

The Rabbit

Guy de Maupassant

Old Lecacheur appeared at the door of his house between five and a quarter past five in the morning, his usual hour, to watch his men going to work.

He was only half awake, his face was red, and with his right eye open and the left nearly closed, he was buttoning his braces over his fat stomach with some difficulty, at the same time looking into every corner of the farmyard with a searching glance. The sun darted its oblique rays through the beech trees by the side of the ditch and athwart the apple trees outside, and was making the cocks crow on the dunghill, and the pigeons coo on the roof. The smell of the cow stable came through the open door, and blended in the fresh morning air with the pungent odor of the stable, where the horses were neighing, with their heads turned toward the light.

As soon as his trousers were properly fastened, Lecacheur came out, and went, first of all, toward the hen house to count the morning's eggs, for he had been afraid of thefts for some time; but the servant girl ran up to him with lifted arms and cried:

"Master! master! they have stolen a rabbit during the night."

"A rabbit?"

"Yes, master, the big gray rabbit, from the hutch on the left"; whereupon the farmer completely opened his left eye, and said, simply:

"I must see about that."

And off he went to inspect it. The hutch had been broken open and the rabbit was gone. Then he became thoughtful, closed his right eye again, and scratched his nose, and after a little consideration, he said to the frightened girl, who was standing stupidly before her master:

"Go and fetch the gendarmes; say I expect them as soon as possible."

Lecacheur was mayor of the village, Pavigny-le-Gras, and ruled it like a master, on account of his money and position, and as soon as the servant had disappeared in the direction of the village, which was only about five hundred yards off, he went into the house to have his morning coffee and to discuss the matter with his wife, whom he found on her knees in front of the fire, trying to make it burn quickly, and as soon as he got to the door, he said:

"Somebody has stolen the gray rabbit."

She turned round so suddenly that she found herself sitting on the floor, and looking at her husband with distressed eyes, she said:

"What is it, Cacheux? Somebody has stolen a rabbit?"

"The big gray one."

She sighed.

"What a shame! Who can have done it?"

She was a little, thin, active, neat woman, who knew all about farming. Lecacheur had his own ideas about the matter.

"It must be that fellow, Polyte."

His wife got up suddenly and said in a furious voice:

"He did it! he did it! You need not look for any one else. He did it! You have said it, Cacheux!"

All her peasant's fury, all her avarice, all her rage of a saving woman against the man of whom she had always been suspicious, and against the girl whom she had always suspected, showed themselves in the contraction of her mouth, and the wrinkles in the cheeks and forehead of her thin, exasperated face.

"And what have you done?" she asked.

"I have sent for the gendarmes."

This Polyte was a laborer, who had been employed on the farm for a few days, and who had been dismissed by Lecacheur for an insolent answer. He was an old soldier, and was supposed to have retained his habits of marauding and debauchery from his campaigns in Africa. He did anything for a livelihood, but whether he were a mason, a navvy, a reaper, whether he broke stones or lopped trees, he was always lazy, and so he remained nowhere for long, and had, at times, to change his neighborhood to obtain work.

From the first day that he came to the farm, Lecacheur's wife had detested him, and now she was sure that he had committed the theft.

In about half an hour the two gendarmes arrived. Brigadier Senateur was very tall and thin, and Gendarme Lenient short and fat. Lecacheur made them sit down, and told them the affair, and then they went and saw the scene of the theft, in order to verify the fact that the hutch had been broken open, and to collect all the proofs they could. When they got back to the kitchen, the mistress brought in some wine, filled their glasses, and asked with a distrustful look:

"Shall you catch him?"

The brigadier, who had his sword between his legs, appeared thoughtful. Certainly, he was sure of taking him, if he was pointed out to him, but if not, he could not answer for being able to discover him, himself, and after reflecting for a long time, he put this simple question:

"Do you know the thief?"

And Lecacheur replied, with a look of Normandy slyness in his eyes:

"As for knowing him, I do not, as I did not see him commit the theft. If I had seen him, I should have made him eat it raw, skin and flesh, without a drop of cider to wash it down. But as for saying who it is, I cannot, although I believe it is that good-for-nothing Polyte."

