Bel-Ami

Guy De Maupassant

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1. Poverty

After changing his five-franc piece Georges Duroy left the restaurant. He twisted his mustache in military style and cast a rapid, sweeping glance upon the diners, among whom were three saleswomen, an untidy music-teacher of uncertain age, and two women with their husbands.

When he reached the sidewalk, he paused to consider what route he should take. It was the twenty-eighth of June and he had only three francs in his pocket to last him the remainder of the month. That meant two dinners and no lunches, or two lunches and no dinners, according to choice. As he pondered upon this unpleasant state of affairs, he sauntered down Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, preserving his military air and carriage, and rudely jostled the people upon the streets in order to clear a path for himself. He appeared to be hostile to the passers-by, and even to the houses, the entire city.

Tall, well-built, fair, with blue eyes, a curled mustache, hair naturally wavy and parted in the middle, he recalled the hero of the popular romances.

It was one of those sultry, Parisian evenings when not a breath of air is stirring; the sewers exhaled poisonous gases and the restaurants the disagreeable odors of cooking and of kindred smells. Porters in their shirt-sleeves, astride their chairs, smoked their pipes at the carriage gates, and pedestrians strolled leisurely along, hats in hand.

When Georges Duroy reached the boulevard he halted again, undecided as to which road to choose. Finally he turned toward the Madeleine and followed the tide of people.

The large, well-patronized cafes tempted Duroy, but were he to drink only two glasses of beer in an evening, farewell to the meager supper the following night! Yet he said to himself: "I will take a glass at the Americain. By Jove, I am thirsty."

He glanced at men seated at the tables, men who could afford to slake their thirst, and he scowled at them. "Rascals!" he muttered. If he could have caught one of them at a corner in the dark he would have choked him without a scruple! He recalled the two years spent in Africa, and the manner in which he had extorted money from the Arabs. A smile hovered about his lips at the recollection of an escapade which had cost three men their lives, a foray which had given his two comrades and himself seventy fowls, two sheep, money, and something to laugh about for six months. The culprits were never found; indeed, they were not sought for, the Arab being looked upon as the soldier's prey.

But in Paris it was different; there one could not commit such deeds with impunity. He regretted that he had not remained where he was;

but he had hoped to improve his condition—and for that reason he was in Paris!
He passed the Vaudeville and stopped at the Cafe Americain, debating as to whether he should take that "glass." Before deciding, he glanced at a clock; it was a quarter past nine. He knew that when the beer was placed in front of him, he would drink it; and then what would he do at eleven o'clock? So he walked on, intending to go as far as the Madeleine and return.
When he reached the Place de l'Opera, a tall, young man passed him, whose face he fancied was familiar. He followed him, repeating: "Where the deuce have I seen that fellow?"
For a time he racked his brain in vain; then suddenly he saw the same man, but not so corpulent and more youthful, attired in the uniform of a Hussar. He exclaimed: "Wait, Forestier!" and hastening up to him, laid his hand upon the man's shoulder. The latter turned, looked at him, and said: "What do you want, sir?"
Duroy began to laugh: "Don't you remember me?"
"No."
"Not remember Georges Duroy of the Sixth Hussars."
Forestier extended both hands.
"Ah, my dear fellow, how are you?"
"Very well. And how are you?"
"Oh, I am not very well. I cough six months out of the twelve as a result of bronchitis contracted at Bougival, about the time of my return to Paris four years ago."
"But you look well."
Forestier, taking his former comrade's arm, told him of his malady, of the consultations, the opinions and the advice of the doctors and of the difficulty of following their advice in his position. They ordered him to spend the winter in the south, but how could he? He was married and was a journalist in a responsible editorial position.
"I manage the political department on 'La Vie Francaise'; I report the doings of the Senate for 'Le Salut,' and from time to time I write for 'La Planete.' That is what I am doing."
Duroy, in surprise, glanced at him. He was very much changed. Formerly Forestier had been thin, giddy, noisy, and always in good spirits. But three years of life in Paris had made another man of him; now he was stout and serious, and his hair was gray on his temples although he could not number more than twenty-seven years.
Forestier asked: "Where are you going?"
Duroy replied: "Nowhere in particular."
"Very well, will you accompany me to the 'Vie Francaise' where I have some proofs to correct; and afterward take a drink with me?"
"Yes, gladly."

