

# Maupassant's Short Stories Vol. 13

by

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## Old Judas

This entire stretch of country was amazing; it was characterized by a grandeur that was almost religious, and yet it had an air of sinister desolation.

A great, wild lake, filled with stagnant, black water, in which thousands of reeds were waving to and fro, lay in the midst of a vast circle of naked hills, where nothing grew but broom, or here and there an oak curiously twisted by the wind.

Just one house stood on the banks of that dark lake, a small, low house inhabited by Uncle Joseph, an old boatman, who lived on what he could make by his fishing. Once a week he carried the fish he caught into the surrounding villages, returning with the few provisions that he needed for his sustenance.

I went to see this old hermit, who offered to take me with him to his nets, and I accepted.

His boat was old, worm-eaten and clumsy, and the skinny old man rowed with a gentle and monotonous stroke that was soothing to the soul, already oppressed by the sadness of the land round about.

It seemed to me as if I were transported to olden times, in the midst of that ancient country, in that primitive boat, which was propelled by a man of another age.

He took up his nets and threw the fish into the bottom of the boat, as the fishermen of the Bible might have done. Then he took me down to the end of the lake, where I suddenly perceived a ruin on the other side of the bank a dilapidated hut, with an enormous red cross on the wall that looked as if it might have been traced with blood, as it gleamed in the last rays of the setting sun.

"What is that?" I asked.

"That is where Judas died," the man replied, crossing himself.

I was not surprised, being almost prepared for this strange answer.

Still I asked:

"Judas? What Judas?"

"The Wandering Jew, monsieur," he added.

I asked him to tell me this legend.

But it was better than a legend, being a true story, and quite a recent one, since Uncle Joseph had known the man.

This hut had formerly been occupied by a large woman, a kind of beggar, who lived on public charity.

Uncle Joseph did not remember from whom she had this hut. One evening an old man with a white beard, who seemed to be at least two hundred years old, and who could hardly drag himself along, asked alms of this forlorn woman, as he passed her dwelling.

"Sit down, father," she replied; "everything here belongs to all the world, since it comes from all the world."

He sat down on a stone before the door. He shared the woman's bread, her bed of leaves, and her house.

He did not leave her again, for he had come to the end of his travels.

"It was Our Lady the Virgin who permitted this, monsieur," Joseph added, "it being a woman who had opened her door to a Judas, for this old vagabond was the Wandering Jew. It was not known at first in the country, but the people suspected it very soon, because he was always walking; it had become a sort of second nature to him."

And suspicion had been aroused by still another thing. This woman, who kept that stranger with her, was thought to be a Jewess, for no one had ever seen her at church. For ten miles around no one ever called her anything else but the Jewess.

When the little country children saw her come to beg they cried out: "Mamma, mamma, here is the Jewess!"

The old man and she began to go out together into the neighboring districts, holding out their hands at all the doors, stammering supplications into the ears of all the passers. They could be seen at all hours of the day, on by-paths, in the villages, or again eating bread, sitting in the noon heat under the shadow of some solitary tree. And the country people began to call the beggar Old Judas.

One day he brought home in his sack two little live pigs, which a farmer had given him after he had cured the farmer of some sickness.

Soon he stopped begging, and devoted himself entirely to his pigs. He took them out to feed by the lake, or under isolated oaks, or in the near-by valleys. The woman, however, went about all day begging, but she always came back to him in the evening.

He also did not go to church, and no one ever had seen him cross himself before the wayside crucifixes. All this gave rise to much gossip:

One night his companion was attacked by a fever and began to tremble like a leaf in the wind. He went to the nearest town to get some medicine, and then he shut himself up with her, and was not seen for six days.

The priest, having heard that the "Jewess" was about to die, came to offer the consolation of his religion and administer the last sacrament. Was she a Jewess? He did not know. But in any case, he wished to try to save her soul.

Hardly had he knocked at the door when old Judas appeared on the threshold, breathing hard, his eyes aflame, his long beard agitated, like rippling water, and he hurled blasphemies in an unknown language, extending his skinny arms in order to prevent the priest from entering.

The priest attempted to speak, offered his purse and his aid, but the old man kept on abusing him, making gestures with his hands as if throwing; stones at him.

Then the priest retired, followed by the curses of the beggar.

