, sobbing out:

'He is dying--he is dying--come immediately--he is dying.'

"My mother rushed out. My uncle had fallen to the ground, and lay full length along the floor, without moving. I fancy he was already dead. My mother was superb at that moment! She went straight up to the two girls who were kneeling by the body and trying to raise it up, and pointing to the door with irresistible authority, dignity and majesty, she said: 'Now it is time for you to leave the room.'

"And they went out without a word of protest. I must add, that I was getting ready to turn them out as unceremoniously as I had done the parson and the porter.

"Then the Abbe Poivron administered the last sacraments to my uncle with all the customary prayers, and remitted all his sins, while my mother sobbed as she knelt near her brother. Suddenly, however, she exclaimed: 'He recognized me; he pressed my hand; I am sure he recognized me!!!--and that he thanked me! Oh, God, what happiness!'

"Poor mamma! If she had known or guessed for whom those thanks were intended!

"They laid my uncle on his bed; he was certainly dead this time.

"'Madame,' Melanie said, 'we have no sheets to bury him in; all the linen belongs to these two young ladies,' and when I looked at the omelette which they had not finished, I felt inclined to laugh and to cry at the same time. There are some humorous moments and some humorous situations in life, occasionally!

"We gave my uncle a magnificent funeral, with five speeches at the grave. Baron de Croiselles, the senator, showed in admirable terms that God always returns victorious into well-born souls which have temporarily been led into error. All the members of the Royalist and Catholic party followed the funeral procession with the enthusiasm of victors, as they spoke of that beautiful death after a somewhat troublous life."

Viscount Roger ceased speaking; his audience was laughing. Then somebody said: "Bah! That is the story of all conversions in extremis."