They walked along arm-in-arm with that familiarity which exists between schoolmates and brother-officers.
"What are you doing in Paris?" asked Forestier, Duroy shrugged his shoulders.
"Dying of hunger, simply. When my time was up, I came hither to make my fortune, or rather to live in Paris—and for six months I have been employed in a railroad office at fifteen hundred francs a year."
Forestier murmured: "That is not very much."
"But what can I do?" answered Duroy. "I am alone, I know no one, I have no recommendations. The spirit is not lacking, but the means are."
His companion looked at him from head to foot like a practical man who is examining a subject; then he said, in a tone of conviction: "You see, my dear fellow, all depends on assurance, here. A shrewd, observing man can sometimes become a minister. You must obtrude yourself and yet not ask anything. But how is it you have not found anything better than a clerkship at the station?"
Duroy replied: "I hunted everywhere and found nothing else. But I know where I can get three thousand francs at least—as riding-master at the Pellerin school."
Forestier stopped him: "Don't do it, for you can earn ten thousand francs. You will ruin your prospects at once. In your office at least no one knows you; you can leave it if you wish to at any time. But when you are once a riding-master all will be over. You might as well be a butler in a house to which all Paris comes to dine. When you have given riding lessons to men of the world or to their sons, they will no longer consider you their equal."
He paused, reflected several seconds and then asked:
"Are you a bachelor?"
"Yes, though I have been smitten several times."
"That makes no difference. If Cicero and Tiberius were mentioned would you know who they were?"
"Yes."
"Good, no one knows any more except about a score of fools. It is not difficult to pass for being learned. The secret is not to betray your ignorance. Just maneuver, avoid the quicksands and obstacles, and the rest can be found in a dictionary."
He spoke like one who understood human nature, and he smiled as the crowd passed them by. Suddenly he began to cough and stopped to allow the paroxysm to spend itself; then he said in a discouraged tone:
"Isn't it tiresome not to be able to get rid of this bronchitis? And here is midsummer! This winter I shall go to Mentone. Health before everything."
They reached the Boulevarde Poissoniere; behind a large glass door an open paper was affixed; three people were reading it. Above the door was printed the legend, "La Vie Francaise."

Forestier pushed open the door and said: "Come in." Duroy entered; they ascended the stairs, passed through an antechamber in which two clerks greeted their comrade, and then entered a kind of waiting-room.
"Sit down," said Forestier, "I shall be back in five minutes," and he disappeared.
Duroy remained where he was; from time to time men passed him by, entering by one door and going out by another before he had time to glance at them.
Now they were young men, very young, with a busy air, holding sheets of paper in their hands; now compositors, their shirts spotted with ink—carefully carrying what were evidently fresh proofs. Occasionally a gentleman entered, fashionably dressed, some reporter bringing news.
Forestier reappeared arm-in-arm with a tall, thin man of thirty or forty, dressed in a black coat, with a white cravat, a dark complexion, and an insolent, self-satisfied air. Forestier said to him: "Adieu, my dear sir," and the other pressed his hand with: "Au revoir, my friend." Then he descended the stairs whistling, his cane under his arm.
Duroy asked his name.
"That is Jacques Rival, the celebrated writer and duelist. He came to correct his proofs. Garin, Montel and he are the best witty and realistic writers we have in Paris. He earns thirty thousand francs a year for two articles a week."
As they went downstairs, they met a stout, little man with long hair, who was ascending the stairs whistling. Forestier bowed low.
"Norbert de Varenne," said he, "the poet, the author of 'Les Soleils Morts,'—a very expensive man. Every poem he gives us costs three hundred francs and the longest has not two hundred lines. But let us go into the Napolitain, I am getting thirsty."
When they were seated at a table, Forestier ordered two glasses of beer. He emptied his at a single draught, while Duroy sipped his beer slowly as if it were something rare and precious. Suddenly his companion asked, "Why don't you try journalism?"
Duroy looked at him in surprise and said: "Because I have never written anything."
"Bah, we all have to make a beginning. I could employ you myself by sending you to obtain information. At first you would only get two hundred and fifty francs a month but your cab fare would be paid. Shall I speak to the manager?"
"If you will."
"Well, then come and dine with me to-morrow; I will only ask five or six to meet you; the manager, M. Walter, his wife, with Jacques Rival, and Norbert de Varenne whom you have just seen, and also a friend of Mme. Forestier, Will you come?"
Duroy hesitated, blushing and perplexed. Finally he, murmured: "I have no suitable clothes."