Then he related at length his troubles with Polyte, his leaving his service, his bad reputation, things which had been told him, accumulating insignificant and minute proofs, and then, the brigadier, who had been listening very attentively while he emptied his glass and filled it again with an indifferent air, turned to his gendarme and said:

"We must go and look in the cottage of Severin's wife." At which the gendarme smiled and nodded three times.

Then Madame Lecacheur came to them, and very quietly, with all a peasant's cunning, questioned the brigadier in her turn. That shepherd Severin, a simpleton, a sort of brute who had been brought up and had grown up among his bleating flocks, and who knew scarcely anything besides them in the world, had nevertheless preserved the peasant's instinct for saving, at the bottom of his heart. For years and years he must have hidden in hollow trees and crevices in the rocks all that he earned, either as a shepherd or by curing animals' sprains--for the bonesetter's secret had been handed down to him by the old shepherd whose place he took--by touch or word, and one day he bought a small property, consisting of a cottage and a field, for three thousand francs.

A few months later it became known that he was going to marry a servant, notorious for her bad morals, the innkeeper's servant. The young fellows said that the girl, knowing that he was pretty well off, had been to his cottage every night, and had taken him, captured him, led him on to matrimony, little by little night by night.

And then, having been to the mayor's office and to church, she now lived in the house which her man had bought, while he continued to tend his flocks, day and night, on the plains.

And the brigadier added:

"Polyte has been sleeping there for three weeks, for the thief has no place of his own to go to!"

The gendarme made a little joke:

"He takes the shepherd's blankets."

Madame Lecacheur, who was seized by a fresh access of rage, of rage increased by a married woman's anger against debauchery, exclaimed:

"It is she, I am sure. Go there. Ah, the blackguard thieves!"

But the brigadier was quite unmoved.

"One minute," he said. "Let us wait until twelve o'clock, as he goes and dines there every day. I shall catch them with it under their noses."

The gendarme smiled, pleased at his chief's idea, and Lecacheur also smiled now, for the affair of the shepherd struck him as very funny; deceived husbands are always a joke.

Twelve o'clock had just struck when the brigadier, followed by his man, knocked gently three times at the door of a little lonely house, situated at the corner of a wood, five hundred yards from the village.

They had been standing close against the wall, so as not to be seen from within, and they waited. As nobody answered, the brigadier knocked again in a minute or two. It was so quiet that the house seemed uninhabited; but Lenient, the gendarme, who had very quick ears, said that he heard somebody moving about inside, and then Senateur got angry. He would not allow any one to resist the authority of the law for a moment, and, knocking at the door with the hilt of his sword, he cried out:

"Open the door, in the name of the law."

As this order had no effect, he roared out:

"If you do not obey, I shall smash the lock. I am the brigadier of the gendarmerie, by G--! Here, Lenient."

He had not finished speaking when the door opened and Senateur saw before him a fat girl, with a very red, blowzy face, with drooping breasts, a big stomach and broad hips, a sort of animal, the wife of the shepherd Severin, and he went into the cottage.

"I have come to pay you a visit, as I want to make a little search," he said, and he looked about him. On the table there was a plate, a jug of cider and a glass half full, which proved that a meal was in progress. Two knives were lying side by side, and the shrewd gendarme winked at his superior officer.

"It smells good," the latter said.

"One might swear that it was stewed rabbit," Lenient added, much amused.

"Will you have a glass of brandy?" the peasant woman asked.

"No, thank you; I only want the skin of the rabbit that you are eating."

She pretended not to understand, but she was trembling.

"What rabbit?"

The brigadier had taken a seat, and was calmly wiping his forehead.

"Come, come, you are not going to try and make us believe that you live on couch grass. What were you eating there all by yourself for your dinner?"

"I? Nothing whatever, I swear to you. A mite of butter on my bread."

"You are a novice, my good woman. A mite of butter on your bread. You are mistaken; you ought to have said: a mite of butter on the rabbit. By G--, your butter smells good! It is special butter, extra good butter, butter fit for a wedding; certainly, not household butter!"

The gendarme was shaking with laughter, and repeated:

"Not household butter certainly."