The companion of old Judas died the following day. He buried her himself, in front of her door. They were people of so little account that no one took any interest in them.

Then they saw the man take his pigs out again to the lake and up the hillsides. And he also began begging again to get food. But the people gave him hardly anything, as there was so much gossip about him. Every one knew, moreover, how he had treated the priest.

Then he disappeared. That was during Holy Week, but no one paid any attention to him.

But on Easter Sunday the boys and girls who had gone walking out to the lake heard a great noise in the hut. The door was locked; but the boys broke it in, and the two pigs ran out, jumping like gnats. No one ever saw them again.

The whole crowd went in; they saw some old rags on the floor, the beggar's hat, some bones, clots of dried blood and bits of flesh in the hollows of the skull.

His pigs had devoured him.

"This happened on Good Friday, monsieur." Joseph concluded his story, "three hours after noon."

"How do you know that?" I asked him.

"There is no doubt about that," he replied.

I did not attempt to make him understand that it could easily happen that the famished animals had eaten their master, after he had died suddenly in his hut.

As for the cross on the wall, it had appeared one morning, and no one knew what hand traced it in that strange color.

Since then no one doubted any longer that the Wandering Jew had died on this spot.

I myself believed it for one hour.

## The Little Cask

He was a tall man of forty or thereabout, this Jules Chicot, the innkeeper of Spreville, with a red face and a round stomach, and said by those who knew him to be a smart business man. He stopped his buggy in front of Mother Magloire's farmhouse, and, hitching the horse to the gatepost, went in at the gate.

Chicot owned some land adjoining that of the old woman, which he had been coveting for a long while, and had tried in vain to buy a score of times, but she had always obstinately refused to part with it.

"I was born here, and here I mean to die," was all she said.

He found her peeling potatoes outside the farmhouse door. She was a woman of about seventy-two, very thin, shriveled and wrinkled, almost dried up in fact and much bent but as active and untiring as a girl. Chicot patted her on the back in a friendly fashion and then sat down by her on a stool.

"Well mother, you are always pretty well and hearty, I am glad to see."

"Nothing to complain of, considering, thank you. And how are you, Monsieur Chicot?"

"Oh, pretty well, thank you, except a few rheumatic pains occasionally; otherwise I have nothing to complain of."

"So much the better."

And she said no more, while Chicot watched her going on with her work. Her crooked, knotted fingers, hard as a lobster's claws, seized the tubers, which were lying in a pail, as if they had been a pair of pincers, and she peeled them rapidly, cutting off long strips of skin with an old knife which she held in the other hand, throwing the potatoes into the water as they were done. Three daring fowls jumped one after the other into her lap, seized a bit of peel and then ran away as fast as their legs would carry them with it in their beak.

Chicot seemed embarrassed, anxious, with something on the tip of his tongue which he could not say. At last he said hurriedly:

"Listen, Mother Magloire--"

"Well, what is it?"

"You are quite sure that you do not want to sell your land?"

"Certainly not; you may make up your mind to that. What I have said I have said, so don't refer to it again."

"Very well; only I think I know of an arrangement that might suit us both very well."

"What is it?"

"Just this. You shall sell it to me and keep it all the same. You don't understand? Very well, then follow me in what I am going to say."

The old woman left off peeling potatoes and looked at the innkeeper attentively from under her heavy eyebrows, and he went on:

"Let me explain myself. Every month I will give you a hundred and fifty francs. You understand me! suppose! Every month I will come and bring you thirty crowns, and it will not make the slightest difference in your life--not the very slightest. You will have your own home just as you have now, need not trouble yourself about me, and will owe me nothing; all you will have to do will be to take my money. Will that arrangement suit you?"

He looked at her good-humoredly, one might almost have said benevolently, and the old woman returned his looks distrustfully, as if she suspected a trap, and said:

"It seems all right as far as I am concerned, but it will not give you the farm."

"Never mind about that," he said; "you may remain here as long as it pleases God Almighty to let you live; it will be your home. Only you will sign a deed before a lawyer making it over to me; after your death. You have no children, only nephews and nieces for whom you don't care a straw. Will that suit you? You will keep everything during your life, and I will give you the thirty crowns a month. It is pure gain as far as you are concerned."