Forestier was amazed. "You have no dress suit? Egad, that is indispensable. In Paris, it is better to have no bed than no clothes." Then, fumbling in his vest-pocket, he drew from it two louis, placed them before his companion, and said kindly: "You can repay me when it is convenient. Buy yourself what you need and pay an installment on it. And come and dine with us at half past seven, at 17 Rue Fontaine."
In confusion Duroy picked up the money and stammered: "You are very kind—I am much obliged—be sure I shall not forget."
Forestier interrupted him: "That's all right, take another glass of beer. Waiter, two more glasses!" When he had paid the score, the journalist asked: "Would you like a stroll for an hour?"
"Certainly."
They turned toward the Madeleine. "What shall we do?" asked Forestier. "They say that in Paris an idler can always find amusement, but it is not true. A turn in the Bois is only enjoyable if you have a lady with you, and that is a rare occurrence. The cafe concerts may divert my tailor and his wife, but they do not interest me. So what can we do? Nothing! There ought to be a summer garden here, open at night, where a man could listen to good music while drinking beneath the trees. It would be a pleasant lounging place. You could walk in alleys bright with electric light and seat yourself where you pleased to hear the music. It would be charming. Where would you like to go?"
Duroy did not know what to reply; finally he said: "I have never been to the Folies Bergeres. I should like to go there."
His companion exclaimed: "The Folies Bergeres! Very well!"
They turned and walked toward the Faubourg Montmartre. The brilliantly illuminated building loomed up before them. Forestier entered, Duroy stopped him. "We forgot to pass through the gate."
The other replied in a consequential tone: "I never pay," and approached the box-office.
"Have you a good box?"
"Certainly, M. Forestier."
He took the ticket handed him, pushed open the door, and they were within the hall. A cloud of tobacco smoke almost hid the stage and the opposite side of the theater. In the spacious foyer which led to the circular promenade, brilliantly dressed women mingled with black-coated men.
Forestier forced his way rapidly through the throng and accosted an usher.
"Box 17?"
"This way, sir."
The friends were shown into a tiny box, hung and carpeted in red, with four chairs upholstered in the same color. They seated themselves. To their right and left were similar boxes. On the stage three men were performing on trapezes. But Duroy paid no heed to them, his eyes

finding more to interest them in the grand promenade. Forestier remarked upon the motley appearance of the throng, but Duroy did not listen to him. A woman, leaning her arms upon the edge of her loge, was staring at him. She was a tall, voluptuous brunette, her face whitened with enamel, her black eyes penciled, and her lips painted. With a movement of her head, she summoned a friend who was passing, a blonde with auburn hair, likewise inclined to embonpoint, and said to her in a whisper intended to be heard; "There is a nice fellow!"
Forestier heard it, and said to Duroy with a smile: "You are lucky, my dear boy. My congratulations!"
The ci-devant soldier blushed and mechanically fingered the two pieces of gold in his pocket.
The curtain fell—the orchestra played a valse—and Duroy said:
"Shall we walk around the gallery?"
"If you like."
Soon they were carried along in the current of promenaders. Duroy drank in with delight the air, vitiated as it was by tobacco and cheap perfume, but Forestier perspired, panted, and coughed.
"Let us go into the garden," he said. Turning to the left, they entered a kind of covered garden in which two large fountains were playing. Under the yews, men and women sat at tables drinking.
"Another glass of beer?" asked Forestier.
"Gladly."
They took their seats and watched the promenaders. Occasionally a woman would stop and ask with a coarse smile: "What have you to offer, sir?"
Forestier's invariable answer was: "A glass of water from the fountain." And the woman would mutter, "Go along," and walk away.
At last the brunette reappeared, arm-in-arm with the blonde. They made a handsome couple. The former smiled on perceiving Duroy, and taking a chair she calmly seated herself in front of him, and said in a clear voice: "Waiter, two glasses."
In astonishment, Forestier exclaimed: "You are not at all bashful!"
She replied: "Your friend has bewitched me; he is such a fine fellow. I believe he has turned my head."
Duroy said nothing.
The waiter brought the beer, which the women swallowed rapidly; then they rose, and the brunette, nodding her head and tapping Duroy's arm with her fan, said to him: "Thank you, my dear! However, you are not very talkative."
As they disappeared, Forestier laughed and said: "Tell, me, old man, did you know that you had a charm for the weaker sex? You must be careful."
Without replying, Duroy smiled. His friend asked: "Shall you remain any longer? I am going; I have had enough."

Georges murmured: "Yes, I will stay a little longer: it is not late."
Forestier arose: "Very well, then, good-bye until to-morrow. Do not forget: 17 Rue Fontaine at seven thirty."
"I shall not forget. Thank you."
The friends shook hands and the journalist left Duroy to his own devices.
Forestier once out of sight, Duroy felt free, and again he joyously touched the gold pieces in his pocket; then rising, he mingled with the crowd.
He soon discovered the blonde and the brunette. He went toward them, but when near them dared not address them.
The brunette called out to him: "Have you found your tongue?"
He stammered: "Zounds!" too bashful to say another word. A pause ensued, during which the brunette took his arm and together they left the hall.

