

The Wrong House

Guy de Maupassant

Quartermaster Varajou had obtained a week's leave to go and visit his sister, Madame Padoie. Varajou, who was in garrison at Rennes and was leading a pretty gay life, finding himself high and dry, wrote to his sister saying that he would devote a week to her. It was not that he cared particularly for Mme. Padoie, a little moralist, a devotee, and always cross; but he needed money, needed it very badly, and he remembered that, of all his relations, the Padoies were the only ones whom he had never approached on the subject.

Pere Varajou, formerly a horticulturist at Angers, but now retired from business, had closed his purse strings to his scapegrace son and had hardly seen him for two years. His daughter had married Padoie, a former treasury clerk, who had just been appointed tax collector at Vannes.

Varajou, on leaving the train, had some one direct him to the house of his brother-in-law, whom he found in his office arguing with the Breton peasants of the neighborhood. Padoie rose from his seat, held out his hand across the table littered with papers, murmured, "Take a chair. I will be at liberty in a moment," sat down again and resumed his discussion.

The peasants did not understand his explanations, the collector did not understand their line of argument. He spoke French, they spoke Breton, and the clerk who acted as interpreter appeared not to understand either.

It lasted a long time, a very long time. Varajou looked at his brother-in-law and thought: "What a fool!" Padoie must have been almost fifty. He was tall, thin, bony, slow, hairy, with heavy arched eyebrows. He wore a velvet skull cap with a gold cord vandyke design round it. His look was gentle, like his actions. His speech, his gestures, his thoughts, all were soft. Varajou said to himself, "What a fool!"

He, himself, was one of those noisy roysterers for whom the greatest pleasures in life are the cafe and abandoned women. He understood nothing outside of these conditions of existence.

A boisterous braggart, filled with contempt for the rest of the world, he despised the entire universe from the height of his ignorance. When he said: "Nom d'un chien, what a spree!" he expressed the highest degree of admiration of which his mind was capable.

Having finally got rid of his peasants, Padoie inquired:

"How are you?"

"Pretty well, as you see. And how are you?"

"Quite well, thank you. It is very kind of you to have thought of coming to see us."

"Oh, I have been thinking of it for some time; but, you know, in the military profession one

has not much freedom."

"Oh, I know, I know. All the same, it is very kind of you."

"And Josephine, is she well?"

"Yes, yes, thank you; you will see her presently." "Where is she?"

"She is making some calls. We have a great many friends here; it is a very nice town."

"I thought so."

The door opened and Mme. Padoie appeared. She went over to her brother without any eagerness, held her cheek for him to kiss, and asked:

"Have you been here long?"

"No, hardly half an hour."

"Oh, I thought the train would be late. Will you come into the parlor?"

They went into the adjoining room, leaving Padoie to his accounts and his taxpayers. As soon as they were alone, she said:

"I have heard nice things about you!"

"What have you heard?"

"It seems that you are behaving like a blackguard, getting drunk and contracting debts."

He appeared very much astonished.

"I! never in the world!"

"Oh, do not deny it, I know it."

He attempted to defend himself, but she gave him such a lecture that he could say nothing more.

She then resumed:

"We dine at six o'clock, and you can amuse yourself until then. I cannot entertain you, as I have so many things to do."

When he was alone he hesitated as to whether he should sleep or take a walk. He looked first at the door leading to his room and then at the hall door, and decided to go out. He sauntered slowly through the quiet Breton town, so sleepy, so calm, so dead, on the shores of its inland bay that is called "le Morbihan." He looked at the little gray houses, the

occasional pedestrians, the empty stores, and he murmured:

"Vannes is certainly not gay, not lively. It was a sad idea, my coming here."

He reached the harbor, the desolate harbor, walked back along a lonely, deserted boulevard, and got home before five o'clock. Then he threw himself on his bed to sleep till dinner time. The maid woke him, knocking at the door.

"Dinner is ready, sir:"

He went downstairs. In the damp dining-room with the paper peeling from the walls near the floor, he saw a soup tureen on a round table without any table cloth, on which were also three melancholy soup-plates.

M. and Mme. Padoie entered the room at the same time as Varajou. They all sat down to table, and the husband and wife crossed themselves over the pit of their stomachs, after which Padoie helped the soup, a meat soup. It was the day for pot-roast.

After the soup, they had the beef, which was done to rags, melted, greasy, like pap. The officer ate slowly, with disgust, weariness and rage.

Mme. Padoie said to her husband:

"Are you going to the judge's house this evening?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do not stay late. You always get so tired when you go out. You are not made for society, with your poor health."

She then talked about society in Vannes, of the excellent social circle in which the Padoies moved, thanks to their religious sentiments.

A puree of potatoes and a dish of pork were next served, in honor of the guest. Then some cheese, and that was all. No coffee.

When Varajou saw that he would have to spend the evening tete-a-tete with his sister, endure her reproaches, listen to her sermons, without even a glass of liqueur to help him to swallow these remonstrances, he felt that he could not stand the torture, and declared that he was obliged to go to the police station to have something attended to regarding his leave of absence. And he made his escape at seven o'clock.

