

On Horseback and other Stories
Foreword

Guy de Maupassant (1850-93) wrote some 340 stories, at a headlong rate following his eruption on the literary scene in France in 1880 with the publication of virtually the first of them, the famous *Boule de Suif*. The following nine years were immensely productive, and included two novels and many articles. He wrote for the money and geared the stories and their subject matter to the varied journals he offered them to; and they were high and low. Yet he was an unerring craftsman and his eye for the required detail, his unflinching and pitiless, yet never moralizing, account of the human condition, and his sense of form, never deserted him. He was, and is, a master of the genre. Flaubert, conveniently a childhood friend of his mama, had guided him; Zola championed him. Fame ensued on the instant; he was handsome, urbane and sought after, yet he barred himself against intrusion into his privacies, even to this very day. He remained close to this mother, whom his father left when he was 13. Known-of lovers notwithstanding, he never married.

Edmund Howard's selection for *Capuchin* exemplifies these gifts and the range of his themes; and the stories reveal fragments of his life. *On Horseback (A Cheval)* surely draws upon some figure of his own acquaintance during his early employment in the civil service, following the sudden impoverishment of his by no means undistinguished family, where the descendant of long-faded aristocracy working for a pittance in the Ministry of Drudge is grotesquely penalized for his pretensions as a chevalier. As a womaniser in his wild oats days, de Maupassant was surely no stranger to such a bordello as *Madame Tellier's Establishment*, exquisitely peopled and narrated with exactly the apt Chekhovian inconsequentiality of plot. Guy himself had briefly been in uniform, aged 20, during the brutish assault by Prussia of France in 1870: a humiliation which cut the future writer to the quick. Yet in *Mademoiselle Fifi*, whose characters are re-created with wicked precision, de Maupassant is not merely engaged in revenge but – characteristically – in choosing his heroine from life's gutter. The touch of genius in *The Necklace* is surely in the unexpected inner response of the female protagonist to the consequences of her self-induced if utterly forgivable catastrophe. As for *The Piece of String*, we recall that the de Maupassants were a Norman family and could risk satirising their own kind in terms not dissimilar to the slant the English give to Scottish compatriots. Wretched, luckless Morin – *That Pig of a Morin* – to be thus exposed to the ruthlessness of the reputation he so indelibly, yet pathetically, indeed virtually innocently, earned for himself!

Darker hues crowd in upon the last three of this collection. *The Horla* is one of de Maupassant's very last stories, dating from some three years before the end, when the syphilis he contracted, most probably in early life (notwithstanding his unawareness of its invasion of him), had begun to besiege him with paranoia. The last two of our collection tell of that other constituent of the French nation Guy knew so well, the Bretons: poignantly so – *desperately* poignantly – in *The Two Little Soldiers*, and no less than savagely so in *The Christening*. The jaw drops.

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