As Brigadier Senateur was a joker, all the gendarmes had grown facetious, and the officer continued:

"Where is your butter?"

"My butter?"

"Yes, your butter."

"In the jar."

"Then where is the butter jar?"

"Here it is."

She brought out an old cup, at the bottom of which there was a layer of rancid salt butter, and the brigadier smelled of it, and said, with a shake of his head:

"It is not the same. I want the butter that smells of the rabbit. Come, Lenient, open your eyes; look under the sideboard, my good fellow, and I will look under the bed."

Having shut the door, he went up to the bed and tried to move it; but it was fixed to the wall, and had not been moved for more than half a century, apparently. Then the brigadier stooped, and made his uniform crack. A button had flown off.

"Lenient," he said.

"Yes, brigadier?"

"Come here, my lad, and look under the bed; I am too tall. I will look after the sideboard."

He got up and waited while his man executed his orders.

Lenient, who was short and stout, took off his kepi, laid himself on his stomach, and, putting his face on the floor, looked at the black cavity under the bed, and then, suddenly,

he exclaimed:

"All right, here we are!"

"What have you got? The rabbit?"

"No, the thief."

"The thief! Pull him out, pull him out!"

The gendarme had put his arms under the bed and laid hold of something, and he was pulling with all his might, and at last a foot, shod in a thick boot, appeared, which he was holding in his right hand. The brigadier took it, crying:

"Pull! Pull!"

And Lenient, who was on his knees by that time, was pulling at the other leg. But it was a hard job, for the prisoner kicked out hard, and arched up his back under the bed.

"Courage! courage! pull! pull!" Senateur cried, and they pulled him with all their strength, so that the wooden slat gave way, and he came out as far as his head; but at last they got that out also, and they saw the terrified and furious face of Polyte, whose arms remained stretched out under the bed.

"Pull away!" the brigadier kept on exclaiming. Then they heard a strange noise, and as the arms followed the shoulders, and the hands the arms, they saw in the hands the handle of a saucepan, and at the end of the handle the saucepan itself, which contained stewed rabbit.

"Good Lord! good Lord!" the brigadier shouted in his delight, while Lenient took charge of the man; the rabbit's skin, an overwhelming proof, was discovered under the mattress, and then the gendarmes returned in triumph to the village with their prisoner and their booty.

A week later, as the affair had made much stir, Lecacheur, on going into the mairie to consult the schoolmaster, was told that the shepherd Severin had been waiting for him for more than an hour, and he found him sitting on a chair in a corner, with his stick between his legs. When he saw the mayor, he got up, took off his cap, and said:

"Good-morning, Maitre Cacheux"; and then he remained standing, timid and embarrassed.

"What do you want?" the former said.

"This is it, monsieur. Is it true that somebody stole one of your rabbits last week?"

"Yes, it is quite true, Severin."

"Who stole the rabbit?"

"Polyte Ancas, the laborer."

"Right! right! And is it also true that it was found under my bed?"

"What do you mean, the rabbit?"

"The rabbit and then Polyte."

"Yes, my poor Severin, quite true, but who told you?"

"Pretty well everybody. I understand! And I suppose you know all about marriages, as you marry people?"

"What about marriage?"

"With regard to one's rights."

"What rights?"

"The husband's rights and then the wife's rights."

"Of course I do."

"Oh! Then just tell me, M'sieu Cacheux, has my wife the right to go to bed with Polyte?"

"What, to go to bed with Polyte?"

"Yes, has she any right before the law, and, seeing that she is my wife, to go to bed with Polyte?"

"Why, of course not, of course not."

"If I catch him there again, shall I have the right to thrash him and her also?"

"Why--why--why, yes."

"Very well, then; I will tell you why I want to know. One night last week, as I had my suspicions, I came in suddenly, and they were not behaving properly. I chucked Polyte out, to go and sleep somewhere else; but that was all, as I did not know what my rights were. This time I did not see them; I only heard of it from others. That is over, and we will not say any more about it; but if I catch them again--by G--, if I catch them again, I will make them lose all taste for such nonsense, Maitre Cacheux, as sure as my name is Severin."