He had scarcely reached the street before he gave himself a shake like a dog coming out of the water. He muttered:

"Heavens, heavens, heavens, what a galley slave's life!"

And he set out to look for a cafe, the best in the town. He found it on a public square, behind two gas lamps. Inside the cafe, five or six men, semi-gentlemen, and not noisy, were

drinking and chatting quietly, leaning their elbows on the small tables, while two billiard players walked round the green baize, where the balls were hitting each other as they rolled.

One heard them counting:

"Eighteen-nineteen. No luck. Oh, that's a good stroke! Well played! Eleven. You should have played on the red. Twenty. Froze! Froze! Twelve. Ha! Wasn't I right?"

Varajou ordered:

"A demi-tasse and a small decanter of brandy, the best." Then he sat down and waited for it.

He was accustomed to spending his evenings off duty with his companions, amid noise and the smoke of pipes. This silence, this quiet, exasperated him. He began to drink; first the coffee, then the brandy, and asked for another decanter. He now wanted to laugh, to shout, to sing, to fight some one. He said to himself:

"Gee, I am half full. I must go and have a good time."

And he thought he would go and look for some girls to amuse him. He called the waiter:

"Hey, waiter."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me, where does one amuse oneself here?"

The man looked stupid, and replied:

"I do not know, sir. Here, I suppose!"

"How do you mean here? What do you call amusing oneself, yourself?"

"I do not know, sir, drinking good beer or good wine."

"Ah, go away, dummy, how about the girls?"

"The girls, ah! ah!"

"Yes, the girls, where can one find any here?"

"Girls?"

"Why, yes, girls!"

The boy approached and lowering his voice, said: "You want to know where they live?"

"Why, yes, the devil!"

"You take the second street to the left and then the first to the right. It is number fifteen."

"Thank you, old man. There is something for you."

"Thank you, sir."

And Varajou went out of the cafe, repeating, "Second to the left, first to the right, number 15." But at the end of a few seconds he thought, "second to the left yes. But on leaving the cafe must I walk to the right or the left? Bah, it cannot be helped, we shall see."

And he walked on, turned down the second street to the left, then the first to the right and looked for number 15. It was a nice looking house, and one could see behind the closed blinds that the windows were lighted up on the first floor. The hall door was left partly open, and a lamp was burning in the vestibule. The non-commissioned officer thought to himself:

"This looks all right."

He went in and, as no one appeared, he called out:

"Hallo there, hallo!"

A little maid appeared and looked astonished at seeing a soldier. He said:

"Good-morning, my child. Are the ladies upstairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"In the parlor?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I go up?"

"Yes, sir."

"The door opposite the stairs?"

"Yes, sir."

He ascended the stairs, opened a door and saw sitting in a room well lighted up by two lamps, a chandelier, and two candelabras with candles in them, four ladies in evening dress, apparently expecting some one.

Three of them, the younger ones, remained seated, with rather a formal air, on some crimson velvet chairs; while the fourth, who was about forty-five, was arranging some flowers in a vase. She was very stout, and wore a green silk dress with low neck and short sleeves, allowing her red neck, covered with powder, to escape as a huge flower might from

its corolla.

The officer saluted them, saying:

"Good-day, ladies."

The older woman turned round, appeared surprised, but bowed.

"Good-morning, sir."

He sat down. But seeing that they did not welcome him eagerly, he thought that possibly only commissioned officers were admitted to the house, and this made him uneasy. But he said:

"Bah, if one comes in, we can soon tell."

He then remarked:

"Are you all well?"

The large lady, no doubt the mistress of the house, replied:

"Very well, thank you!"

He could think of nothing else to say, and they were all silent. But at last, being ashamed of his bashfulness, and with an awkward laugh, he said:

"Do not people have any amusement in this country? I will pay for a bottle of wine."

He had not finished his sentence when the door opened, and in walked Padoie dressed in a black suit.

Varajou gave a shout of joy, and rising from his seat, he rushed at his brother-in-law, put his arms round him and waltzed him round the room, shouting:

"Here is Padoie! Here is Padoie! Here is Padoie!"

Then letting go of the tax collector he exclaimed as he looked him in the face:

"Oh, oh, oh, you scamp, you scamp! You are out for a good time, too. Oh, you scamp! And my sister! Are you tired of her, say?"

As he thought of all that he might gain through this unexpected situation, the forced loan, the inevitable blackmail, he flung himself on the lounge and laughed so heartily that the piece of furniture creaked all over.

The three young ladies, rising simultaneously, made their escape, while the older woman retreated to the door looking as though she were about to faint.

And then two gentlemen appeared in evening dress, and wearing the ribbon of an order. Padoie rushed up to them.

"Oh, judge--he is crazy, he is crazy. He was sent to us as a convalescent. You can see that he is crazy."

Varajou was sitting up now, and not being able to understand it all, he guessed that he had committed some monstrous folly. Then he rose, and turning to his brother-in-law, said:

"What house is this?"

But Padoie, becoming suddenly furious, stammered out:

"What house--what--what house is this? Wretch--scoundrel--villain--what house, indeed? The house of the judge--of the judge of the Supreme Court--of the Supreme Court--of the Supreme Court--Oh, oh--rascal!-- rascal!--rascal!"