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2. Madame Forestier

"Where does M. Forestier live?"
"Third floor on the left," said the porter pleasantly, on learning Duroy's destination.
Georges ascended the staircase. He was somewhat embarrassed and ill-at-ease. He had on a new suit but he was uncomfortable. He felt that it was defective; his boots were not glossy, he had bought his shirt that same evening at the Louvre for four francs fifty, his trousers were too wide and betrayed their cheapness in their fit, or rather, misfit, and his coat was too tight.
Slowly he ascended the stairs, his heart beating, his mind anxious. Suddenly before him stood a well-dressed gentleman staring at him. The person resembled Duroy so close that the latter retreated, then stopped, and saw that it was his own image reflected in a pier-glass! Not having anything but a small mirror at home, he had not been able to see himself entirely, and had exaggerated the imperfections of his toilette. When he saw his reflection in the glass, he did not even recognize himself; he took himself for some one else, for a man-of-the-world, and was really satisfied with his general appearance. Smiling to himself, Duroy extended his hand and expressed his astonishment, pleasure, and approbation. A door opened on the staircase, He was afraid of being surprised and began to ascend more rapidly, fearing that he might have been seen posing there by some of his friend's invited guests.
On reaching the second floor, he saw another mirror, and once more slackened his pace to look at himself. He likewise paused before the third glass, twirled his mustache, took off his hat to arrange his hair, and murmured half aloud, a habit of his: "Hall mirrors are most convenient."
Then he rang the bell. The door opened almost immediately, and before him stood a servant in a black coat, with a grave, shaven face, so perfect in his appearance that Duroy again became confused as he compared the cut of their garments.
The lackey asked:
"Whom shall I announce, Monsieur?" He raised a portiere and pronounced the name.
Duroy lost his self-possession upon being ushered into a world as yet strange to him. However, he advanced. A young, fair woman received him alone in a large, well-lighted room. He paused, disconcerted. Who was that smiling lady? He remembered that Forestier was married, and the thought that the handsome blonde was his friend's wife rendered him awkward and ill-at-ease. He stammered out:

"Madame, I am—"
She held out her hand. "I know, Monsieur—Charles told me of your meeting last night, and I am very glad that he asked you to dine with us to-day."
Duroy blushed to the roots of his hair, not knowing how to reply; he felt that he was being inspected from his head to his feet. He half thought of excusing himself, of inventing an explanation of the carelessness of his toilette, but he did not know how to touch upon that delicate subject.
He seated himself upon a chair she pointed out to him, and as he sank into its luxurious depths, it seemed to him that he was entering a new and charming life, that he would make his mark in the world, that he was saved. He glanced at Mme. Forestier. She wore a gown of pale blue cashmere which clung gracefully to her supple form and rounded outlines; her arms and throat rose in, lily-white purity from the mass of lace which ornamented the corsage and short sleeves. Her hair was dressed high and curled on the nape of her neck.
Duroy grew more at his ease under her glance, which recalled to him, he knew not why, that of the girl he had met the preceding evening at the Folies-Bergeres. Mme. Forestier had gray eyes, a small nose, full lips, and a rather heavy chin, an irregular, attractive face, full of gentleness and yet of malice.
After a short silence, she asked: "Have you been in Paris a long time?"
Gradually regaining his self-possession, he replied: "a few months, Madame. I am in the railroad employ, but my friend Forestier has encouraged me to hope that, thanks to him, I can enter into journalism."
She smiled kindly and murmured in a low voice: "I know."
The bell rang again and the servant announced: "Mme. de Marelle." She was a dainty brunette, attired in a simple, dark robe; a red rose in her black tresses seemed to accentuate her special character, and a young girl, or rather a child, for such she was, followed her.
Mme. Forestier said: "Good evening, Clotilde."
"Good evening, Madeleine."
They embraced each other, then the child offered her forehead with the assurance of an adult, saying:
"Good evening, cousin."
Mme. Forestier kissed her, and then made the introductions:
"M. Georges Duroy, an old friend of Charles. Mme. de Marelle, my friend, a relative in fact." She added: "Here, you know, we do not stand on ceremony."
Duroy bowed. The door opened again and a short man entered, upon his arm a tall, handsome woman, taller than he and much younger, with distinguished manners and a dignified carriage. It was M. Walter, deputy, financier, a moneyed man, and a man of business, manager of "La Vie Francaise," with his wife, nee Basile Ravalade, daughter of the banker of that name.