The old woman was surprised, rather uneasy, but, nevertheless, very much tempted to agree, and answered:

"I don't say that I will not agree to it, but I must think about it. Come back in a week, and we will talk it over again, and I will then give you my definite answer."

And Chicot went off as happy as a king who had conquered an empire.

Mother Magloire was thoughtful, and did not sleep at all that night; in fact, for four days she was in a fever of hesitation. She suspected that there was something underneath the offer which was not to her advantage; but then the thought of thirty crowns a month, of all those coins clinking in her apron, falling to her, as it were, from the skies, without her doing anything for it, aroused her covetousness.

She went to the notary and told him about it. He advised her to accept Chicot's offer, but said she ought to ask for an annuity of fifty instead of thirty, as her farm was worth sixty thousand francs at the lowest calculation.

"If you live for fifteen years longer," he said, "even then he will only have paid forty-five thousand francs for it."

The old woman trembled with joy at this prospect of getting fifty crowns a month, but she was still suspicious, fearing some trick, and she remained a long time with the lawyer asking questions without being able to make up her mind to go. At last she gave him instructions to draw up the deed and returned home with her head in a whirl, just as if she had drunk four jugs of new cider.

When Chicot came again to receive her answer she declared, after a lot of persuading, that she could not make up her mind to agree to his proposal, though she was all the time trembling lest he should not consent to give the fifty crowns, but at last, when he grew urgent, she told him what she expected for her farm.

He looked surprised and disappointed and refused.

Then, in order to convince him, she began to talk about the probable duration of her life.

"I am certainly not likely to live more than five or six years longer. I am nearly seventy-three, and far from strong, even considering my age. The other evening I thought I was going to die, and could hardly manage to crawl into bed."

But Chicot was not going to be taken in.

"Come, come, old lady, you are as strong as the church tower, and will live till you are a hundred at least; you will no doubt see me put under ground first."

The whole day was spent in discussing the money, and as the old woman would not give in, the innkeeper consented to give the fifty crowns, and she insisted upon having ten crowns over and above to strike the bargain.

Three years passed and the old dame did not seem to have grown a day older. Chicot was in despair, and it seemed to him as if he had been paying that annuity for fifty years, that he had been taken in, done, ruined. From time to time he went to see the old lady, just as one goes in July to see when the harvest is likely to begin. She always met him with a cunning look, and one might have supposed that she was congratulating herself on the trick she had played him. Seeing how well and hearty she seemed he very soon got into his buggy again, growling to himself:

"Will you never die, you old hag?"

He did not know what to do, and he felt inclined to strangle her when he saw her. He hated her with a ferocious, cunning hatred, the hatred of a peasant who has been robbed, and began to cast about for some means of getting rid of her.

One day he came to see her again, rubbing his hands as he did the first time he proposed the bargain, and, after having chatted for a few minutes, he said:

"Why do you never come and have a bit of dinner at my place when you are in Spreville? The people are talking about it, and saying we are not on friendly terms, and that pains me. You know it will cost you nothing if you come, for I don't look at the price of a dinner. Come whenever you feel inclined; I shall be very glad to see you."

Old Mother Magloire did not need to be asked twice, and the next day but one, as she had to go to the town in any case, it being market day, she let her man drive her to Chicot's place, where the buggy was put in the barn while she went into the house to get her dinner.

The innkeeper was delighted and treated her like a lady, giving her roast fowl, black pudding, leg of mutton and bacon and cabbage. But she ate next to nothing. She had always been a small eater, and had generally lived on a little soup and a crust of bread and butter.

Chicot was disappointed and pressed her to eat more, but she refused, and she would drink little, and declined coffee, so he asked her:

"But surely you will take a little drop of brandy or liqueur?"

"Well, as to that, I don't know that I will refuse." Whereupon he shouted out:

"Rosalie, bring the superfine brandy--the special--you know."

The servant appeared, carrying a long bottle ornamented with a paper vine-leaf, and he filled two liqueur glasses.

"Just try that; you will find it first rate."

The good woman drank it slowly in sips, so as to make the pleasure last all the longer, and when she had finished her glass, she said:

"Yes, that is first rate!"

Almost before she had said it Chicot had poured her out another glassful. She wished to refuse, but it was too late, and she drank it very slowly, as she had done the first, and he asked her to have a third. She objected, but he persisted.

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